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RECOGNISING CULTURAL DIVERSITY:
THE GEORGES RIVER PROJECT IN SOUTH-WESTERN SYDNEY

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Introduction and research questions
Parks are places in which people can come together as families and communities to share enriching events and build deep bonds between each other and with the place itself. In Australia active citizenship is intimately related to the use of communal and public spaces—their definition, regulation and design. Parklands are envisaged as nodal points of intra- and inter-cultural group solidarity, where affective bonding between people and through those experiences with the place, can enhance social commitment to the wider social milieu. However urban parks may also be places where people are made to feel intimidated and scrutinised, excluded rather than welcomed into a wider society. Australian cities are experiencing rapid increases in cultural and ethnic diversity as immigration and lifestyle patterns change and as earlier population groups migrate internally and their populations age. If cultural or ethnic groupsii are constrained in their use of parks then the opportunity to build relationships with places and with the communities who use them within Australia is missed.

The question of social relations in parklands is important because in order to survive as viable ecologies, parklands must be socially as well as biologically sustainable. It is participation in meaningful social interactions which is most effective in building attachment to place, rather than scenic beauty or accessibility. (Eisenhauer et al, 2000). Along with such attachment is likely to come an interest in care and conservation. A parkland which has no social value to any real group of people, which
is not visited or cared for or protected in a practical ways, will not survive. A park which has become a place of threat or fear for one social group or for all has lost its strongest allies, those social groups who will defend it if it is threatened with development or commercialisation. The most effective way to mobilise collective, community level support for sustainable use, is to ensure that the parklands are valued and enjoyably used by as diverse a population among its surrounding communities as is possible.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and its Cultural Heritage Division (in the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation) is the industry partner in this collaborative project with UTS. NPWS research and management staff have identified a gap in the service’s knowledge, and indeed in international literature, about how cultural diversity shapes communities’ expectations and use of parklands. A recent statement of NPWS guidelines points out that:

...the principled commitment of NPWS staff to the ideal of multiculturalism is not a sufficient basis in itself to give NPWS the multicultural dimension it needs. This will require an active learning program (including targeted research into both natural and cultural heritage) in which NPWS reaches out to the various migrant communities in order to understand their views of nature and their needs in relation to national parks (Thomas 2002: Appendix pp.133–137).

NPWS is also aware of the tensions which arise in park usage when intercultural (or inter-ethnic) tension obstructs and distorts some users’ access to the parks they want to visit. The service has begun to fill that gap by initiating a series of studies of separate ethnic communities’ use of various parks, namely the Macedonian community’s use of the Royal NP in Sydney (Thomas, 2001), Vietnamese use of a range of national parks (Thomas, 2003) and the Aboriginal people’s use of parks and space in rural Taree (Byrne and Nugent, 2004) The service is now seeking to widen substantially its strategic resources by researching culturally diverse community use of parks on a more comparative basis and by using this research to develop a set of guidelines for park managers to research culturally diverse user needs in their own areas and to utilise the results in better park plans and interpretive collaborations with local communities.
To meet that goal, this project is a collaboration between academic social science researchers in a number of disciplines (history, cultural archaeology and sociology) and park managers in NPWS/DEC. It has received the active support and funding of the Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research group, a peak body of NPWS and local government park managers whose responsibilities cover the whole gamut of park designations in urban areas, from conserved ‘national parks’ to recreational reserves to highly modified environments like reclaimed industrial sites or wetlands which have been turned into sporting facilities. All of these park management bodies are interested in developing better data on cultural diversity but also in identifying best practice research, planning and interpretation strategies to empower local park managers to interact more closely and effectively with their changing local communities.

The project is designed as strategic research: it will focus active research on one geographic area but will undertake this research so as to trial and evaluate promising methodologies for wider use at the same time. The results will be twofold:

1. an addition to our knowledge of the relations between ethnic groups and parks in the local study area, and
2. guidelines for effective and accessible methods for park managers in other areas to research, plan and interpret their parks collaboratively with their own local populations.

So our research questions are:

> Are ethnic or cultural differences demonstrated in different views of and use of urban parks?
> If so, how best to show such differences to park management staff and to the public?
> What politics and practical management tools will allow park managers to recognise the culturally diverse park use among their visitors and to foster positive uses and interactions by and between ethnic groups?
Background

The study area, the Georges River in south western Sydney, has been chosen because it meets the criteria of offering a rich local study which will yield both theoretical and practical results which can also be used more broadly in developing management tools for use in other cities across the nation. The Georges River has shaped southwestern Sydney. As it flows east towards the coast, the river’s rocky-walled bends hide sandy beaches which lie between broad mangrove flats and steep escarpments. Its varied and intractable riverbanks proved difficult to tame for European farming lands and then suburban housing blocks, particularly in the brackish reaches below Liverpool. So its banks had been left ignored in the rush to develop the northern side of the river, from Liverpool through Bankstown, then Canterbury and Hurstville. These wild places remaining here and there have gradually been disciplined into the suburban mainstream, normalised, surveyed and gazetted as ‘public recreation’ or ‘picnic reserves’. The mangrove flats and wetlands have often been cleared and filled with dredged sand from the riverbed, making way for sports ovals and wide grassy lawns, but just sometimes they have survived long enough to be conserved with boardwalks, a few remnants of the wide expanses they occupied in the past. So today, where most of the area is the uniformly and densely alienated for light industrial or housing blocks, there remains an irregular swathe of parklands, twisting through the suburbs, conserved because of the undisciplined route of the river.

