

المياه تجمعنا

WATERS OF BELONGING : AL-MIYAHU TAJMA'UNAH

Arabic Australians & the Georges River parklands

The waters draw everyone together



Heather Goodall, Denis Byrne & Allison Cadzow
with Stephen Wearing
The Parklands, Culture and Communities Project

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Other Authors/Contributors:

Byrne, Denis.
Cadzow, Allison.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this booklet, and those in the Recommendations, are not necessarily those of the funding bodies: OEH, UTS or the ARC.

Nor do these views reflect all those of any ethnic or community group, all of which are internally diverse. The quoted views are those of the participants and interviewees and the recommendations reflect those views.

Artist biography : Cover image

Salwa El-Shaikh grew up close to the Georges River in Revesby and later Panania with a Palestinian father and Lebanese mother. The Georges River was intertwined in her life as a family, through the school years and later with her own children. Salwa's artwork is predominately in clay and connects her with her love of water, rivers and the sea.

Background image: Detail from pot titled "Water".

Foreground image: Sculpture titled "News". A woman dressed in 1920's Palestinian Galilee dress, representing the past. The bird, traditionally a symbol of news – and here a peace dove – carries a letter to the family address in Palestine (although currently inaccessible under Israeli control). This letter also represents the future, when letters will be able to reach Palestine safely.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SYDNEY'S GEORGES RIVER

Introducing the Parklands, Culture and Communities project

This series arises from **Parklands, Culture and Communities**, a project which looks at how cultural diversity shapes people's understandings and use of the Georges River and green spaces in Sydney's south west.

We focus on the experiences of four local communities (Aboriginal, Vietnamese, Arabic and Anglo Australians) and their relationships with the river, parks and each other. Culturally diverse uses and views have not often been recognised in Australia in park and green space management models, which tend to be based on Anglo-Celtic 'norms' about nature and recreation. UTS and the Office of Environment and Heritage supported this research because they have been interested in how the more diverse cultural knowledges held by Australians today might offer support for managing green spaces more effectively.

As an intensively used and culturally diverse urban park, the Georges River National Park and its surrounding public council-managed parks offer a chance to observe, research and develop strategies for learning how to make other parks more inclusive, relevant and welcoming to communities.

Local and overseas studies in multicultural societies recognise that different cultural groups

DO think differently about nature and it is important to understand the views of major cultural groups of park users living in the vicinity of a park in order to better manage these places into the future.¹

This is one of a number of publications which focus on each community to explore the results of this research. *Rivers and Resilience* looks at the past and present of Aboriginal people on the Georges River (2009, UNSW Press). *Place Making in National Parks* (online at the Office of Environment and Heritage) analyses the interaction of all these four groups with national parks generally as well as the Georges River National Park. *Waterborne* focusses on the Vietnamese Australian community living near the Georges River.

This book, *Rivers of Belonging*, includes the stories of Arabic Australians about the parks and rivers of their homeland as well as those about the parks on the Georges River.

It is based on research into the traditions and cultures about nature in the Arab world and on interviews in the Georges River area with Arabic Australians as well as with bilingual educators and parklands staff.

Parks and people in the Georges River area

All parks in Sydney are not the same - and it is important to explain firstly how the parklands

along the Georges River are situated in relation to all the communities of the area.

Our study covers the areas along the northern side of the Georges River, including the cities of Liverpool, Fairfield, Bankstown and Hurstville. Their suburbs have the most ethnically diverse and most dense population of the Sydney Metropolitan area. They also have the lowest amount of greenspace.

Although small parks are scattered through the suburbs, the long period of intensifying immigration after WW2 and the industrial development in which many migrants were employed all led to increasing population density without any real expansion of the public open space available to them.² The main open space has remained the bushland along the river - and then only because it was sandy or rocky or swampy and could not be developed.

The two major plans for the city - one in 1948 (the County of Cumberland Plan) and the other in 1968 (State Planning Authority) - encouraged protection of what was in 1948 the substantial amounts of greenspace along the Georges River.³

But both plans were frustrated because industrial or residential development was built on the land which these planners had expected to remain as parkland.

