

CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

LGA URBAN FOREST POLICY

(adopted at 2003 LGA Conference)

Whilst only a cliché, “can’t see the forest for the trees” adequately describes how our urban forests are not managed and our urban trees are.

DEFINITION

Urban forest is defined as the totality of trees and shrubs on all public and private land in and around urban areas (including bushland, parkland, gardens and street trees) and is measured as a canopy cover percentage of the total area, and is recognised as a primary component of the urban ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

The trees and large woody shrubs that grow anywhere within our towns and cities form what is referred to internationally as an urban forest. Urban forests are managed as a distinct entity by states in the European Community, the USA, and in many parts of Asia, but not in Australia.

The planned, systematic, and integrated management of urban trees is almost universally referred to as Urban and/or Community Forestry. In India it is called Social Forestry. Like its commercial counterpart production or commercial forestry, the urban forest is a net producer of products.

The commercial forest produces timber and woodchip on a rotational basis and in return receives inputs from strategic planning, management and routine maintenance to ensure a sustainable supply of those products.

By comparison an urban forest produces numerous, but less tangible, benefits including micro-climatic influence, stormwater management, oxygen production, pollution filtering, carbon sequestration, prevention of heat absorption, soil decontamination and biodiversity, as well as public and private amenity. These benefits, whilst poorly defined and less tangible than products like timber and woodchip, are arguably of greater value in assisting sustainable urban living in the twenty-first century and need to be quantified to facilitate effective planning and decision making

The NSW EPA Act (1979) provides the statutory means to preserve or secure the amenity provided by urban trees. The Act does not describe what amenities urban trees may be worth preserving for. The Act focuses statutory controls on to individual trees rather than on the trees collectively and thus there are numerous different and conflicting Tree Preservation Orders in NSW councils, none of which is capable of addressing the management of urban forests. The result is that NSW councils cannot effectively manage their urban forests to capitalise on the contributions they provide.

In 1978, responding to the destructive spread of Dutch elm disease, the United States Congress introduced the Community Forestry Assistance Act. The Act acknowledged the decline of trees across urban America and identified a need for education, research and funding to reverse the trend. The voluntary American Forests organisation has developed computer software that calculates the contribution of urban forests to storage of carbon, reduction of ultra-violet radiation, reduction of heat energy absorption, the absorption of suspended particulate matter from the air, and stormwater control. Urban ecosystem analysis software has provided US communities with the means to more adequately identify the contribution of their collective urban trees.

Urban ecosystem analysis calculations are derived from measuring the canopy cover of an urban area by the use of aerial photographs and optimal canopy densities have been identified as targets for strategic planning. For example, American Forests recommends 50% canopy cover in suburban areas to maximise the contributions of urban trees.

Research has also identified the positive role of trees in a social context such as improved recovery of hospital patients, rehabilitation of prisoners, and the reduction of violence in public housing estates.¹

By comparison, Australian states and cities do not recognise the collective ecological and social contributions of urban trees therefore impeding their progress towards achieving ecologically sustainable development. Virtually no research has been conducted on Australian trees for urban use despite an apparent public preference to utilise Australian species.

The future of urban trees in Australian towns and cities is particularly precarious at present because of the unprecedented litigation against tree owners within a climate of blame resting firmly on trees because they interact with inflexible and generally aging civil infrastructure. Utility providers and transport managers, responding to pressure from insurers, are seeking to eliminate urban trees from their infrastructure and their sphere of activity. At the same time, Australia's earliest urban tree populations are entering senescence and declining rapidly. The costs of removal and replacement are beyond the resources of most councils. Government assistance is essential if trees are to remain a part of the urban fabric, as they so rightly should.

This is therefore a critical time to embrace the concept of urban forestry in order to secure a future for urban trees, and for sustainable living in Australia, the most urbanised society on earth.

VISION FOR URBAN FORESTS

By 2050 the extent and quality of urban forests will have achieved identified and agreed targeted canopy coverage and will be providing optimal benefits at acceptable costs.

To achieve this by 2010 trees in urban areas will be planted, maintained and managed according to urban forestry principles.

GOAL

To improve urban forest planning, management and practices throughout NSW Local Government areas so that communities receive maximum benefit from their urban forest on all land, for an acceptable cost, in a manner based on the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD).