The parks are named differently and some come under different jurisdictions and management regimes. Most were small, locally managed parks, some with trusts under council supervision, others with management directed by the local users, including boat owners who valued launch and picnic sites and sporting bodies who valued playing fields. Increasingly their varied designations were regularised and standardised, under local government supervision and, most recently, in 1992, the collection of parklands around Picnic Point were consolidated into the Georges River National Park under NPWS. Yet while these parks have been locked into the formal regulations of modern bureaucracies, their very physical openness, their continuing presence as examples of the ‘natural’ environment in the midst of development, makes them places of rich opportunity for social interactions and cultural performance. Less constrained, and also less expensive to hire, than the halls and public gathering places.
of the built environment, parks and the river they border allow freer expression and endless opportunities for cultural inventiveness for individuals, families or wider groups.

In the Georges River area, there have been many newly arriving groups over the years to use these open spaces and this process has escalated dramatically since the 1970s. After challenging the original owners, the Gandangara peoples, in the early 1810s the British and particularly the Irish settled in the area and by the 1880s felt they had established a stable presence with a secure hold over the working class society of the area, despite a growing presence of southern Europeans and some Chinese among the market gardens and chicken farms. With the end of the post world war two period, however, the few centres of closer settlement like Bankstown and Liverpool were rapidly joined by a network of intensifying nodes of residential suburban development, where many house blocks were being cut out from each 5-acre farming block. The rapidly rising population drew even in the 1950s on new immigration sources. Some were indigenous, as Aboriginal people from rural NSW and Queensland migrated to the city’s outskirts. Others were from overseas: the Migrant Hostels on the river at East Hills and Riverwood saw many more European immigrants drawn into the region, destabilising the Irish ascendancy. Then with the 1970s the demographic changed again with a significant arrival of Vietnamese migrants. Most recently, there have been substantial numbers of Arabic-speaking peoples coming into the area, from countries ranging right across the Middle East, from the Sudan in the west, through Lebanon and Palestine to Iran and Pakistan in the east. Their linguistic, religious and cultural diversities, like those of the Vietnamese before them, have not been recognised by the established population, who lump them all together as ‘Muslims’ or as ‘Iraqis’.

**Making ‘places’ and making ‘people’: conceptual explorations**

Because parks offer such accessible, unconstrained and inexpensive venues for family and community gatherings and cultural events, parks in the area have been actively used by all these incoming groups. Public parks are by definition open to all, and invite interactions. Their space is always shared. People can be excluded only on grounds of proscribed behaviour or dress. It is no longer acceptable, or even legal, to exclude groups from public parks and facilities in the style of the old ‘Whites Only’
days of Jim Crow, Apartheid or their only slightly less subtle Australian manifestations. Social distinctions and exclusions continue to operate, of course, and the high visibility in parks makes the social practices which can be the occasion for such informal discrimination more visible than they might be within a building. However, interactions are always possible, at least in theory. Moreover, the ‘natural’ qualities of parks make them one of the few places where everyone, even the newest migrant, can feel a sense of rightful presence. All of the cultural groups we have interviewed have a general religious or cultural orientation towards nature. Exactly what it was that each group understood as ‘nature’ varied significantly, and this variation forms an important element of our inquiry. But each group laid a high value on ‘nature’ and were confident that they had a right to seek out experiences of contact with nature and natural environments, beyond any reference to relations to the specific territory of their homeland.

As would be expected then, recent work (Veal and Dinning 2003) demonstrates that many people of all ages and all cultural or ethnic groups utilise parks. Only some south-east Asian groups are slightly below the average in their visitation rates, but even they are only 20% below the rates of all other groups. However how and why culturally diverse groups use parks has not been investigated in this or other studies in Australia and only very slightly overseas. Nor have any differences been explored in the way differing cultural groups might use parklands.

This research project investigates exactly those questions. To do so we have problematised two key concepts: ‘place’ and ‘ethnicity’. We have assumed that the way people perceive and understand any place is shaped by their culture that is, by what they understand about nature and how they have learned about and are still encouraged to value particular aspects of the material world they encounter. So the homeland culture of migrants and their knowledge of parks of all sorts, including ‘national’ ones, from their place of origin, may be called on as they learn about the environment of their new home. But homeland knowledge and experience are not deterministic nor are they ever followed slavishly, and one of the most interesting dimensions of our study has been the indication that homeland practices of engaging with nature are used as a way, not to recall nostalgically the old home, but to learn and explore the new one. The outcomes are great modifications to cultural practice,
reflecting active engagements between past and present, between old and new homes, remembered and newly encountered environments.

Such dynamic processes are not static or fixed, but rather change over time. The very way people see a place is altered by their orientation to it (is it local or distant), by their familiarity with it, by the physical way they move around it, by their level of comfort in it and with whom they traverse it. One of our interviewees has described how her way of moving around the suburb she grew up in has changed over the years, as her increased walking habits have meant she has become more aware of the geographic substructure underlying the built environment of roads and footpaths.

...it gives you a different perspective of the space and of how the urban space operates because the river goes places that roads don’t. It actually block access to places. Like it makes you go the long way to places on a road whereas if you’re walking along the river, it’s a shortcut, if that makes sense because the river blocks roads off and stuff. So you see, walking along the river becomes a different access to the area, a different way of seeing that same place...which was one of the things you realise as a kid running around the bush, that it’s often quicker to go to your friend’s house through the bush than through the street, because you don’t have to walk up, connect to the main road, back out again, and down. And like, if someone had said to me, five years ago, walk to Bankstown, I would have walked the way I walk on the road but now if someone said to me walk to Bankstown I’d get there a lot quicker by taking that river walk (Joy Suliman, November 2003).