Since 1970, the rising value of 'water view'

properties has sent the cost of land along the river skyrocketing, eating away more of the parkland as profits were made from land sales. A map of the rivers and parkland today from Liverpool to Hurstville show how very little of this land is left as public green space. The only surviving large area of greenspace in the mid Georges River, as this map shows, is the Holsworthy Military Reserve, which is closed to the public.

A clear pattern about who lives closest to the rivers and remaining parkland can be seen in the detailed results of the 2006 Census for these Local Government Areas along the river (the cities of Liverpool, Fairfield, Bankstown and Hurstville). The lower income communities include Aboriginal Australians but otherwise they are often the most recently arrived migrants and, although multilingual, the least proficient in English. These lowest income communities are living in parts of the Local Government Areas (LGA) which are the furthest away from the river frontage land and therefore the furthest from the parks. (ABS, 2006 Census). These include the Vietnamese and the Arabic Australians who have been the participants of this study.

In contrast, the river frontage housing is almost completely taken up by high income families with high fluency in English, who have Anglo and western European origins. This pattern is strongest near the Georges River National Park in the Bankstown and then repeated, just to the east, in the Hurstville City areas.⁴

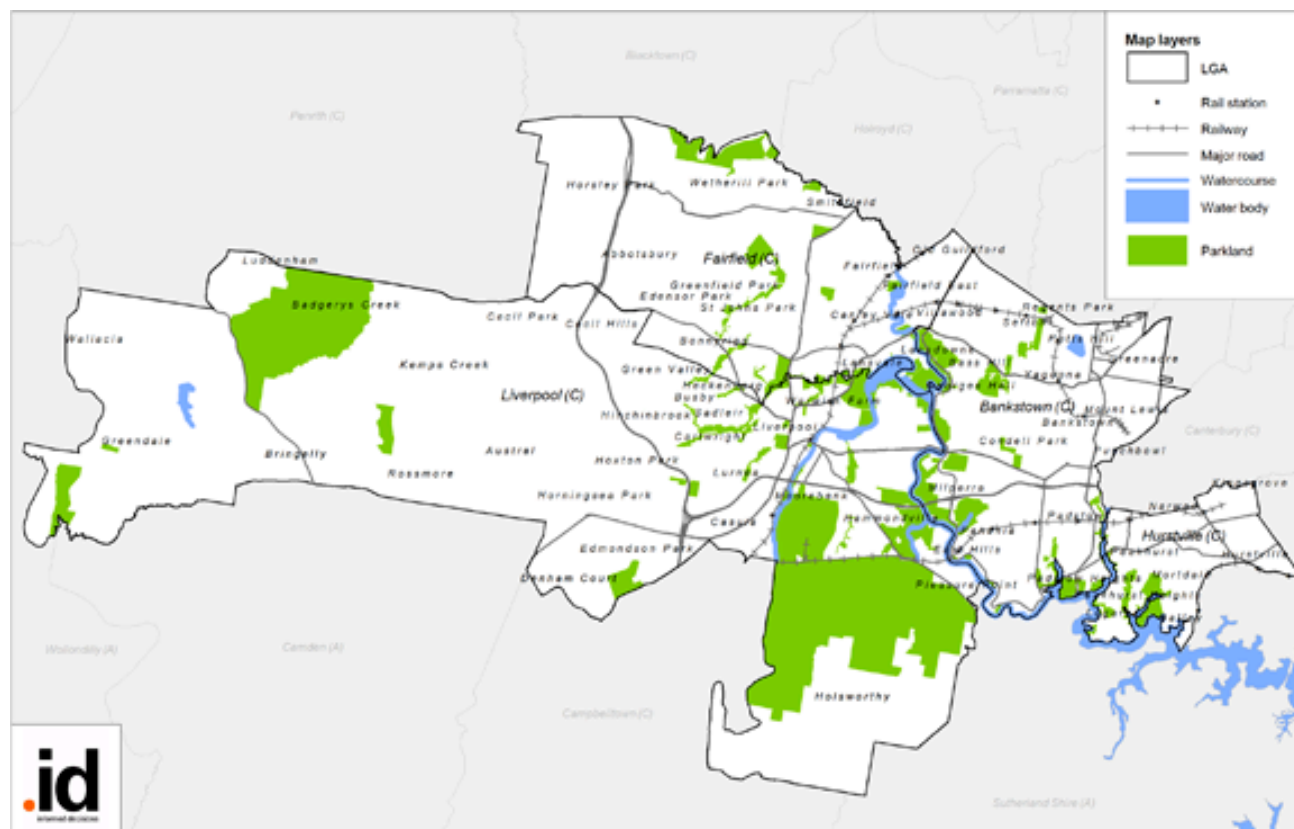
This pattern suggests strongly that it is

