

SOS Green Spaces



PHOTOGRAPH © BRIAN RAPSEY


Quiet, beauty and fresh air to share

POSITION STATEMENT ON OPEN SPACE
IN THE SYDNEY METROPOLITAN AREA



TOTAL
ENVIRONMENT
CENTRE

July 2014 © Total Environment Centre Inc
www.tec.org.au



The Urban Sanctuary

This position statement on open space in the Sydney metropolitan area was produced by Total Environment Centre for our Urban Sanctuary campaign, a precursor to the current SOS Green Spaces campaign.

http://www.tec.org.au/sos_green_spaces

WHY AN URBAN SANCTUARY?

The population of the Sydney Metropolitan Area is expected to swell to 6.2 million by 2036. Analysts believe the greatest growth will occur in the South West, North West and West Central sub-regions along with a proportional increase in the Central Coast sub-region. This will not just include the expansion of residential areas but also employment growth, particularly in the west where it is estimated that 384,000 jobs will be required to support the boost in population.

Both federal and state governments have recognised that this burgeoning spatial and vertical growth of the Sydney region will have to be supported by strategic integrated land use, as well as comprehensive policies for urban planning and transport infrastructure.

If done properly this could be a game changer for Sydney, making it a much more livable and more prosperous city. In fact a clear vision that acknowledges the connection between community and commercial needs and the maintenance of a healthy natural and open space

environment, has never been more necessary. The last cohesive plan for Sydney's metropolitan growth that fully integrated an open space vision was created in 1951 for the County of Cumberland. This model has disappeared into urban sprawl and the balance between transport infrastructure, green space and commercial enterprise in Sydney is no longer functional.

Sydney's growing competition for urban land use is also bringing enormous pressure to bear on the regional green and local urban spaces we already have, making planning and protection a deepening concern for local communities and a challenge to successive state governments.

After decades of ad hoc policy making, we have now reached the point where discussion and debate around our understanding of what a park is and how it functions socially, culturally and environmentally, can no longer be postponed, particularly as many conflicting factors are coming into play.

While the more traditional park provides a 'connection with nature' or passive activity, there is a growing push towards

treating public spaces with a high level of organised activity both community based and commercial. There is also a trend towards public spaces that are not necessarily 'green' and contain more hard-edged features.


Disagreements over the pace and scope of commercial development have already led to an increasingly adversarial, community versus developer deadlock across the metropolitan area. There is a very real risk that commercial interests could acquire a more powerful voice than local communities, and once this is established our public spaces could become increasingly semi-privatised.

The time to get this right is now. The shaping of our future parks will determine living standards for Sydney's domestic population and its business community for the next 100 years. Well maintained, open and green spaces can and will provide us with vital opportunities for creativity, interaction and enhanced life experience. Benefits to flora and fauna will also have a critical impact on the city's ecological profile and cultural identity.

Generational choices

The template for Sydney's world famous attractions was originally put in place in the late 19th century, beginning with the establishment of the Royal National, Ku-ring-gai Chase National and Centennial Parks. Large military reserves were also created around this time and when some of these in proximity to Sydney Harbour became 'surplus' to defence needs, they were converted

'THE TIME TO GET THIS RIGHT IS NOW. THE SHAPING OF OUR FUTURE PARKS WILL DETERMINE LIVING STANDARDS FOR SYDNEY'S DOMESTIC POPULATION AND ITS BUSINESS COMMUNITY FOR THE NEXT 100 YEARS.'





PHOTOGRAPH © BRIAN RAPSEY

to significant regional public open space in the latter part of the 20th century. More recently the Western Sydney Parklands of 5,280ha have been established.

Despite an ongoing love affair, the relationship between Sydney's human population and its remnant natural areas is complex. Bushland areas within greater Sydney have been consistently threatened by urbanisation, over use, weed infestation, illegal dumping, pollution, the installation of infrastructure, housing and commercial development and the creation of playing fields. Every day these factors are incrementally reducing bushland cover, its biodiversity and viability.

Numerous pieces of legislation and regulations seeking to minimise the destruction of these green spaces have been implemented because their link to environmental sustainability and quality of life for urban dwellers is well known to government at all levels. The intent is palpable, however the lack of resources supporting an over-arching strategy, have taken their toll.