So this project draws its approach to ‘place’ from the work of cultural geographers like Doreen Massey, who emphasise the cultural, social and political dimensions of any ‘place’, pointing out that it is not a fixed and bounded point, but rather the sum of the social processes which focus on it, but which may have connections to events, places and people from around the globe, linking any discrete material place with far wider processes. We have been interested in not just which parks and places on the river people use, but in how they see them and what they make of them, as well as what they would like to do there and what might obstruct them from doing it.

Because we are investigating the degree to which identifiably different cultural groups use and value parklands and the river, we are concerned with ‘ethnicity’, that quality of culture, history and nationality by which so many people identify themselves and
are identified by others. Our subjects are people from four different cultural or ethnic
groups: Anglo-Celtic Australians of long standing in the area; resident indigenous
Australians; resident Vietnamese Australians and Arabic-speaking residents, many of
whom are newly immigrant. Yet despite the fact that most of these people have no
difficulty identifying their own or others’ ethnic affiliation, we recognise that
‘ethnicity’ is not a predetermined or fixed quality of individuals or communities. It
does not arrive fully formed with migrants in their suitcases, nor does it pass
unchanged across generations. Instead, we follow Teo (2003) in identifying a process
of ‘ethnicisation’, by which people confirm, and at times construct, an ‘ethnic’
identity in the context of the interactions of the social environment. Their adoption
and consolidation of an ethnic identity which links them with a homeland and a local
migrant community arises in the emerging relations between themselves, their fellow
countrymen and their surrounding new neighbours, which may as often be marked by
hostility and conflict as by optimistic welcome and acceptance. Ethnicity then is
another dynamic process, an identity emerging from the complex interactions and
possible hostilities of the new home, in which such identities may be assertive or
defensive depending on the circumstances which they have to meet.

We are finding that the open, public spaces of parklands and rivers offer opportunities
to observe ethnicisation occurring and these examples are shaped by, expressed
through and directly tied to the places in which they are enacted. These might be
assertive processes, like the evocation of a homeland culture by celebrating national
festivals or practices like folk dancing; or the celebration of family events like birthdays
or weddings with particular homeland performances; or the holding of religious
observances. Or alternatively it might be the creation of a new but still recognisably
‘ethnic’ identity, based on a homeland affiliation but becoming very different in the
new home context, as we will argue below has been the case with Vietnamese
Australians’ fishing on the Georges River. Or it might be a deliberately exploratory or
transgressive process, as in the situations we discuss below, confirming Mandy
Thomas’ work (2001), where young Vietnamese Australians take part in ‘barbeque’
and ‘bushwalking’ experiences with non-Vietnamese friends in national parks, in
which they are deliberately seeking out experiences they see as pushing through the
confining boundaries of ‘ethnicity’. Yet another process, this time a government-
instigated example, would be the proliferation of ‘Australia Day’ celebrations in public parks. These highly orchestrated occasions seek to generate interactions between ‘ethnic’ groups which will foster experiences incorporating many visible performances of ethnic diversity, via food or dance, and will draw the participants into a new ‘multicultural’ but a still unquestionably unitary ‘national’ identity. (Hokari 2003) The recruitment of the ‘natural’ environment into the process of nation-making has a long history in Australia, seen as early as the 1890s in the use of emblems like wattle and gum leaves as markers of national identity. Contemporary manifestations seek to emplace unitary nationhood, as demonstrated now in stimulated displays of multiculturalism, onto the sites most iconically associated with Australian identity that is, onto the ‘bush’ of ‘national’ and recreational parklands.

Just as frequently, one can see the day-to-day negative experiences of defensive ethnicisation. Indigenous Australians continue to face spatial discrimination in public places and Vietnamese migrants have done so in the past, focussed on their physical differences from Anglo-Celtic or European Australians as well as their cultural practices. Today in the Georges River area, it is predominantly Arabic-speaking people who can be seen to be meeting hostility expressed towards their language, their physical appearance, their cultural practices like cooking and the distinctive clothing worn by many Muslim women, most notably hijab (the veil) and clothing covering limbs. Experiences of hostility from Anglo- and other Australians have risen in the last two years, particularly since September 11, 2001, but were based on a pre-existing tension which had become evident with rising numbers of new immigrants from the Middle East over the preceding decade. The experiences our interviewees report to have occurred in parks range from name-calling, harassment and intimidation to, occasionally, physical violence. The outcome for both groups and individuals, including individual young Arabic-speaking men and male teenagers, has been a marked reluctance to go to parks alone, or to go to any parks with which they are not familiar, and where they can not depend on finding a substantial number of members of their own community. Such experiences generate widespread fears and continuing apprehension. Even when they might be unreasonable, such fears have a severe impact by limiting the use of public space by members of the Arabic-speaking community and confining them to fewer, well-known areas where they feel familiar,
secure and supported. Conversely, the outcome is to make it less likely that the interactions Arabic-speaking people might have with people outside their community in public places will be relaxed and mutually productive interchanges. Such experiences generate a defensive sense of ‘ethnic’ self-identification and corresponding identification by others as a perceived ‘ethnic threat’, which is a product not of any homeland culture but of the circumstances and ongoing experiences in the new environment.

**Outcomes in practice**

Many park managers in the national parks service and in local government are aware of a significant degree of cultural diversity in their user groups and are eager to learn about how it affects their park usage. However, as it currently stands in the Georges River area, policy and park regulations in most cases assume that there are only one set of acceptable and desirable behaviours in parks and that where members of the public behave differently it is assumed that the role of park management is to correct and redirect that behaviour towards the norm through education preferably or punitive discipline if necessary. It is often immigrant or culturally different groups whose behaviour is defined in this way as ‘lacking’ in knowledge either of local environments or of local regulations, or in an alternative approach, as so determined by the practices and experiences of their homeland as to require, again, extensive re-education about local conditions to awaken a sense of environmental (and indeed national) responsibility in them.

