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# Living with trees – Perspectives from the suburbs

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## **Abstract**

A study of suburban backyards and backyarders in Sydney and Wollongong revealed evidence of attitudes and behaviours in relation to trees. Attitudes are characterised under themes that indicate conditions of tolerance and belonging. They include attachment/risk, order/freedom and nativeness/alienness. While love is common, high levels of suspicion and intolerance towards trees in the suburban context are more common. Our findings confirm and throw further light on previous work indicating that many Australians have very partitioned views of the world in relation to where humans and nonhuman lifeforms belong. This partitioning must be understood in conceptual as well as spatial terms.

## **Keywords**

trees, garden, backyard, Australia, nature, environmental attitudes, boundaries

## **Disciplines**

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# Living with trees – Perspectives from the suburbs

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Peer reviewed contribution

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**ABSTRACT:** A study of suburban backyards and backyarders in Sydney and Wollongong revealed evidence of attitudes and behaviours in relation to trees. Attitudes are characterised under themes that indicate conditions of tolerance and belonging. They include attachment/risk, order/freedom and nativeness/alienness. While love is common, high levels of suspicion and intolerance towards trees in the suburban context are more common. Our findings confirm and throw further light on previous work indicating that many Australians have very partitioned views of the world in relation to where humans and nonhuman lifeforms belong. This partitioning must be understood in conceptual as well as spatial terms.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Whatever C.E Lane Poole meant by ‘a forest conscienceness’, it is likely it included a favourable disposition towards trees, a foundational element of forests, however variable they might be in other respects. You can have trees without a forest, but you can’t have a forest without trees. We are familiar in recent decades with individual trees as potent and iconic symbols of forests, and people’s passion for forests, in a number of conservation campaigns. Trees are hugged, encircled, dwelt in, photographed and planted. Even those who fell them often profess respect and affection.

In the context of suburban life, however, people express a different set of attitudes towards trees that reflect ownership, association and attachment. This is linked to the greater level of control over planting and clearing decisions people have in relation to their domestic outdoor space. Backyards are a reflection of people’s individual and familial needs and desires, shaped by factors such as marketing influences, environmental knowledge and cultural and emotional connections. These attitudes need to be explored and understood because it is the urbanised populations of Australia who most influence the future of Australian forests. They do this materially, politically and symbolically. They sustain demand for forest products such as timber building materials and paper. Many recent campaigns for forest conservation have been driven by people living at some distance from the object of their passion. The concern to consider both the material and symbolic aspects of trees is also an international one (Rival 1998, Jones and Cloke 2002).

This paper explores the patterns and contradictions of city dwellers’ engagement with trees - an analysis that also appears to have relevance for clarifying and resolving forest conflicts, and in which research is ongoing. In the course of a project where we have used the backyard as a lens through which to analyse human interactions with nature in suburban contexts, trees are at the forefront of people’s consciousness, in both positive and negative ways. The suburban backyard is

usually conceptualised as a cultural landscape, in contrast to natural environments that are seen as remote and 'out there'. However, backyards, like all urban areas, are teeming with diverse combinations of plant and animal life that both shape and are shaped by human activity. It is precisely this hybrid and marginal status that makes it such an interesting space in which to examine the complex interpenetrations of nature and culture.

## 2 NATURE IN THE SUBURBAN CONTEXT - A PARTITIONED VIEW OF THE WORLD?

For more than two hundred years in Australia, the distinction between the city and the bush has roughly paralleled that between culture and nature. This dualistic conceptualisation inheres in attitudes that are otherwise very different, for example those of early colonists who determined that Sydney would reflect aspirations to decency and be the antithesis of Old World slums (Davison 1994), and twentieth century environmentalists who have channelled energy into the designation of 'pure' spaces, including national parks and wilderness areas on public land. For the former the city is to be a place of civilisation and reflect the highest aspects of culture, for the latter the city represents the fundamentally flawed aspects of culture, a place where nature has been destroyed (see also Anderson 2003).