OBJECTIVES

1. To continually improve the knowledge and understanding of good urban tree and forest management by the community, government and industry.
2. To encourage and facilitate involvement by the whole community in the promotion and development of urban forests.

¹ Prow, Tina., "The Power of Trees", Human Environmental Research Laboratory at University of Illinois.

3. In conjunction with local, state and federal government, and the arboricultural industry, identify and undertake research that is relevant to Australian urban trees and forests, and which is urgently needed to achieve better planning and management.
4. To identify threatening processes on urban forests, and to review and improve policies, legislation and environmental planning instruments to ensure the best planning and management for urban forests in NSW.
5. To support the development of the arboricultural industry through a combination of education, legislation, membership of professional organisations, and adequate provision of appropriate arboricultural training and resourcing.

URBAN FORESTRY PRINCIPLES

All cities and towns will have an urban forest policy promoting and capitalising on the benefits of the urban forest whilst minimising the cost of such a forest. The policy would incorporate the following management principles:

- **PLANNED MANAGEMENT**
The optimum development of an urban forest will result from sound planning. A strategic plan is fundamental to achieving the optimum extent and quality of the urban forest.
- **SYSTEMATIC MANAGEMENT**
Optimum outcomes from the urban forest will be attained when the resources invested in its management are adequate and are managed efficiently. A systematic approach to management of the urban forest will assist in providing the best cost – benefit outcomes.
- **INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT**
The urban forest is an integral part of the urban form. Its management must be integrated with the management of the entire urban environment - built infrastructure and natural places. Managers from all disciplines must work in an integrated manner to achieve the best outcomes for urban areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, have been considered and endorsed by the LGA Executive to compliment and further develop the existing urban trees policy of LGA of NSW. The recommendations are that LGA:

1. Adopt the vision, goal, objectives and urban forestry principles above as the basis of an Urban Forests Management Policy.
2. Recognise that the arboricultural industry is a developing industry with the capacity to generate significant employment opportunities within a functional urban forestry management framework.
3. Recognise the Local Government Tree Resource Association as the professional organisation representing local government tree managers, and establish ongoing dialogue with this organisation.
4. Lobby the state government to investigate the need for, and benefits that would be derived from, the development of a joint, integrated inter-governmental approach that facilitates a planned, systematic and integrated framework to best manage trees within an urban forest structure. This urban forest planning

framework will embrace the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD), and recognise the inter-relatedness of water, soil and air quality issues with urban forest management issues.

5. Lobby the State Government to develop an urban forests management strategy, which addresses the objectives and incorporates the principles of this policy.
6. Lobby the state government to commit or secure funding for research into:
 - a) The social, environmental and economic benefits provided by urban trees as individuals, as species and collectively as urban forests.
 - b) The performance of Australian tree species under urban conditions, potentially with the view to developing Australian species that are better suited for urban use.
7. Lobby the state government to lobby the federal government to facilitate an inter-governmental approach to urban forestry legislation similar to that in the USA such as the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act.
8. Lobby the state government to urgently investigate the need to regulate the arboricultural industry with a view to ensuring industry and public safety through:
 - a) Suitable occupational health and safety standards in the arboricultural industry.
 - b) Appropriate qualifications of people performing tree surgery, including tree removal, and associated tree work.
 - c) Appropriate qualifications of consultants who assess, report or make recommendations on the health, safety and treatment of trees.
 - d) Compliance with Australian Standards that relate to the arboricultural industry.
 - e) Truth in all advertising that relates to tree surgery, removal or assessment.
9. Recommend that its member councils:
 - a) Recognise the urban forest as a community asset with values and costs, that will maximise the benefits to the community if managed holistically in a strategic and systematic manner.
 - b) Recognise the arboricultural industry, and support best practice tree planting and maintenance.
 - c) Integrate tree management expertise with civil design and construction, and strategic planning.
 - d) Adopt the urban forest principles identified in this policy.
10. That the LGA:
 - a) Recognise the need to continue to develop this policy as information and resources become available.
 - b) That the LGA endorse the continuation of a working group to further develop and implement this policy and associated action plan.