economic and social class - that is income and other socio-economic advantages - which determines who ends up living next to the to the river parklands rather than in suburbs further away.

Yet despite the fact that the Vietnamese and Arabic Australians are living further away from the river, both these communities are very active park users.

Introducing Rivers of Belonging: Arabic Australians and the Georges River parklands

Arabic Australians are a large proportion of the population in south west Sydney, concentrated in suburbs such as Canterbury, Lakemba, Bankstown and Auburn although there is a significant group to the east, around Rockdale, Hurstville and Arncliffe.⁵



Map showing rivers and parkland today in the four LGAs in 2006.

Arabic Australians have been visibly numerous and frequent users of the parks since the early 1980s. Despite being located in the areas furthest from the river in each suburb, Arabic Australian groups with whom we have worked have all mentioned their frequent use of the Georges River National Park, East Hills Park, Mirambeena and Chipping Norton within the Georges River area. Other parks mentioned were Auburn Botanical Gardens and the Blue Mountains, and public beach parks such as Coogee, Cronulla and Gunnamatta Bay. Some groups valued rural experiences and had bought property in areas such as Goulburn and the Southern highlands.

Public friction and conflict between Arabic Australians and other park users and Parks staff has arisen from different approaches to the role of nature and the uses of parks and rivers by families, large community groups and young people.