What then of the suburbs, the 'half-world between city and country' (Boyd 1952) where most Australians live? Our study of trees is nested within the objective of our broader project to understand how occupants of the suburbs understand their material and symbolic connections to 'nature' and 'the environment'. Is nature something that should be contained, preserved and valued 'out there', i.e. somewhere else? Or is it integrated and connected within the urban context? We build here on more generalised research undertaken by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (2002). In survey and focus group research examining attitudes to wildlife they concluded that people have a 'partitioned concept of the world' in relation to areas that are considered 'right for humans' and others that are considered 'right for wildlife' (NPWS 2002: 10). The report states further that:

There is a tendency to place a boundary between the natural environment and the urban spaces (the partitioning concept and proximity effect). While proximity of nature will be tolerated by some, many understand and expect the natural environment is kept separate from urban areas (p. 12).

The study identified four distinct conceptual spaces. These were urban spaces constructed for human habitation and consisting of backyards and streets; urban naturalness such as maintained local parks; accessible 'bush', described as managed native areas; and the natural environment which was not managed or controlled (figure 1). We have modified 'Urban Space' in this conceptualisation by including the backyard as a site separate to the general neighbourhood of front yards and streets. Issues of privacy, ownership and control are strongly articulated by more than half the participants in the research project, indicating the physical and conceptual delineation of this space from more public urban areas.

In this paper we use the example of trees to illustrate first that the process of boundary making is social as well as spatial, and second that boundaries of nature are simultaneously inscribed and transgressed. Using Sibley's (1995) concept of 'geographies of exclusion', we will examine what happens when trees transgress the boundaries of nature as 'out there'. Sibley characterises the liminal (or 'in-between') zone, whether spatial or social, as 'a source of anxiety' (1995 p. 33). He examines the implications of humans who are marginalised by such boundary making, for example migrants, refugees and children. Since Sibley's work geographers and other scholars have explored the implications for nonhumans, particularly animals (Wolch and Emel 1998, Philo and Wilbert 2000).

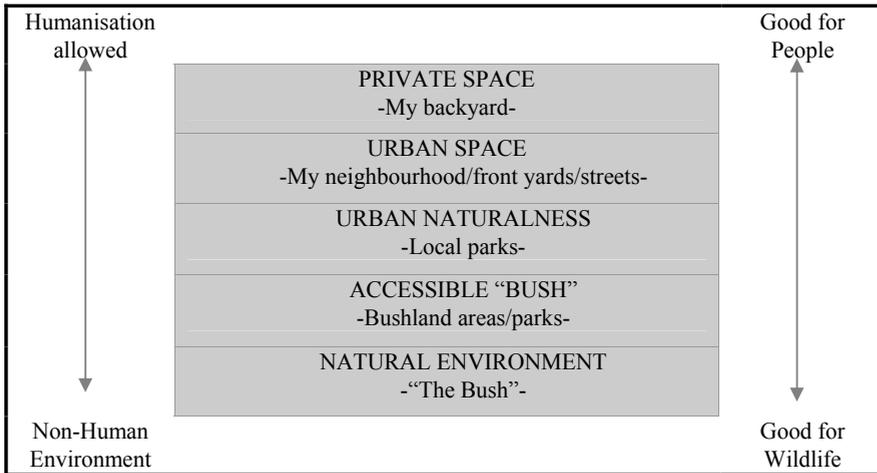


Figure 1. Adapted from NSW NPWS (2002: p60).

### 3 METHODS

This paper draws on a sample of 226 backyards in Sydney and Wollongong. Our sampling strategy was designed to encompass the socioeconomic and ecological variability in each of these main study areas. Although we were not attempting to select a statistically representative sample we did try to encompass socioeconomic, ethnic, age, gender and tenure variability in our participants. Each backyard was visited and a semi-structured interview undertaken onsite with the participant by one of a team of three researchers, including the two authors. An initial set of questions related to the activities of different members of the household, changes that had occurred over time, people's feelings about the space and what sorts of plants and animals belong there, wider environmental attitudes and practices, and major influences. The interviews were conversational in style, with the interviewers following up issues of particular interest to the participants. The backyard was mapped and photographed, and checklists on the demography of the household, the structures in the backyard and the biogeography were completed. The recorded interview and mapping activities took between one to one-and-a-half hours to complete, dependent, in part, on the openness and motivations of the participant and the size and complexity of the backyard. The interviews were transcribed and imported into the qualitative data analysis program, N6. Each interview was read through and indexed at nodes generated by the text. New nodes were created as new ideas emerged and coding at multiple nodes became established practice where content, context and emerging theory overlapped. Hence there were descriptive nodes, for example, recording how people's backyards had changed over time; emotive and attitudinal nodes exploring how participants felt, and conceptual nodes examining emerging discourses, for example, participants' perceptions of agency within broader environmental issues. Specific demographic information was imported as base data so that comparative analysis could be done using variables of age, gender and ethnicity as well as detailed biogeographical and structural information.