As the population and densities increase, the greater metro region faces significant challenges in the 21st century. Rather than choosing between parks and bushland, and annexing green space for people to live in, which is an unsustainable short term fix, the governance of Sydney should make long term plans for both to coexist and prosper.

WHAT IS AN URBAN SANCTUARY?

Social amenity and public space

If social amenity and public space are to be protected for the greater benefit of the metro community, and the environment, and for their wide range of passive and active recreational activities, we must first articulate what constitutes the public space.

In this report it is generally assumed that public space is accessible to everybody (under appropriate management regimes) and can be divided into two broad types:

GREEN / OPEN SPACE:

- parks and gardens
- amenity greenspace
- playgrounds and sports grounds
- green corridors
- natural or semi-natural areas

CIVIC AREA:

- marketplaces and shopping centres
- streets

The Green and Open spaces, our *urban sanctuaries*, are the primary focus of TEC's report.

Habitat

After 220 years of urban development Sydney has lost most of its fauna and much of the flora that existed in the original mosaic of ecological communities. Thirty-five percent of the Greater Sydney total area is now covered by urban development, and a further 33% is taken up by rural or agricultural landscapes.

Fortunately the ability of some species and relics of ecosystems to 'hang on' in an urban environment can be surprising. Yet these areas are generally low in biodiversity, and the native species that do exist have to compete with introduced species and a highly fragmented landscape.

The remainder of the land surrounding the urban area to the north, south and west, retains its "natural" state which can generally be classed into 4 broad types of habitat – forests and woodlands, heathland, coastal, intertidal and freshwater.

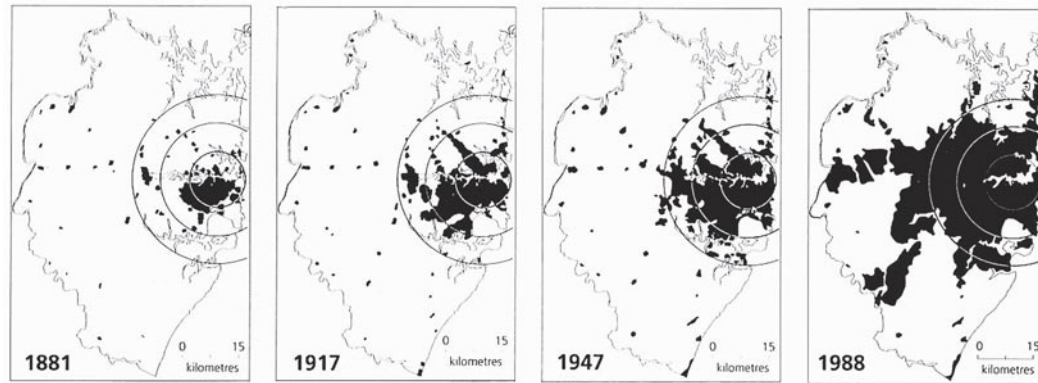
In 2014 the City of Sydney adopted an Urban Ecology Strategic Action Plan in recognition of what has been lost. More importantly, it comprehensively assessed what remains, and the "potential to conserve and enhance these existing biodiversity values". The study reviewed the existing data and identified priority sites and species, and potential habitat linkages and potential threats posed to biodiversity within the LGA. Six recognizable ecological communities were identified, along with 70 naturally occurring species of flora and 87 species of native fauna.

Remaining habitat and threats posed to native fauna and flora vary from inner Sydney across the suburbs to the fringes. Significant conservation outcomes are possible but only if a set of guiding principles are created and all levels of government commit to preserving what's left, and maintaining and improving connectivity.

'35% OF THE GREATER SYDNEY TOTAL AREA IS NOW COVERED BY URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND A FURTHER 33% IS TAKEN UP BY RURAL OR AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES.'

sos green spaces

The expansion of Sydney's urban footprint 1881-1988¹



THE THREATS

Fragmentation

The habitat fragmentation caused by clearing and other human-related disturbances has been described by Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens as "one of the most serious ecological threats confronting the long-term survival of flora and fauna"². This is most particularly the case when ecological communities are restricted to small isolated pockets that produce in-breeding, lost connectivity between populations, and greater vulnerability to unpredictable environmental events.