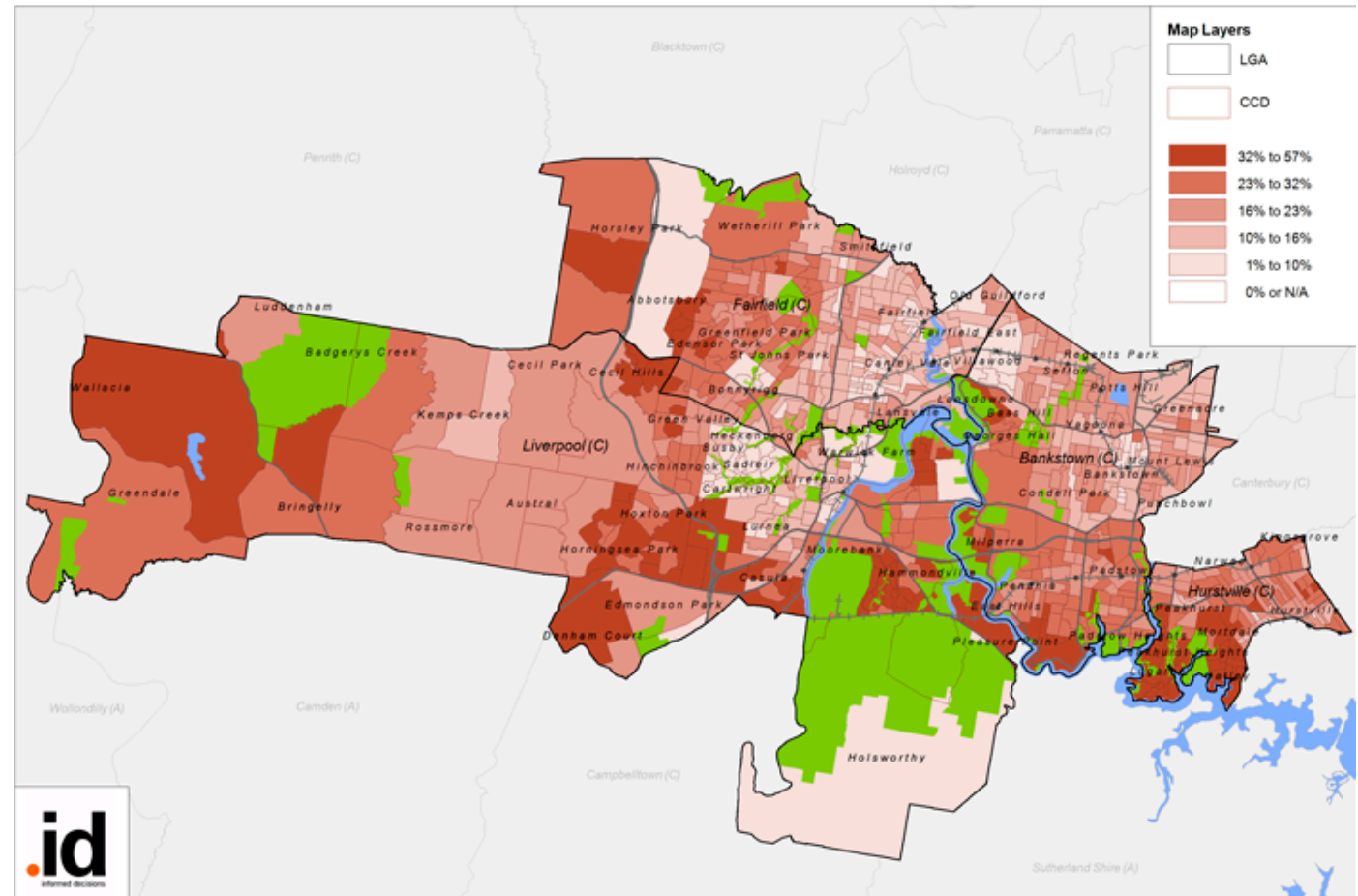
Misunderstandings about what immigrants



Arabic Australians in Georges River park.

High income households, Georges River area 2006

(As a percentage of total households)



From ABS data 2006 Census.

bring from their country of origin has contributed to friction. Some Park staff, for example, recognised the fact that Arabic immigrants had often suffered warfare and trauma in their homeland, but these staff also believed wrongly that Arabic immigrants were coming from countries which had been so overdeveloped that their cultures could have no conception of conservation:

“...they are coming often from ancient cultures that have lost a large percentage of their natural world to the extent that it no longer features within the culture to the same degree. And there is no native vegetation left or anything in some of these places. They’re coming to a relatively new nation where there’s still bush in the biggest city in the country, where there’s still a bit of nature left to conserve.”⁶

Our research has shown that such assumptions are actually very different from the reality of what immigrants bring with them from their home countries in the Arab World.

So finding out more about Arabic Australians' relationships with the environment may allow all Australians to recognise and value the many roles Arabic Australians do and can play in caring for the area as neighbours and park visitors.