#### 3.1 *The tree participants*

This paper contains excerpts from eighteen interviews with twenty-one participants (three of the interviews were with two people contributing, the remainder each with an individual). There were thirteen female and eight male participants. The participants were all homeowners, mostly still paying off mortgages. They ranged in age, employment and household structure as well as occupancy time and age of suburb. Age range was spread fairly evenly, with the greatest concentration of six

participants aged in their thirties and five aged in their fifties. Four participants made up the mid twenties and forties age groups respectively with two participants older than sixty. There were ten participants employed full-time, four retired, three studying, three at-home mothers and one person unemployed. Ten interviews were with participants with nuclear families, five with couples and three with single people. Socio-economic status of the participants was predominantly middle class, determined by a triangulation of current employment, education qualifications and occupancy status, cross referenced with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS 1998). Socio-economic status was first divided up by class level and then across education/skill levels, with high education/skill level and low education/skill level in each class. In this middle class group there was some variation across education levels with seven participants having gained or completing tertiary qualifications.

Average occupancy time for the group was nine years but there were eleven participants resident at their current address for less than five years, six of these in new houses located in fringe suburbs of Wollongong and Sydney (southern suburbs in Wollongong and outer west and outer northwest of Sydney). The remaining seven participants had been residents for between seven and thirty seven years. The participants in new houses were establishing their backyards at the time of the interview, the remaining thirteen having purchased a house with an existing backyard (mostly in established inner and northern suburbs of Wollongong and the north shore of Sydney).

Across the data there was a correlation between age of suburb and size of backyard. In older, established suburbs the backyards were larger, while in newer, outer fringe suburbs the backyards were smaller. Seven participants in older suburbs had backyards between 200 and 300 square metres and five had backyards larger than 300 square metres. The older suburbs also had greater tree cover in backyards and in the suburban neighbourhood, with trees in front gardens and council street trees. Of the six participants in outer fringe suburbs, five had backyards between 100 and 200 square metres and one had a large backyard greater than 300 square metres. Tree cover in the newer suburbs was limited to young street trees. Only one new backyard had established native tree cover and another had young deciduous trees.

#### 4 RESULTS

As our focus in this paper is on attitudes, we draw mainly on the interview data. (Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.) Although none of our questions specifically asked about trees, they were clearly at the forefront of people's consciousness, in both positive and negative ways. A volatile, passionate and contradictory set of attitudes and behaviours emerges in these interviews, indicating that trees are variously seen as powerful, dangerous and beloved. Across the total data set key themes are associated with the way people discuss removing, planting or taking no action against trees (Table 1). The most frequently cited reason for removal related to danger, disease or size (36 mentions), while the most important reasons for planting related to aesthetics and creating habitat for birds. However, the associations are not always causal. For example the association between removal and aesthetics includes having to remove beautiful trees that died, as well as choosing to remove ugly ones. Similarly, the association between removal and shade includes situations where people describe the double-edged sword of removing dangerous trees but missing the shade, in addition to descriptions of removing trees because they provided too much shade. Nor are clearly expressed attitudes necessarily associated with action towards trees, as the 'no action' group shows.

We explore these attitudes below in terms of three themes that can be understood as axes of tolerance, i.e. they are variables by which people decide under what conditions they will foster, tolerate or remove trees living close to them. They can also be understood as axes of belonging; they specify the conditions under which trees are allowed to belong. There is considerable connection between the themes, and we do not want to overstate the distinctions between them. Nor do we attempt here to quantify the dominance of one attitude over the others. Rather we aim to tease out the range of variability, the reasons for particular attitudes and their potential connections to particular types of behaviour.