It can be argued, however, that different approaches to parklands and rivers by some cultural groups may suggest neither ignorance nor negligent disregard. Rather, they suggest well-considered (although non-Anglo) cultural knowledge, or deeply felt religious belief, or simply sensible approaches to developing a responsible relationship with a new home and new neighbours. Recognising the sources of culturally-shaped knowledge from migrants’ homelands or the motivations of their strategies to learn their new home may offer park managers valuable resources such as:

> useful comparative knowledge from other environments:
> the potential to recruit the enthusiasm of new residents towards conservation strategies once their interest in these issues is recognised and properly acknowledged;

> or finally the opportunity to foster more productive social interactions in parklands once the tensions and conflicts which generate ethnic polarisation in public space are recognised and intervention strategies developed.

**Methodologies**

The Georges River project has used a number of methodologies to elicit individual and collective perceptions of parklands and the river. Our aims have been to enable us to identify the varying approaches which may emerge to questions about the meaning of ‘nature’, about the expectations held about parklands and rivers and their usage, about meaningful experiences in natural public spaces in the area and about obstructions to use or enjoyment of parklands and river.

We have begun interviewing members of each of the four ethnic groups, seeking interviews with different age groups and both sexes, and drawing on members of those communities as far as possible to carry out or facilitate the interviews. To date we have interviewed between 12 and 20 members each from the Anglo-Celtic, Arabic-speaking and Vietnamese communities, with less as yet from the Aboriginal communities of the area. We have conducted unstructured interviews both with individuals and with groups, in ‘focus group’ settings. Some interviews have been conducted in the riverbank parks themselves, others at the more distant homes or workplaces of the interviewees. We have assumed that the conscious statements made individually or collectively may not fully express the complexities of these issues, nor reveal the actual behaviour of participants in parklands. For this reason we have undertaken both individual and collective interviewing (on and off-park), and noted the differences which emerge between individual responses and those in groups. We have undertaken some observation visits of the parks during weekends and weekdays, to test out some of the assertions and generalisations which emerge in interviews. And we have attempted in both group and individual interviews to explore not only tensions within cultural groups but any contacts or interactions occurring outside and across ethnic affiliations.
An important element of our approach has been to seek visualisations of the ways people actually move around the spaces of parks and riverbanks, in order to gain an insight into the different ways of seeing and knowing the area. We have asked interviewees to map their movements between and within the parks they visit, using a number of differently scaled maps. The process so clearly described by Joy Suliman (above) in which different ways of physically moving through a place allow different ways of seeing and knowing it, is actually made visible in this process. And finally, we have asked them as well to show us what they see as positive or negative in parks by photographing these elements then explaining their choices to us. This process offers a significant expansion of the use of GIS technologies within NPWS and more generally in research and analysis. Previously it has been primarily biological, geographical and demographic data which has been collected and displayed in GIS formats. This project will utilise GIS as well as other graphical display software to engage cultural data with both social and biological data. The results of these visualisation strategies are preliminary but we suggest below some areas where they are already offering insights into the way knowledge of place is constructed.

We are also investigating the perceptions of park managers, in both NPWS and Local Government, to parks, the river and their users. To date, our preliminary interviews with managers, rangers and policy makers have indicated that many of them have concerns about what they see as the limitations of the cultural homogeneity assumed in their policy documents, and are themselves seeking tools for creatively approaching the issues. It is also the case however that they are concerned principally with a sense of obligation to conserve and sustainably manage the environments for which they are responsible. They have often expressed frustration at seeking to balance the competing demands of a variety of user groups with their judgement about how best to conserve and protect the places they use. In these circumstances, the simplistic assumptions that users are either ignorant or transgressive are readily available backstops. The absence of many members of the Aboriginal community, and even less of Vietnamese or Arabic-speaking communities, among the staff of park management in either NPWS or local government makes the process of moving beyond such assumptions even harder.
Emerging areas of focal interest

The findings of our preliminary research suggest that diverse understandings of nature and diverse expectations of parks and the river are held by the various cultural groups with whom we have been working. While these results, drawn from interviews with small numbers, are hardly definitive, they open up areas of significant difference between user groups and between users and park managers, suggesting that further inquiry is needed. So far, analysis has proceeded on the interviews with Vietnamese and Arabic-speaking communities, with fewer results yet from the Anglo and Indigenous groups. Nevertheless, three areas of interest are already evident:

(1) the question of the time of day in which users want access to parks;

(2) the use of water and its conservation; and

(3) fishing and its technologies.

Night and day

Most large parks are open only during daylight hours. Where there are gates, they are locked at sundown and stern signs warn off intruders. Night time use is regarded in policy documents as undesirable and suspicious. Many complaints by park neighbours, particularly those who criticise the recent NPWS take-over of the Georges River National Park, allege increasing night time use of parks, with unidentified malevolent ‘outsiders’ said to come in to the poorly patrolled areas and have loud parties or dump stolen cars or undertake more dangerous and illegal activity. Yet many members of the public, and many of our interviewees, strongly argued for legitimate night time activities to be recognised and safely facilitated. The most sustained argument arose from Muslim interviewees among the Arabic-speaking communities, who explained that the cycles of religious observance strongly shaped social life in favour of evening socialisation. This was particularly the case during Ramadan, usually in November, the month of fasting from sunrise till sunset. A sixteen year old Muslim teenaged boy who lives at Revesby and bike-rides regularly into the national park with friends, explained that although he was young and fit enough to be outside and active during Ramadan, older people liked to stay inside during the fasting hours, and only begin to come out in the cooler hours just before
sunset, in preparation for breaking their fast. Most parks lack adequate shelter from the sun, so if it is hot and sunny, people are again less likely to come to the park until nearly dark. Then many of the Muslims we interviewed explained that they enjoy spending the end of the daily fast in company with family and friends during the evening, in groups which might range from 20 to 70 people. Sharing their meal in outdoor venues is easy, relaxed and pleasant during this spring period. Such evening gatherings of practising Muslims are alcohol-free. It is however impossible to use many parks for these informal gatherings because the parks close at sundown. Our interviewees explained that their preference for evening extended family gatherings is common throughout the year, and so the desire to use parks after dark is not restricted to Ramadan, although then the pattern is in its most pronounced form. As a number of women in a focus group at the Muslim Women Association explained:

— I don’t come across any problems with parks except when I go to family parks like the one near Georges River. That one closes really early and we usually go in summer and so we’re all sitting around and you have to get up.