It is well established that urban remnants in the Sydney region are often the last remaining examples of once-common vegetation types and ecosystems. Despite extreme levels of human disturbance, these remnant areas are of high conservation significance.³

Species decline in urban ecosystems is as much due to disruptions to ecological interaction as any other factor, according to research conducted by Sydney University's Integrative Ecology Lab and the Institute of Wildlife Research. While further declines in ecological functionality contribute to the breakdown of these interactions, urban ecosystems have shown they can be surprisingly resilient under effective management.

**'IMPORTANT
SAFEGUARDS
ARE NEEDED IN
REGULATING
COMMERCIAL
DEVELOPMENT
ON PUBLIC LANDS.'**





SOS GREEN SPACES



PHOTOGRAPH © BRIAN RAPSEY

Commercial Leasing

The privatisation of public spaces is increasing and poses a challenge in numerous cities around the world, including the Greater Sydney Metropolitan area.

In some parks and reserves commercial leasing can be used as a critical tool to provide funding for the rest of the park's operations. But when applied poorly, or without transparency and proper public consultation, the selling or commercial leasing of public space can result in land grabs and loss of public amenity and native habitats.

In larger areas of public space where major development is proposed, such as the 22 hectare Barangaroo site, the planning future of an entire section of Sydney can be placed in the hands of one developer. This can lead to the dominance of commercial interests leaving the fundamentals of public space at the mercy of corporate self-interest — for example the proposed waterfront park was replaced with a casino. A business centre was approved for development near Wetherill Park in the Western Sydney Parklands in 2013, followed shortly afterwards by a proposal to build a 16 hectare Westfield shopping complex within the Parklands.

These examples underpin the key philosophical and economic debate currently taking place around open spaces and publicly owned lands — whether they should be self-funded, or run as a public asset, and whether their administrators can be trusted to run them for the public good with ecologically sustainable development principles at the forefront.

Important safeguards are needed in regulating commercial development on public lands. There is currently a lack of transparency and rigour in the release of development information to the public, which affects ensuing debate. Most recently the NSW government has announced plans to privatise crown lands — a fire sale that could have significant impacts on open space assets.

Weakening of regulations

While the proposed changes to the NSW planning laws stalled in the NSW Parliament in 2014, the bill contained numerous changes that further weakened protection of the natural environment and public space. These included⁴:

- the loss of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) and the precautionary principle as overarching objectives of the planning system
- no specific reference to the protection and conservation of native animals and plants nor the provision of land for public purposes in the general environmental protection objective
- a departure from measuring the benefits of a development proposal against community and environmental impacts or benefits in favour of economic considerations
- provisions for the Planning Minister to override strategic plans and for developers to 'bend the rules'
- the loss of appeal and review rights for the community while giving expanded rights to developers and proponents.

Such changes were welcomed by the development lobby and indicate (despite a claimed public desire for balance), a continuing unbalanced approach to urban development.

In addition some local governments (e.g. Wyong) are proposing to reclassify community land with natural values to operational land, so they may be sold off for biobanking to developers. A fundamental principle of biobanking is that of additionality, whereby biobanking credits can only be created in respect to management actions carried out on the site where those actions are additional to any existing biodiversity conservation.

Reclassifying conservation lands so that developers can resubmit them is simply a 'pea and thimble' trick.