Table 1. Four main themes associated with removal or planting of trees in the backyard. Derived from mentions in interviews. Participants could cite multiple reasons for their actions. No action refers to descriptions of established trees.

	Removed	Planted	No action
Aesthetics	9	22	37
Danger, disease, size	36	6	28
Birds	8	20	31
Shade	7	12	19
Total	60	60	115

#### 4.1 *Attachment and Risk*

##### 4.1.1 *Love*

People use the word ‘love’ to describe attachments to particular trees in their backyard. Kent and Gwen of Austinmer had their house on the market when interviewed about their backyard, which was dominated by a large camphor laurel. Kent said, ‘I love me tree’, and for Gwen, ‘The tree is a big part of it ... we’ll be sorry to leave it when [we] sell but then we’ll just have to create another one’. Moira described how the use of a favoured tree, also a camphor laurel, had changed with the growth of her family.

I love that tree ... we now have tables and chairs and a paved area underneath it so we tend to sit out there a lot in the summer when the weather is nice ... [it] has a ladder going up there, we used to have a tree house in there when the kids were younger. That’s gone but the ladder’s there so my son has built a crawling insect that’s going up the ladder using I think an old shovel head and different pieces of metal ... he’ll have his mates over too, they like to hang out there as well. (Moira, Keiraville)

For these participants, the emotional attachment to the tree was foregrounded and then the reasons behind such a bond of love followed. Reasons encompassed an appreciation of the social value the tree added, or as more aesthetic reasons, as Denise of Mt St Thomas expressed when describing her backyard trees. She said ‘I love tea trees, I just love the shape of the flower, they’re so simple and really pretty’. Sylvie expressed love for her remnant eucalypt because of its habitat value for bird visitors.

We love that [gum tree] because it brings the birds to the garden and we get the thorn birds up in the top when it flowers, tiny little ones or they eat the insects, I don’t know what they eat but yeah they come across the high tops of the trees and that means they come into our yard which I like. (Sylvie, Mt Annan)

##### 4.1.2 *Danger and disease*

The primary reason cited for tree removal was danger. Dangerous trees were trees that were deemed unsafe for structural reasons, such as disease, age, angle, shedding large branches, planted too close together, wind affected, fire hazard or a threat to plumbing. Avoiding threats from falling trees was a behavioural implication aligned with the need for security identified by the NPWS report (NPWS 2002: 32). However, participants talked about needing to feel safe from danger in different ways. Most frequently, removal of trees for these reasons was likely to elicit a matter-of-fact retelling during the interview, with negative judgment expressed attitudinally through use of the words like ‘dangerous’ and ‘diseased’, legitimising the removal.

It was huge, it was taller than the pine trees and it was quite dangerous and it was diseased so I was advised to take it out and there were also gum trees up along the back boundary, which I wanted to get rid of because I wanted to do the garden differently. (Jillian, Mangerton)

... that one has got the priority because it's dangerous. My son always climbs in that tree, it's his famous tree so he will be upset but it's too dangerous for him to climb in at the moment. So that one is going to go and then this will and we are going to put more palms down the back. We really like the palms and because we've found that they seem to grow so well. (Janette, Port Kembla)

When trees are removed for reasons related to danger, size or aesthetics, they appear to be rarely replaced.

Participants did not always view large trees in the backyard as a threat to their security. There were several accounts of large trees falling during storms and high winds and, while the potential to turn such recounts into disaster stories was there, the accounts are generally attitudinally neutral. When Amanda of Cherrybrook, who had several very large eucalypts in her backyard, was asked by the researcher if she is concerned about the trees she answered:

Only that they might fall, but you know, if they fall they fall, don't they. I don't think they will. I think because I watch them and they swing about a bit and they all seem to be going that way rather than this way. So I'm not going to cut them down just because they might fall on the house ... and I wouldn't cut a tree down to get a view either. (Amanda, Cherrybrook)

For Lawrence of Turramurra, his equanimity towards trees was linked to his view that people are inextricably a part of nature: 'it is a fire situation and I realise you've got to live with it. But it doesn't worry me because if I'm here I think with the hoses and things I can control it until I get some help'. Lawrence speaks from experience, as for example in his account of the big storms of 1991.