— It’s all of us, isn’t it? Especially when you have an extended family with you and you’re all seated and you’re having a coffee and you’re having your dinner, everyone shouting, talking, you know, sharing nice times, and suddenly the time is ‘Off you go, we need to close!’

— Exactly, yeah. We’re all enjoying our time and its ‘Off you go!’

Muslims, and more generally those of the Arabic-speaking communities, are not the only people who are interested in safe access to the parks during the evenings. Many people who fish, from all communities, are interested in night access to the river for line fishing and for prawning when the prawns are running. And many immediate neighbours of the parks, who in our survey tend to be Anglo or European Australians, and certainly of more middle class income levels, wanted better lighting in the parks as well. They are partly seeking to deter the ubiquitous ‘outsiders’ but also to enjoy the areas over their fences, the marginal areas of the parks, which they have often claimed de facto by mowing and clearing them for a few metres, extending their own backyards into the park and sometimes erecting play equipment like swings for their children. Yet it is not the case that people are waiting for legal access and better lighting before they go into the parks at night. As there has always been, there is a great deal of human activity in the parks after dark despite the regulations and the locked gates.
Many of the young people we spoke to, particularly the young men from the Anglo and Vietnamese communities, admitted going into parks at night to socialise in groups in an exciting atmosphere away from adult presence. Many again reported seeing anglers approaching the river, some but not all carrying illegal nets or traps, others preparing for prawning. There are plenty of dumped car bodies in the upper, plateau area of the Georges River national park, suggesting illegal activity associated with car theft and stripping is occurring under shelter of darkness. And other illegal but not illegitimate activity is also occurring more deeply into this sandstone scrubby area. This is the extensive building of ‘cubby houses’ by apparently teenagers. These are elaborate structures, made from frames of small saplings and palings, nailed to living tree trunks, and sometimes constructed with up to three levels rising to a height of 10 or 15 metres. Rangers report that there is seldom the debris of alcoholic parties around such cubbys. More often they find computer magazines and mineral water bottles. When they find them, NPWS rangers dismantle these structures, but with in a few weeks they reappear somewhere close by, perhaps deeper into the scrub towards the cliffs, but still in the same area. NPWS staff do not perceive this activity to be malicious or widely destructive but they are concerned about the degree of damage to living trees. They are seeking ways to identify the cubby builders and, without wishing to smother their desire to find quiet, bushland retreats, the rangers are hoping to direct it into less environmentally damaging forms.

Park neighbours suggest that all ‘intruders’ into the parks after dark are nefarious and dangerous. Yet it is clear from our early inquiries that a wide range of night time activities are actually already occurring and many of them are not particularly anti-social in themselves, although it may be better for environmental sustainability if they were modified. Neighbours also suggest that such intruders are all ‘outsiders’, who come from long distances to invade and terrorise a quiet suburban park. Yet our mapping would suggest otherwise. The early findings of our maps of movement and knowledge around the parks suggest that those with deep and detailed knowledge of the bush parks are not outsiders but instead locals, who have perhaps been regular visitors over many years, on foot or on bikes, and who have therefore built up a strong knowledge of the less accessible and more secluded areas of the bushland. Our observations of park neighbourhood areas also suggested strongly that the margins of
the parks are a regular and welcome meeting place for local teenagers, close, cheap, relatively safe and accessible places to hang out and pass the time. It is far more likely that the cubby builders are from close by and able to make regular unobtrusive visits into the parks to enjoy its pleasures as a teenage fantasy world.

So night time in the park is actually crowded with nocturnal people as well as nocturnal animals. Their purposes are sometimes illegal but not necessarily illegitimate. Many other genuine and positive social processes could be accomplished if the parks were opened for longer hours and had better lighting and more staffing to ensure a safe experience for all. Populating the parks at night, with the family groups who want to go there and some security staff to patrol and protect them, may offer the opportunity to make the parks safer and more attractive to a far wider range of the community in the district. Such wider and more frequent use would have the effect, as has been demonstrated in other studies (Eisenhauer et al, 2000), of deepening a sense of community ownership and responsibility for the parks’ as environments as well as social spaces.

Water

The presence of water is an important quality of natural environments for all interviewees with whom we have spoken. But the reasons for valuing water vary to some extent across ethnic groups. The Aboriginal people with whom we have begun to work have been far more likely to discuss the river as a whole, in terms of its body of knowledge as well as its quality, as well as referring to discrete parts of it being valued for their fishing or accessibility as social places or for the presence of art work in the escarpments overlooking the river. The Vietnamese interviewees stressed the importance of water to them in choices of recreational sites. Many of the older interviews particularly valued the opportunities for reflection and for enjoying memories of home when beside a river. The absolute abundance of water in the environment in Vietnam, with its high rainfall, multiple rivers and streams, and its irrigated agriculture means that water is appreciated both functionally, for fishing and agriculture, and aesthetically, as flowing water continues to play a major role in Vietnamese iconography and literature. Recent industrialisation, after years of wartime pollution with defoliants and other chemicals as well as ordinance, has left an abiding concern about water quality which some older Vietnamese bring with them to
Australia. Older Vietnamese people have also discussed the lack of water in the Australian environment, in terms of the need to travel long distances to reach a river and the rare opportunities they have to do this. What they have seldom raised, however, is an awareness of issues of conservation and wastage of water in the Australian environment.