The book structure

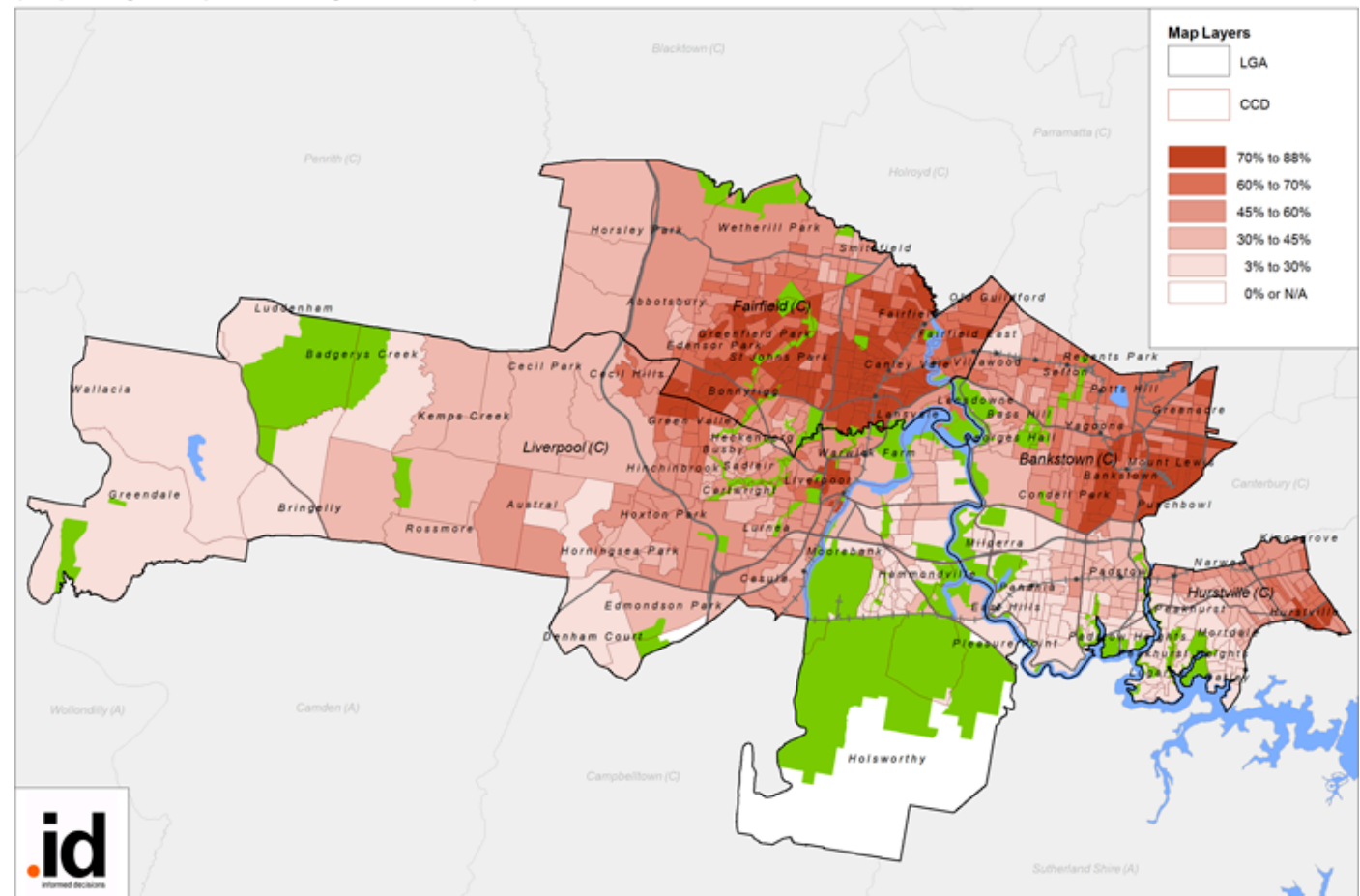
This booklet contains three parts. The first will present the results of our research on how people in the Middle East and North Africa relate to nature and water from the perspective of their traditions, faith and experience.

The second part will cover the ways the Arabic Australians whom we interviewed have talked about their experiences of the Georges River and its parklands. Many experiences have been positive but some have been cause for concern. Park staff have shown in interviews for this project that they are aware of some of these problems but have been facing funding and staffing constraints.

The third part will set out the recommendations arising from the research and the interviews, demonstrating the importance placed on such changes by community members.

People speaking a language other than English at home, Georges River area 2006

(As a percentage of total persons excluding overseas visitors)



From ABS data 2006 Census.