There were two big trees in that gap there that came down on to the back property. They fell down in between two houses, and further down there was a very big eucalypt that went down on top of a house and went through the roof. People arrived from everywhere to help clean up. They had to rebuild half the house. (Lawrence, Turramurra)

#### 4.1.3 *Size*

Danger is often encoded in the size of the trees, or more specifically the relativities of size between the backyard and the trees. Connie from Kellyville, a new Sydney suburb with large houses on small blocks (Head et al. 2003) was asked by the researcher about any plants that she felt didn't belong in her backyard.

The backyard is pretty weed free. There were two gum trees in the garden when we came here. We took them out because they were too big for a backyard like this. (Connie, Kellyville)

The size of eucalypts in particular is often generalised to exclude their belonging from backyards generally, an attitude encapsulated by Lindsay: 'I don't think gum trees have a place in suburban backyards somehow'.

#### 4.2 *Order and freedom*

Desires for independence, order, freedom and privacy have underpinned the attraction of suburban life since its earliest Australian manifestations (Davison 1994, Freestone 2000, Stretton 2001). The NPWS study refers to the behavioural implication of these needs as a 'marking out of your own territory'. (NPWS 2002: 32). Freedom for humans has other implications for wildlife and trees, however.

For the research team, such marking became apparent at the very beginning of each interview when participants were asked to describe what was in the backyard. Linguistically, material processes dominate this part of the interview as participants describe not only what is there, but their own 'doing' or active involvement in the creation of the backyard. In this sense, what is planted is

thus open to a range of regulatory actions such as pruning, lopping, trimming, fertilising, spraying, cutting and removing, as well as more passive activities of observing and, in some cases, talking to the plants and trees.

Marking out your own territory was strongly expressed by participants in new housing developments, such as Shell Cove in Wollongong and Kellyville in Sydney. In these suburbs, the developers' practice of clearing the block of existing vegetation presented the owner with a blank slate. Decisions about what to plant, and whether trees would be included, revealed much about how people think about the place of trees in a suburban context. In the texts below, Elliot and Ben express their personal sense of aesthetics with regard to garden design, including the place of native trees and plants. Both were residents of less than one year and at the time of the interview Elliot had purchased four established deciduous trees in boxes from a hardware store. Ben's backyard has a tree layer exclusively of native and non-native palms. In both these texts, participants use the conjunction 'but' as a way of expressing a disjunction between what they know about the needs of the environment and their own needs. In the context of the interview, the researcher has asked whether the participant made a distinction between planting native or non-native plants.

I try and harmonise with the environment as much as I can *but* at the end of the day if it's in the way, then I'll try and adjust it to suit. I mean it's not, I mean I'm not going complete native but I will have a lot of native stuff, mainly for the bird life and a lot of it grows well and stuff like that. *But* it's not the be all and end all. I've never been one to get myself in one trap, I'll take bits and pieces of what I like and put them together. (Elliot, Shell Cove)

I think for us more it is in what we have chosen, that's what it is. We'd like to have a bit of a tropical feel over there, the pool there, you've got the palms, lush greenery. Natives really don't fit in, *but* I'm exploring the idea of, because we face north, we get the westerly sun in summer. So we are exploring putting deciduous trees outside those windows, and on the back over there, for screening purposes, putting conifers. So we're looking at that. It is council land but I'm sure they'll love it if you grow a few trees over there. (Ben, Kellyville)

#### 4.3 *Nativeness and alienness*

An important issue for many participants on the axis of belonging is whether or not trees are native. For some this is a straightforward issue about which they feel very strongly. For others, the nativeness or nonnativeness of trees intersects with other characteristics to influence whether they belong, are tolerated, or banished. Participants who were strongly committed to restoring native trees indigenous to their area were often highly critical and in some cases intolerant of the choices made by neighbours, or of the reasons people gave to legitimise removal of native trees. Discourses of nativeness and belonging become moral judgments as they are contrasted with the desires of neighbours to grow what they want.

