

# CITIES NATURE JUSTICE: an introduction to the volume

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## Heather Goodall<sup>1</sup>

The linking of the three terms ‘cities’, ‘nature’ and ‘justice’ is unusual, as one of the contributors to this volume has rightly pointed out. These terms often appear in pairs – as ‘cities’ and ‘justice’ or as ‘nature’ and ‘justice’ – but are rarely found together. Yet there are many examples of the way these three elements are entangled in everyday interactions and conflicts. An example is Sydney, which is facing environmental crises in the many forms shared with other major cities, such as water scarcity, the impact of climate change and the demands of growth economies and escalating power consumption. Often these crises are discussed only in terms of the technology or the economics of the problem. Questions around environmental crises are far more complex, but it is usually difficult to draw together the many strands involved.

Water crises, for example, such as that Sydney continues to face, have figured in the power politics of city life, from class-segregated access to public and private swimming pools through to ethnically stigmatized swimming, fishing and praying styles in this city of rivers and beaches. Such entanglement of the social and cultural with the scientific and technological is not limited to water. Conflicts over national parklands within cities, such as the Georges River and the Kuringai Chase National Parks, have on one side been about questions around the biology of nature, wilderness and conservation, as well as the rights of the continuing but unrecognized Aboriginal populations in dense urban settings. Yet at the same time, they have been about the class and ethnic politics of access to both the homogenous amenity of ‘greenspace’ but also to the emotively-defined ‘native’ vegetation of landscape as national icon. The recognition that ‘nature’ has been sustained in cities challenges the common view that cities are places composed only of ‘built environment’.

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Goodall is Professor of History at the University of Technology, Sydney & researches in Aboriginal, comparative colonial & environmental history. She is a co-founder of the Indian Ocean & South Asia Research Network.

The maintenance of nature within cities has been one dimension of Aboriginal interests in city environments. It is also at the centre of the many disputes now between state level environment authorities and the diverse local communities, who are seeking both access to and a say in management and interpretation but do so on the basis of their many different and often conflicting cultural backgrounds and ‘stakeholder’ claims.

Recognising the interaction between cities, nature and justice is all the more urgent as cities become increasingly the living environments for major proportions of all human societies and as, furthermore, those megacities are linked along global networks of trade, communication and power. The pretence that cities are separated somehow from the rest of their environment – not only from the hinterlands from which they draw immediate resources, food and water, but from the extended and iconic ‘national’ landscape’ as well as the global environment – must be interrogated, particularly as the urban and ‘North’ centres of some of the more powerful conservation movements come into view. Most ‘environmental’ analyses are focused on the western world – and often within that, on those nations which were previously settler colonies of European powers. Yet the emerging megacities of the world are not in the ‘North’ but in the ‘South’ and it is the perspectives on development, environment and justice formed in the South, including that from Indigenous peoples colonized but increasingly assertive within ‘North’ nations, which will be crucial to generating sustainable futures.

The connections between such themes are seldom explored, but in the current rapidly changing environmental conditions, there have been increasing calls for solutions which engage sciences with social, cultural and political analysis. The *Cities Nature Justice* symposium, was held in December 2008 by Transforming Cultures at UTS and the Centre for Contemporary China at ANU, and was funded with support from the Asia Pacific Futures Research Network. It brought together researchers from the USA, China, India and Australia who are exploring the human social and cultural dimensions of environmental crisis in cities with those working on the biological, technological, economic and planning dimensions of the same crises. This volume of original articles, interviews and opinions, reflects just a sample of the range of discussion which took place over the conference.

There are detailed urban studies of Australian cities – Morgan, Lunney and Goodall – which engage with the interactions between human societies in Australia and the everyday

dimensions of nature with which we all live and so seldom consider: suburban gardens and hoses in Perth; city animals both native and introduced, companion and pest; and the ecology of garbage in its interactions with invasive but native vegetation. Each in different ways addresses the romanticisation of the 'native' which characterizes so greatly the attitudes circulating in cities, where the 'natives' may be cultivated but only if tamed and controlled – or in a conveniently remote wilderness. Lunney in particular directs a biologist's attention to the presence of animals and demands that city populations take up the challenge of thinking not only as zoologists but as ethicists, who must engage with the difficult choices which living with animals should demand.

Amita Baviskar brought a South Asian analysis to every debate throughout the symposium, pointing out the prevalence animal life within Indian cities, including its capital Delhi. She demonstrated in her paper - and in continued discussion in the interview included in this volume - that both the presence of animals and the pressure to remove them, arising from 'improvements' for the Commonwealth Games in 2010, are issues of class and caste power. Baviskar argued that recognition of relationships with animals is part of urban environmental justice for working and subaltern classes just as much as the access to clean water and unpolluted air on which western environmental justice advocates have campaigned.

The political role of urban centres in environmental debates globally is addressed in different ways by two further contributions considering Indian case examples. One is Kerry Little's article on the Lepcha opposition to hydroelectric dams and in Kartik Shanker's interview about sea turtle conservation on the coast of Southern India. Little traces the strategic use of city communication networks by rural people when they decided to carry their campaign from traditionally-owned but remote Dzongu, where dams were to be built with both environmental and livelihood costs, into nearby townships in Sikkim and then to Delhi itself. Kartik Shanker, in his interview in this volume, discusses the problems in the reverse process. Urban-based conservation movements may offer resources to protect turtle hatcheries on the southern coasts of India, but there is no guarantee that they will either understand or respect local coastal people's approaches to turtle conservation. Tensions have arisen when urban conservation initiatives are seen to undermine local beliefs and livelihoods, yet few city-based conservationists have recognized the limits of their understanding of local interests.

The importance of recognizing that relationships with environments can be sustained over long distances, in both rural and urban settings, are explored in Allison Cadzow's article on Vietnamese Sydney-siders and in Leandro Mendes' discussion on Operation Bluetongue, which introduces recent immigrants to cultural exchange with Aboriginal people and brings them into contact with living Australian environments. Both these pieces recognize that migrancy does not operate only in one place at any one time. In fact, as Cadzow demonstrates, people feel continuing attachments to places from their homeland as well as their new home, all shaped by the ways in which they left the country. Threat and fear, perilous sea voyages and barren, frustrating refugee camps all contribute to the way immigrants view their new surroundings. Furthermore, these feelings are reshaped with every return visit to the homeland, a cyclical movement which is very common among all migrants today. At the same time, people are continually building new relationships with both places, in interaction with memories but also with the situation they face in their new country. Leandro Mendes points out that recent immigrants mourn the loss of the environment of their homeland, but that at the same time, they are seeking ways to become familiar with their new home. Mendes explains that immigrants bring much knowledge with them about the environment – ranging from the religious and cultural through to the visceral experiences of warfare, poverty and harrowing escapes. Their existing knowledge is a valuable resource for current park managers, and Mendes argues strongly that park managers need to recognize and respect this knowledge far better than they seem to be doing at the moment.

Finally, strategies for change in environmental impacts and attitudes are the common theme of Ted Trainer and Angelique Edmonds, although they approach this goal in different ways. Trainer, in a 'Reflection' based on his years of teaching from his educational environment on the banks of Sydney's suburban and industrial Georges River, continues the argument about class and privilege in relation to city and global networks of economics and power. Trainer makes the case for a major shift in lifestyles and economies to a 'simpler way' based on local exchange of skills and goods, with devolution of power and a rejection of expectations of continuous growth. Edmonds, with similar goals for eventual major changes, argues in her article that these must be accomplished in small steps which will build into greater momentum. She demonstrates strategies which have been effective in case studies to strengthen capacity for making change towards a more sustainable future.