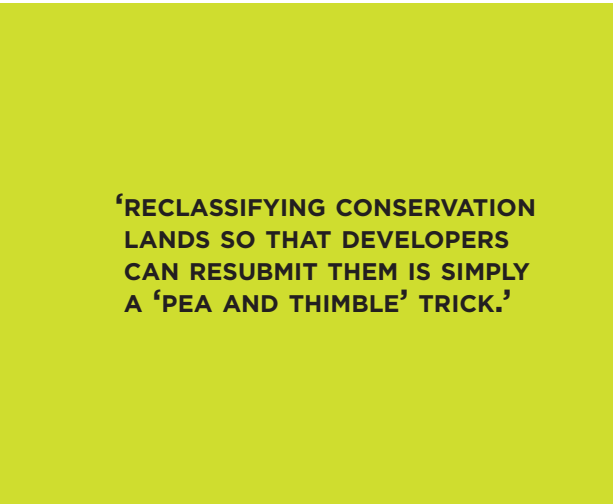
Urban development

Much of Sydney's land releases in 2013/14 have been on the urban fringe in the west and south west with the Department of Planning rezoning land in greenfield areas to accommodate more than 44,000 homes⁵. This was well above the number of rezonings in established suburbs marked as 'urban activation precincts' and departs from the ambition of planners to achieve better density and land use practices in Greater Sydney. It will inevitably place further pressure on the natural environment on private and public lands. It is also impacting heavily upon Sydney's ability to produce its own food with the loss of productive agricultural lands.

Inevitably urban natural areas and 'public space' will play host to any given number of human activities. These activities can range from minimal impact recreational pursuits to large-scale encroachment by developers. In recent years development companies have become larger and more powerful with funding sourced more nationally and internationally, rather than locally. It has been argued that as a result developers (and government decision makers) have become less aware of what is valued and appreciated at a local level and less concerned by the impact their projects have upon those values.⁶

Current reserve system

Greater Sydney is fortunate to be surrounded by a vast network of National Parks and Nature Reserves, with a scattering of smaller national parks within its boundaries. The other large natural areas of note are the Holdsworthy Military Reserve and the Water Catchment lands or Special Areas.



'RECLASSIFYING CONSERVATION LANDS SO THAT DEVELOPERS CAN RESUBMIT THEM IS SIMPLY A 'PEA AND THIMBLE' TRICK.'



There are some opportunities to extend these, for example adding Otford Valley Farm to the Royal National Park. These lands form part of an important wildlife corridor between Royal National Park, Garawarra State Conservation Area and the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area and also form part of the Great Eastern Ranges initiative.

Significant trees

Despite their well-documented importance, Sydney's big old trees are in decline. Proposed removal of street trees, subdivisions for higher density living and increased floor space ratios in numerous LEPs are seeing the felling of many arboreal individuals of note.

Establishing a Significant Tree Register to protect trees both on public and private land has proven to be an effective first step in their defense. Generally, the importance of any given tree is assessed on the basis of:



“DUE TO THE POLITICAL DIFFICULTIES SURROUNDING COMPULSORY ACQUISITION PLANNERS OFTEN CHOOSE TO REDUCE PUBLIC OPEN SPACE AND REMNANT BUSHLAND WHEN PLOTTING THE ROUTES OF NEW ROAD PROJECTS.”



PHOTOGRAPH © ISTOCK

- historic and/or natural value
- social, cultural and commemorative value
- visual and aesthetic value
- whether the tree is particularly old or venerable
- whether it is a rare species of tree
- if it has horticultural or genetic value
- whether it has natural significance

Woollahra, Campbelltown, Gosford, Ryde, Randwick, Waverley, Strathfield, Leichhardt, City of Sydney, North Sydney, Camden and the Blue Mountains are the LGAs in Greater Sydney currently operating a Significant Trees Register.

Stream corridors

Riparian or river bank systems play a critical role in maintaining the health of the larger ecosystems, particularly in urban areas where they often contain the last of the remnant vegetation. For this reason they often support high levels of biodiversity in relation to the surrounding area. Stream corridors within Sydney invariably play the role of connecting wildlife corridors and should be viewed as being of great importance for the movement of both flora and fauna.

Riparian vegetation prevents bank erosion, aiding rainfall and runoff infiltration and contributing to soil, bank and channel stability⁷. It also acts as a filter and a buffer against pollutants, and provides social benefits through aesthetic values, flood mitigation and social amenity.

Nevertheless riparian systems are often disrupted by infrastructure; modified to channel stormwater; and are easily invaded by weeds due to their thin, linear nature. Streams can also become clogged with litter such as plastic bottles.

Roads

Transport routes are known to impact on biodiversity and wildlife in numerous ways. For many native species roads act as a barrier to movement and can isolate populations, altering interactions as a result. Roads assist the dispersal and movement of weeds and feral predators.

Construction and the establishment of roads also impacts on the natural environment as it can lead to changes in an area's water flows and can increase sedimentation in local waterways. This adds and channels increased run-off into local waterways, as less water soaks into the ground.