The Arabic-speaking interviewees, both Muslim and Christian, have raised the issue of water far more frequently. Muslims have explained that it is essential for the practice of Islam to have very good ablution facilities to allow people to wash before each of the five daily prayer sessions. Park water facilities are one of the most commonly complained about elements of infrastructure, with many among all our interviewees complaining about few and poorly functioning water outlets and dirty toilet and washing facilities. However Muslims have a particular and more pressing need to have adequate and accessible clean water. If large family gatherings are to be continued over a period of a number of hours, as everyone wants them to be, then one or other of the prayer periods will be included. But these observances can only be carried out if abundant clean water is available. So the presence and proper functioning of water supplies is crucial to the accessibility of parks to Muslim families.

Both Christian and Muslim Arabic-speakers have migrated from a water-poor region of the globe, although some, like the southern Lebanese, come from water-rich areas within it. Water is an important element of landscape architecture for them and man-made ponds and fountains are highly valued elements of cultural environments for all, which they often discuss as expressing ‘nature’, despite their human construction. All members of these communities are all acutely conscious of the environmental, social and political ramifications of water quantity and quality. Many of the Muslim women we spoke to were shocked at what they observed among European Australians in parks in terms of water wasting behaviour. Some of the Muslim and Christian women from these communities are very active in grass-roots bush regeneration and water conservation groups in their area. They link this to their high sense of anxiety about water scarcity which they feel compels them to exercise a social responsibility to act to teach their children and the wider social community about the need to conserve water.
Water concerns among many of our interviewees opened up an important area of common concern across all ethnic groups, which was the need shared by all carers of children and older people for better water sources and better, cleaner toilet facilities. Although none other than the Muslims had a specific religiously-generated need for abundant water, everyone who brought children and old people to the parks wanted to know that they would be able to take them to clean toilets and give them safe, clean drinking water. And mothers from all groups worried about water safety for their children in rivers and pools.

**Fishing**

The assumption of a strong association between fishing and Vietnamese people circulates widely among non-Vietnamese, and is widely mixed with criticism by non-Vietnamese about fishing styles, technologies and strategies. There have been numerous attempts by NSW Fisheries as well as by NPWS to modify Vietnamese fishing practices as they are in some cases dangerous, with a disproportionate number of Vietnamese fishermen lost during heavy seas while rock fishing, and in other cases they are regarded as illicit, like fishing without a licence or taking prohibited species or sizes of fish or fishing with nets and traps. To the extent that anyone tries to explain the continuing high level of Vietnamese fishing, it is attributed to desires to re-enact nostalgic memories of fishing in their home country, a practice of ‘intangible heritage’, or to contribute to the formation of a ‘community enclave, to consolidate ethnic community identity and the maintenance of links to their homeland and home culture’. So fishing is seen as a mobilisation of memory and place with the goal of reconstructing the past and creating a cultural enclave, which, however much it may be aimed at facilitating success in the new environment, is nevertheless backward looking in its orientation. (Mazumdar et al 2000) The Vietnamese people we spoke to, some elderly, some young and some middle-aged, were just as likely as non-Vietnamese to make the same generalisations that all Vietnamese people liked to fish and that they did so often in Australia.

We’ve begun to look then at what constitutes fishing in Vietnam, at what the practices are which might be seen being re-enacted in the Georges River National Park and which are so widely commented on. It turns out to be not so simple. Much of the fishing practiced in Australia involves line fishing by men from the riverbanks or
familial collecting on shorelines, in circumstances understood to be ‘recreational’. In Vietnam, fishing is traditionally and still often done with very different technologies, including woven basket traps and hand-thrown nets in traditional forms and with large scale mechanically-cast nets in commercial settings. It is usually undertaken collectively, in either commercial or subsistence contexts. There is an aesthetic and literary tradition in Chinese culture, to which some of the Vietnamese people we interviewed referred, which depicts a lone Chinese man sitting quietly beside a river, sometimes rod fishing, to symbolise a deeply contemplative relationship with nature. Apart from this rather different example, however, the sense of demarcated and sequestered ‘leisure’ time is seldom encountered in Vietnam. The fishers there are often women, in either commercial or subsistence fishing, but their situation is likely to be a domestic and village setting, a familiar place in which the surrounding fishers and others are well-known to the women involved. So the circumstances of both traditional and contemporary fishing are significantly different from the recreational fishing undertaken by Vietnamese as well as other recreational fishers in parks in Australia, where the fishers are most generally men, who fish in public settings as a ‘hobby’ in ‘recreational’ time and in the view of onlookers who are total strangers.

There have been moreover dramatic changes in Vietnamese society, even while the American-Vietnam war was underway. Both modernisation and the warfare in rural areas led to sustained growth of population in cities, and while water abounds in semi-tropical Vietnam, there are less opportunities for fishing in cities there than in villages. It was suggested by some of the Vietnamese people interviewed that they and their relations had sometimes not been avid fishermen in Vietnam before they took up the practice in Australia. They had lived in cities and had not often had the chance to fish although they might have warm memories of fishing as young children when they visited grandparents or older relations still living in villages. Others again suggested that some Vietnamese people in Australia were responding to the understanding, which they shared, that Vietnamese people were all fishers, and so were acting out what they felt they should have done in Vietnam rather than what they actually had done. The romanticised imagining of Vietnamese fishing is suggested in some of the photographs circulating on the internet (aimed at both western tourists and Vietnamese disasporic members) suggesting peaceful rural scenes of individual
recognizing cultural diversity

recreational fishing, which turn out to be photographs posed and taken, instead, in the heart of busy, noisy cities.