When we moved in there were quite a few young camphor laurels in the front and she [the previous owner] said to us 'look after our trees' and as soon as she left we cut them down. People don't realise what they've got, they think if it's green it's okay ... As far as getting everyone to see the merits of native plants, indigenous plants, that's not really feasible. It's hard just to get them to cut down a weed. If they think it's pretty then they don't really care about the damage it causes to the native bush. (Miranda, Hornsby)

Neighbour ignorance becomes a moral battleground when Miranda's partner, Rodney, admits to 'accidentally' drilling the neighbour's camphor laurels where the informal boundary line between the two properties merge.

Environmental discourses of protection are positioned against the suburban need for safety in the example of Kris, from Mangerton. Kris, an environmental professional dedicated to restoring the locally indigenous *Eucalyptus maculata* (spotted gum) on her steep hillside backyard, is appalled by her neighbour's attitudes toward trees.

... there is supposed to be protection on the trees and you know, every year someone is cutting a tree down for whatever reason. She has used the excuse that she is old and frail so ... the council came and cut the tree down for her. The neighbours down the back have used an excuse to cut down the tree. The neighbours up over the other side don't even use any excuse, they just hope they don't get caught, um, and I guess I feel like that I'm trying to make a statement as well that you don't have to do that, that you can have a lovely enjoyable, useful, wonderful, garden and that it can be totally native. (Kris, Mangerton)

## 5 DISCUSSION

The three axes of attachment/risk, order/freedom and nativeness/alienness illustrate both the diversity of attitudes across the study sample, and the paradoxes or contradictions expressed by individuals.

### 5.1 *The adversative 'but'*

Many of the interview excerpts we have quoted include the adversative *but*, a grammatical marker which adds another, often oppositional, viewpoint (Halliday 1994: 324). This is analogous to the wider use of *but* in statements like 'I'm not a racist, but there are too many Asians in Australia'. In the cases cited in this paper, the disjunction is between the underlying needs or desires of participants in an urban environment and their environmental concerns for the loss of tree layer. In many cases this disjunction is expressed as guilt. Trees are only one component of habitat and biodiversity consideration in backyards, but removal of ground cover and shrubs arouse nowhere near the same degree of guilt. There seems to be something about the size and life form of trees that leads people to ascribe more rights to them than other forms of life. Thus for example even when seen as messy and potentially dangerous, many people do not like cutting them down. The disjunction extends to the sense that a well-established tree cannot be a weed. Thus Bettina describes the clearing they had to do when she and her husband first came to their house as 'quite heart breaking, especially for Bob, cutting down trees that were weeds.'

In the quotes from Elliot and Ben above, Elliot's view of the world displays a partitioned view between the natural environment and his backyard and the adversative *but* illustrates his need for independence and freedom, presenting his right to arrange his backyard as he desires. Similarly, Ben's use of the adversative *but* indicates that while his own aesthetic needs mean there are no trees in his backyard, the planting of deciduous trees on council land assuages any guilt he may feel. There is no discussion on appropriateness of these trees in this space belonging to council, rather an encroachment of Ben's marking of territory to include this land. In both case, the use of the adversative *but* therefore acts as a linguistic or grammatical marker to produce a view of the world prioritising the individual's needs over the nonhuman environment.

In the following example Michael's *but* encodes the fact that because a tree (removed as it was shading the swimming pool) was non-native it was therefore less valued.

Yeah I wouldn't say I'm passionate about it [the environment] but I'm pretty motivated to try and do the right thing ... Yeah I'm pretty protective of it. I'm not happy about cutting down the trees *but* the fact that it was an oak tree and some other awful looking thing, um, lessened the guilt. When it comes to enjoyment of, you know, like we had to get rid of the tree to build the pool really, to make the pool worthwhile. So it lost. (Michael, Wahroonga)

### 5.2 *A partitioned view of the environment?*

Participants were most likely to welcome trees into their backyards and lives when they are entwined, sometimes literally, with the rhythms of daily or family life, as in the example of Moira discussed above. Kent and Gwen's timber deck is built literally around their beloved camphor laurel, thus embedding it in the valued times of entertaining family and friends on the deck.