Urban transport systems have a major influence on the livability of urban environments. As the dominant form of transport in Sydney, the motor vehicle has made a notable contribution to the proliferation of urban sprawl. Urban sprawl puts greater strain on infrastructure such as water supply and sewerage systems, and leads to congestion, excessive noise and polluted air.

Due to the political difficulties surrounding compulsory acquisition, planners often choose to reduce public space and remnant bushland when plotting the routes of new road projects. Recent substantial threats include the elimination of the inner suburban Tempe Wetlands by WestConnex and the destruction of a significant area of Wolli Creek bushland by the M5 extension.

THE WAY FORWARD

Habitat

Numerous but mostly small pockets of Sydney's natural bushland have escaped clearing and urban development, in most instances because of steep terrain. In the city and urban sprawl areas, where vegetation clearance has been largely complete, the task now is to protect the remnants.

Urban tenures which have successfully improved and/or maintained habitat have invariably applied sophisticated management strategies to achieve positive results. Along with permanent protection, strategies have included the consideration of the habitat potential of weeds, the limitation of clearing to only a portion of the land to reduce predation, the use of extensive offsets and re-vegetation, and the conduct of clearing outside peak breeding times.

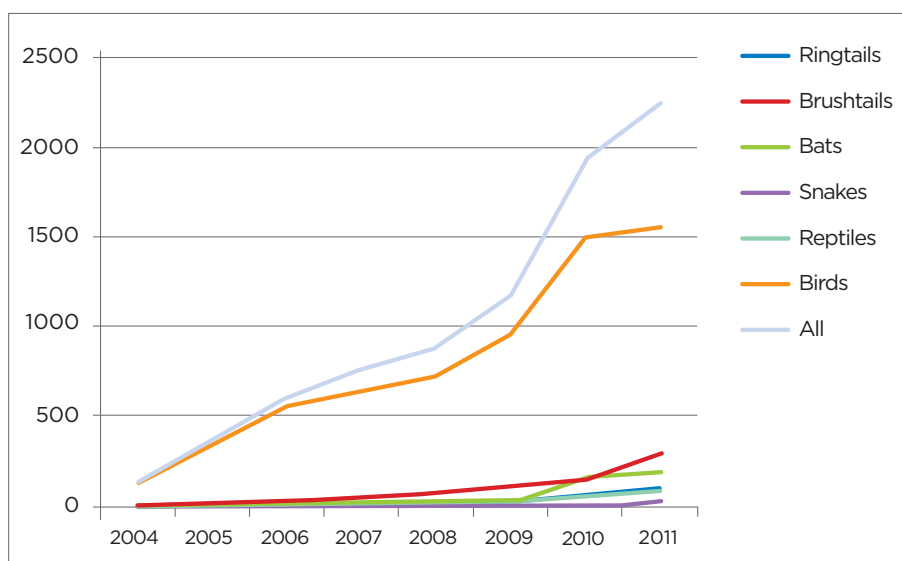
Solid working relationships between all relevant community, council, developer and state government parties have been proven to ensure the most effective strategic planning for open space, habitat and corridor values. The protection of a diversity of habitats is also recommended, with as much connectivity expanded as possible.

Well co-ordinated community education programs about local native fauna, habitat protection and creation, reducing disturbance and responsible pet ownership have also proven useful in achieving community engagement in the process of protecting what's left.

An increasing prioritisation of the natural environment has occurred with demographic changes to inner Sydney in the past two decades. Changes in residents' attitudes have been reflected in environmental policies implemented by local councils such as Ashfield, Burwood, Canada Bay, Canterbury, Marrickville and Leichhardt. They have promoted enhanced biodiversity and replaced exotic street and park plantings with native species and new vegetated verges.⁸

Anecdotal reports suggest that wildlife seems to have responded to this change in environmental focus with increased populations and greater species diversity in these areas. This is also reflected in the increased number of WIRES (Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service) rescues over a 10-year period with a dramatic rise in bird numbers and the reappearance in the area of the long-nosed bandicoot, not recorded in the area since the 1950s. It is hypothesized⁹ that the bandicoots had used increased vegetation around the inner west goods line as a corridor to reestablish themselves in the area.