Methodology for this research

In this project, we have started with the issues raised by the results of two Environmental Protection Agency surveys, *Migrant Communities and the Environment* in 1996 and another, *Who*

Cares About the Environment? in 2004, which showed that immigrants from different language and cultural groups had different priorities about the environment. The 1996 Report showed that cleanliness was very important to Arabic Australian communities.⁷ Pollution was the top environmental

issue of concern to them, followed closely by water conservation. In the 2004 Report, Arabic Australians expressed concern regarding pollution, and worried about how it would affect future generations. This concern was noted as existing at a higher level than for other groups.⁸

While a survey is a useful way to find out the general differences between groups of people, it can't explain WHY such differences exist. To try to get to the bottom of the 'why', our research approach involved asking in-depth questions, using repeat interviews, listening to focus groups with community researchers, observing people in parks and conducting research into the histories and cultures of countries of immigrants' origin.

This is **STRATEGIC RESEARCH**. Although the Georges River area is not exactly the same in its ethnic mix to other urban areas, this project can be seen as a pilot for ways to research and assess the valuable knowledge which immigrants bring to environments like National Parks. It has also developed a series of recommendations arising from community views which could not only make parks safer and more welcoming for all, but could make further research easier.

We used the **in-depth, qualitative interview** approach because we recognise that knowledge of nature is cultural. Parks are not 'pure nature'. There is no single idea of 'wilderness' which is common to all cultures - in fact there are many ways of thinking about of 'wilderness' and some cultures have diametrically opposed ideas about whether the same place should be regarded as 'wilderness' or not. So the idea that parks reflect 'pure nature' has, instead, been chosen

historically by Anglo-Irish cultural groups with particular ideas about nature and recreation. This has most often happened in countries which used to be settler colonies, like the United States and Australia, where there was a strong interest in seeing the land as untouched and 'waiting' for settlers to arrive. These areas had of course been managed by Aboriginal or First Nations people for many thousands of years before they became known as 'parks'. Indeed, parts of Georges River National Park like Cattle Duffers' Flat were created by 'reclaiming' rocky creeks or tidal salt marshes in the late 1950s, when they were filled with sand and planted with grass, while Chipping Norton was sandmined before it became a park. So all these river lands have had a great deal of human interference and reworking to make the 'nature' we see today.

This project does not claim to be a comprehensive sample of the many religions and ethnic groups who all share an Arabic background. Instead, it concentrates on in-depth interviewing - to follow in greater detail the uses of the Georges River parklands by some Arabic Australians. This has limited us to only a few national origins and religions. Yet even national identity and religion are only two of the many ways in which Arabic Australians have formed networks of identity and support within Australia. Left wing political parties, for example, from the 1950s to the present, have brought together people of both Muslim and Christian affiliation in the Georges River area. Other networks which stretch across different faiths include the networks of shared interest in recent politics in the Arab world, or those of shared interests in cultural expression like film.

For this study, between 2002 and 2009, we

interviewed 15 people of Arabic background individually, and 24 people in four focus groups organised by the United Muslim Women Association (one with 8 women from various national backgrounds within the Arab world, one with teenagers at Saturday Arabic School, Wiley Park High School), the Mandaean Culture Club and the City of Bankstown Muslim Youth Reference Group. In addition to this, Hesham Abdo, who was both an interviewee as a 16 year old and then later a researcher as a 20 year old, interviewed 10 young Arabic men individually or in groups of two or three for this project, the interviews ranging in length from several minutes to two hours.

The interviewees were all Arabic Australians, including Muslim community members who live in Picnic Point, Bankstown and Auburn, (with backgrounds in Lebanon, Syria and/or Palestine), the Liverpool-based Mandaean Iraqi community and some Arabic or Arabic-speaking Christians who live in these south western areas. Some interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, and in those cases, appropriate pseudonyms have been chosen which reflect their community background, while their community affiliation and countries of origin have remained unchanged.

We have also utilised broadcast media in which Arabic Australians from the area were involved, most recently the ABC TV program *Compass* 17 July 2011, which featured a number of the Mandaean Australians living around Liverpool who had earlier been interviewed for this project.

In addition to the Arabic Australians interviewed, the project has recorded three focus group

sessions in November 2007 with management staff and bilingual educators from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (now OEH but previously in DECCW). These were discussions about staff experiences with culturally diverse park visitors, about staff awareness of parkland problems and about their observations of the effectiveness or feasibility of various strategies to enhance communication between park users and park managers.