The explanation for Vietnamese fishing in Australia therefore needs to be explored more closely than to assume that it is a simple re-enactment of a practice from home. It is actually very unlike what people may have done at home, even in their distant childhood. An alternative way to consider Vietnamese fishing in Australia, supported by some of our interview material, might be as ‘work’ rather than as ‘leisure’. Richard White is a key American historian in environmental history, who has challenged the prevailing view that productive ‘work’ is always undertaken in hostility to environmental knowledge and values. His acerbic article, “‘Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?’ Work and Nature”\(^{iii}\), challenges as Eurocentric and culturally-specific the view that the ‘original human relationship to nature was one of leisure’ and that ‘identifies nature with play, making it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay or live.’ He argues instead that physical labour gave not only indigenous people but white settlers ‘their most intimate knowledge of the country’. He rejects the current environmentalist position which romanticises hunter/gather economies and sentimentalises some ‘pioneer’ technologies but rejects modern rural work as destructive. Instead, he argues that analysts of environmental change need to recognise ‘work’, including modern, highly technological work, as a way of knowing land, not infallibly by any means, but nevertheless a way of learning about and understanding aspects of environment which would otherwise be inaccessible. White attacks the city-based wilderness advocate, whose urban living is actively impacting on resources, but with those impacts disguised by distance and ideology. Instead, he suggests that ‘coming to terms with modern work and machines involves both more complicated histories and an examination of how all work, and not just the work of loggers, farmers, fishers and ranchers, intersects with nature’.

Thinking about Vietnamese fishing in Australia as work opens up more possibilities than does trying to see it only as uprooted ‘heritage’ and a nostalgic repetition of the past. Instead, it might be seen plainly as subsistence and this is how some Vietnamese interviewees remember it. They recall sea and river fishing and gathering shoreline food like pippies and crabs more frequently when they are newly arrived than later in...
their residence in Australia, and as their resources were scarce this harvesting did help to support family economies. But more than a simple subsistence contribution, the seafood harvest was sign of mastery of the new environment. One young man we interviewed explained that Vietnamese fishers would not throw small fish back, and would take home whatever species they caught in order to prove their skill, to demonstrate to their families that they had succeeded in their task of the day. This suggestion was extended significantly by Dai Le, a filmmaker who came to Australia as a young child. In an interview with us, she makes the much broader argument that her observations of her relations and their Australian fishing suggest an active engagement with the new place at every level. Fishing was a way of learning the land and river, building (probably) on skills and knowledge brought from home, to make sense of a new environment and also of new people. Dai recalls her relations actively trying out new methods and technologies, asking each other about more effective ways to do things, asking Anglo fishermen about what fish they caught and what tackle they used and gathering new ideas to learn how the new place worked. This is work indeed, the work of taking a skill of which they had some knowledge, then using it to engage actively with a new environment, allowing them to probe to find out what is different as well as what is the same, making it a ‘place’ by knotting oneself and ones’ social networks into the physical surroundings and the local networks of similarly engaged fishers, those locals who ‘know’ and can teach the country.

These are of course gendered processes and there is another significant shift from Vietnam. As we asked further questions of the Vietnamese interviewees, it became evident that in fact not everyone fished in Australia. It was most usually middle aged and older men, while younger men more often fished with older men and less often when they were in groups of their own age. In Vietnam, there had been many women involved, by need or by choice, in fishing. The abundance of water as well as the economy meant the opportunities were frequent anywhere outside the cities for women to fish in situations which are not fully public, but were instead in local, village or domestic settings, in groups with other women and where strangers were unlikely to be around. In Australia, the conditions are very different. Here the cultural context privileges men not only as commercial but also as recreational fishers. The intense scarcity of water means the opportunities for fishing are few and in urban areas these
are always in socially exposed setting like public parks or beaches. This exposed setting combined with the highly proscriptive regulations around fishing all militate against women who may already be unconfident in a foreign cultural environment and alien language. The result is that few Vietnamese women can be found fishing; in three site visits we found only two Vietnamese women fishing, both elderly and fishing in company with their elderly husbands, and one middle aged woman said she had tried it here but it hadn’t been very successful or satisfying, and she told us she ‘wasn’t very good at it’. Only some young women among those we interviewed mentioned that they occasionally fished when they went out in groups with young Vietnamese men. The older women we interviewed were saddened by their exclusion from fishing, but appreciated the chance to be close to rivers, valuing their ‘quiet and tranquillity’, as well as the opportunity to remember: ‘I live in South Vietnam where rivers are a way of life, so it is something that brings back a sense of nostalgia’. But these women are now relegated to passive appreciation, more like scenery viewing or the tourist experience. The combination of the cultural and physical environment in Australia means the opportunity to use their fishing memories as a spring board into knowing and mastering this new place are not available to Vietnamese women as it is to their men.