WIRES database – Inner West branch





PHOTOGRAPH © BRIAN RAPSEY

The protection of remaining natural areas must always be the number one priority. These areas are capable of supporting a range of species (particularly birds) and are vital to the conservation network. Long-term strategies should aim to provide habitat for those species that were once common in the urban landscape, but are now in decline.

While the scope to provide large continuous areas of vegetation is limited, it is possible to create habitat, complemented by connectivity where possible, that can be used by a wide variety of native species. Maintenance efforts should be conducted at a rate that minimises disturbance and provides ongoing habitat. The removal of exotic vegetation should be undertaken with caution and preferably following the establishment of native species.

In a welcome recent development there is growing interest in restoring ‘naturalness’ to urban creeks.

Urban density

The South Australian study, ‘Best Practice Open Space in Higher Density Developments Project’ contains welcome insights and proposals including:

- Benchmarks and planning studies suggest there is justification for around 2 hectares per 1,000 people for recreation open space (parks and linear parks) and around 1.5-2 hectares per 1,000 people for sporting open space. Natural areas and stormwater are generally additional requirements.
- People in high density areas should be within 2-3 minutes or 250 metres of usable open space, including accessibility to play and activity opportunities.
- Local parks are required as well as access to larger regional or district open space.
- There should be a balance of public, communal and private open spaces that collectively meet the needs of residents and connect people to surrounding communities.
- There should be a strong emphasis on connectivity and creating opportunities for physical activity in higher density urban developments.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sydney's environment is at a major crossroads. The NSW planning system has failed to deliver an overall environmental vision for the urban area and its nearly 5 million inhabitants. Sydneysiders are routinely exposed to unhealthy air, traffic congestion, the erosion of green spaces and bushland and lack of access to the respite and inspiration nature and parks provide.

Decisions being made now will determine how liveable our city will become.

The NSW Government must commit to protecting and expanding open space and bushland by:

- 1** Delivering a **long-term protection policy and plan** for Sydney's parklands, public spaces, and remnant bushland on private and public land. This should be enshrined in regulation unaffected by the current (and proposed) planning system, which has seen green corridors destroyed at the hands of developers and successive ministers, and which accords developers' profits higher value than our environmental and open space assets. The protection of remnant natural areas and sufficient green spaces in higher density areas should be top priorities.
- 2** Using the best available scientific and planning expertise to deliver an environment that meets a variety of human and environmental needs — protecting native flora and fauna, maintaining and improving connectivity, linking the community in a caring way to bushland; and delivering clean air, opportunities for interaction and communal activity and relaxation.
- 3** Providing for a co-ordinated approach and a variety of funding opportunities that assists local government to deliver the plan's objectives.
- 4** Improving the resources available to the large number of community groups involved in the protection of green spaces and natural areas throughout Greater Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong.

Endnotes

¹ Benson & Howell, Taken for Granted: The Bushland of Sydney and its Suburbs, Kangaroo Press, 1990

² Dr Maurizio Rossetto, The Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust website, accessed June 2014

³ Benson & Howell, Taken for Granted: The Bushland of Sydney and its Suburbs, Kangaroo Press, 1990

⁴ EDO NSW White Paper Submission, 2013

⁵ Land releases on Sydney's fringe spark fears of urban sprawl, SMH, 6/1/14

⁶ Madanipour A, Why are the design and development of public spaces significant for cities, 1999

⁷ Ives, Taylor Davies & Wilks, Ecological condition and biodiversity value of urban riparian and non-riparian bushland environments: Ku-ring-gai, Sydney, 2007

⁸ Sharp, Impacts of habitat fragmentation in an urban environment, 2011

⁹ Leary, Kwonk, Khan & Ibbetson, Yuppie bandicoots of inner western Sydney – in hiding or urban renewal, The Natural History of Sydney, Royal Zoological Society of NSW, 2010

¹⁰ LGA, et al 'Summary Report', www.charlessturt.sa.gov.au accessed 3 July 2014



Total Environment Centre Inc.

Level 1, 99 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010.

PO Box K61, Haymarket, NSW 1240

www.tec.org.au