For many participants, however, trees occupy that ambiguous, liminal space described by Sibley (1995) that creates anxiety. We can think of these trees as lying in the zone of a Venn diagram that illustrates the overlap between 'home' and 'nature'. That sort of anxiety is typified in the discussions of danger, size and nativeness. This then leads to a varied set of practices that materialise these conceptual boundaries. The clearest of these are where trees are removed or banished from the backyard, most frequently by those who understand the environment or nature itself as something 'out there'. Nicky articulated this separation when asked to compare her attitude towards her backyard to other areas such as national parks.

I feel guilt because I don't adhere to them at home, but I sort of appreciate our national parks and the need for trees and things like that. But if you look around we don't have any trees in our backyard. Barry won't have a tree. I would have one, but he feels threatened by trees falling on us ... When I was a child I got a lot of good feelings out of national parks and picnic areas and that. But to be honest, I get a better feeling in my own backyard now; you know, I can sit out on that grass and feel like I'm in a national park. I have my own space there, so I'm fine with it. (Nicky, Albion Park)

Participants whose view of nature across these spaces was more fluid expressed a degree of equanimity in their discussion of trees, including trees that could be deemed dangerous. In Sibley's terms they were more tolerant of the zone of ambiguity and anxiety. These include Amanda and Lawrence, quoted above.

A third group of participants had a strong commitment to restoring the indigenous tree layer in their backyard and their comments were often critical of their neighbours' practices. (It should be noted that many of this group of participants were working professionally in some area of environmental management). This group was most likely to express a sense of connectedness to nature and the environment, and articulate a continuity between the environment 'out there' and what was in the backyard. Thus Kris's vision for future change acknowledged the separateness or partitioning concept between how people regard the environment and their own backyard. She advocated 'a merging of the Australian natural environment and our living environment rather than being this discrete thing' and considers a move to more native backyards would elicit a change in people's attitudes to conserving national parks.

In this third group the passion for trees crosscuts the passion for native plants. However, their expressed sense of connectedness between the backyard environment and more distant environments such as forests or national parks contains a different set of contradictions. One is encapsulated in what Mosquin (1997) referred to as the paradox of human exemption, the extent to which one exempts oneself and other humans from a classification of the natural world (see also Ingold 2000). Mosquin was discussing the way humans exclude themselves from classifications of 'alien' species, but the paradox applies here to the expressed connectedness between the backyard and the 'natural environment'. The continuity and commonality between the backyard and the 'natural environment' professed by this group was expressed in plants, particularly trees. In this respect practices are broadly aligned with attitudes. In relation to other parts of the nonhuman world, however, there are significant dissonances between attitude and practice. Most fundamentally this is seen in the presence of houses and people, but the contradictions are also seen in the backyard presence of things that this group would not tolerate in a place of 'pure' nature – dogs, cats and weeds.

Further, as a group, these participants had the strongest social separation between them and their neighbours. Their belief in the rightness of their attitudes often led them into conflict, either overt or otherwise, with neighbours who believed and acted differently.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The study illustrates clearly that the boundaries people construct around and between themselves and the non-human environment can only partly be understood in spatial terms. Social and conceptual boundaries can be just as strong as the spatial ones, and frequently have physical ramifications

in terms of the removal or fostering of trees. By the same token, both spatial and social boundaries are constantly transgressed.

Across all the interviews diverse sets of attitudes are articulated. Particularly strong are those attitudes that reflect a sense of distrust. This can be linked to a need for security, for people to feel safe in their backyards (NSW NPWS 2002). This need is evident in both new housing estates and established suburbs, where stories of falling tree limbs abound, yet often sits uneasily with the recognition that a lack of trees means a lack of birdlife. How this might translate into attitudes to forests and forest protection, or indeed into urban biodiversity protection, requires further exploration and is the subject of ongoing study. On the face of things it seems most likely that those who value and foster trees in a suburban context are most likely to be supportive of forest protection. On the other hand, a highly partitioned view of the world does not necessarily mean that trees and forests are not valued, rather that their place is seen as somewhere else. Although our study produced many examples, as might be expected, of close engagement with the nonhuman environment leading to more favourable attitudes, trees are a clear exception to this trend. For people whose experience or perception is of trees as dangerous, if they are to be valued, it will be at a distance.

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