These old women mentioned their sense of the loneliness and emptiness of the Australian bush. One woman said (in translation through the young Vietnamese woman who was the project interviewer), ‘We like nature to be complemented by human efforts so it is less wild and less empty or lifeless’. The desire to people the spaces of the bush echoes the early responses of Anglo Australians to native Australian environments. But beyond this, a particularly common sentiment expressed by most of the Vietnamese people who spoke with us which emphasised the valuing of the social dimensions of time in parklands was that they did not seek out ‘nature’ for individual contemplation or aimless leisure. Instead they valued having a purposeful activity as the focus for gatherings. As one young man explained, suggesting the pressure of multi-job families and heavy studying burdens: ‘we are very busy, so we like to have a purpose in being somewhere together, and we like to have a reason to do things in large groups’. Having a reason for being together enhanced the sociality of the gatherings, allowing perhaps shared discussion of memories from home, but
also of other things. There is a comparison here with the experiences of Aboriginal people I have interviewed in western New South Wales about when and in what circumstances they have been taught the stories about country and particularly about the rivers. Tex Scuthorpe, like most others, explained that he wasn’t just told such stories, and that he didn’t learn them on special occasions set aside for ‘teaching’ or ‘culture’. Instead, he learned them while doing something with someone, while undertaking a shared purposeful activity like fencing or fishing. Then, the socialising which the activity necessitates and allows, presents the opportunities to talk about both the past and the present. For the Vietnamese interviewees so far, the socialising fostered by the shared activity of fishing may be the real and valued goal of that fishing, not ‘remembering’ or ‘heritage’ or even subsistence. The reified practice of fishing, if it were to be isolated, ‘conserved’ and ‘performed’ like so much ‘intangible heritage’, would in fact have had the life sucked out of it.

There may be many other reasons why Vietnamese people like fishing, and just as many reasons they are not likely to fish in ways which conform readily to the regulatory framework laid down by the official bodies with whom they may come into conflict. There can be no doubt, however, that many Vietnamese people (or men at least) are committed to doing it. We interviewed a Lebanese high school boy who is a neighbour of the Georges River National Park and who is frequently in and out of the park on his bike and with friends. He has often seen Vietnamese fishermen at night, in heavy boots and waterproof gear, heading for the river. As it happens, both Vietnamese and Muslim residents, for different reasons, each take part in the busy night world of the park, a world unsanctioned by the NPWS who want everyone gone by sunset.

**Conclusion**

Each of these issues emerging as a focal area of investigation has implications for the way the sustainability of parks and river might be fostered. Each shapes peoples behaviour and reveals the values they bring to park and river use. Recognising the complexity of these processes offers opportunities to develop management approaches which go beyond the existing models which assume user ignorance or negligence. Instead management could seek to build on the strengths of interest in the environment demonstrated by many culturally-defined groups to develop
collaborations which draw on the knowledge of those ethnic groups rather than treating them as deficient or transgressive, and therefore in need of re-education or punishment.

Some examples, drawing on the local results and the methodologies being used for this project, might be the following:

- Develop trial areas for evening opening, in consultation with Arabic-speaking users and neighbours. This requires not only active communication between park management and communities, as well as between communities, but also mapping of usage to work out where resources can most efficiently be used to get maximum benefits from lighting and security needed to ensure safe evening use.

- Increased water facilities at key areas where it is known they are most needed for ritual usage among Muslim users. Again communication with and between communities is essential, as is firm mapped knowledge of where the best places are to locate these additional facilities.

- Develop programs for cross-cultural water conservation or river bank cleanup campaigns, in close consultation with all community groups but with particular attention to the Arabic-speaking communities where this research demonstrates that interest in water conservation is high. The resultant community participation, and with effective management strategies to foster cross-cultural collaborations on these type of projects, are most likely to generate not only better conservation outcomes but also better intercultural relations between groups.

- Celebrate fishing cultures by organising local ‘fishing festivals’ rather than ‘fishing competitions’. Instead of attempting to mandate conformity by regulation in fishing techniques and equipment, park managers could assess the wide range of fishing technologies, methods and techniques, histories and cultures, which abound along the river and identify the maximum number which could be considered ‘legal’, then organise events which acknowledged this diversity and celebrated it, with interpretive material solicited from and presented by community groups as well as by
NPWS and local government staff. Planning such events with a strategy of encouraging maximum informal communication between individuals across ethnic lines would again increase the flow of cross cultural learning as well as recognise and affirm the value of the various cultures of fishing which have found a place on the river.

Each of these projects uses the revealed cultural and ethnic differences to identify common ground on which to build alliances for better park conservation and social interaction. Each seeks to acknowledge and value the unique qualities of the cultures and identities of each group and at the same time, to better inform other users about them as well as fostering active interchange and communication. Any such projects need to be based firmly on local research so that park managers can be confident in their identification of their user groups, of the areas they use in common and separately, and of their differing and similar interests. Park managers then need to have effective tools for making such interests visible and understandable, to maximise the possibility of fostering collaborative cross-cultural activities focused on the parklands. Such approaches promise effective strategies for developing sustainable social and ecological relations for urban parks in rapidly changing cities.

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1 The research team has been grateful for the interest and support of the Muslim Women Association, Lakemba; the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Bankstown City Council.

2 The term ‘ethnic group’ is subject to a high degree of confusion. It is in general assumed to refer to cultural characteristics, rather than to biological characteristics as ‘race’ is supposed to do. Beyond that, however, the question of which cultural characteristics are definitive are seldom commonly agreed. So ethnicity can be used to refer to shared language and/or shared nation of origin and/or shared cultural practices and/or shared religion. We would prefer to use ‘cultural’ to define the groups we are studying. However, we recognise that the term ‘ethnic’ is more commonly recognised to refer to the complex of collective identity characteristics to which we are referring. We will therefore use ‘ethnic’ (without the inverted commas) as a general rubric to define the groups but as discussed in the course of the application, this is a loosely used and poorly understood term. We are also very concerned to investigate the degree to which people move between groups, the degree to which ‘boundaries’ between groups are porous or are deliberately transgressed, and the degree to which common ground exists between groups or between segments of groups such as age cohorts or gender groups.

3 This title quotes a bumper sticker in a logging town.