Arabic Australians, like Vietnamese Australians, are living further away from the river than people of Anglo-Irish and western European background, yet both Vietnamese and Arabic Australians are very active park users. To understand why they have made this effort, we have asked the study participants to explain to us more about the ideas about parks and nature in their home countries as well as telling us about their

memories of parks there as well as their journeys - often long and dangerous journeys - to get to Australia. Then we have asked them what they hoped to do in parklands as well as what their actual experiences have been in the Georges River parks. This booklet sets out the themes raised in our research and those which our interviewees have reported to us.

PART 2: INTRODUCING THE PEOPLE

ARAB AUSTRALIANS ON THE GEORGES RIVER

From the Arab world to Sydney: a brief background

There are many Australians living along the Georges River whose family background is in the Arabic world. Some have been in Australia since the early 19th century, arriving soon after the British settlers to work as merchants, hawkers or camel managers. They brought a number of different religious faiths and cultural traditions. Some Arabic peoples were Maronite Christians from Lebanon, while others were Muslims from a range of countries, including Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and the surrounding Middle East. Some were Arabic-speaking people like the Coptic Christians from Egypt or those from the areas which became Iraq. Others again were neighbouring peoples from the west, like Turks who shared the Islamic religion of some Arabic peoples, while others were from further east, in the areas bordering on Afghanistan and the North West provinces of British India. There had been continuing migration from these areas until the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 tried to impose a White Australia, but still many families remained, as citizens or long term residents.

Entry restrictions began to relax after WW2. Families then increasingly came to Australia from the Middle East in the aftermath of the war. They had made judgments about seeking better economic futures for their families but were also fleeing the upheavals of the region

after the partition of Palestine in 1948 and the turbulent years of decolonisation and military interventions. Just like the migrants of the 19th century, many Arabic Australians in the twentieth century also maintained close contacts with their countries of origin, by letter and telephone, with some returning for visits or staying for longer periods to maintain contact with relations and broader communities of faith and culture.

So by 1975, there had already been a long history of migration and communication between the Arab world and Australia, with many Australians tracing their roots back into the Arabic-speaking communities of the Middle East, Iraq and western Asia. Then in 1975, the bitter civil war in Lebanon began, arising from the continuing pressures across the region caused by uneven development, illegal military occupations and the earlier massive flows of refugees.⁹ Many of the migrants between 1945 and 1975 had been able to make considered decisions about migration and had also had the freedom to return home if they chose, or even just to maintain contact with family and friends. But this was no longer the situation for people fleeing the terrible warfare of the 1970s. All segments of the Lebanese population were drawn into the fighting, resulting in large movements of refugees seeking safety and peace, at least until the war subsided. Hostilities dragged on however until the 1990s. So, with some reluctance, refugees who might have hoped to return were faced with remaking their lives in their new homes.¹⁰

There have therefore been some very different settlement experiences for Arabic Australians of all faiths and nationalities. Underlying all, a fundamental difference has been that some people have come after making their own choices about migration but others have been forced to flee from warfare, often facing severe trauma to escape and then in refugee camps before they arrived in Australia. These refugees often spent years afterwards worrying about the families they had been forced to leave behind.

Hesham Abdo, a researcher for and contributor to this project, talked about his father's experience of coming to Australia - a double displacement after he had suffered the loss of his Palestinian home in coastal Jaffa, which had become Tel Aviv in 1948.

*'My Dad said, "When I was coming to Australia I was going to come for three years. Make money in a factory, and then go to Egypt and live there, and get married. And then I came and I met your mum. So I had to stay... and that was it!" So it's become his home.'*¹¹

Other Australians often assume that Arabic migrants all come from arid desert lands, but in fact the Middle East and particularly Lebanon are varied environments. There are large rivers and high, snow capped mountains as well as long Mediterranean coastal areas, where many large bustling cities of the region are located. Even in places where there are rugged crags and cliffs, the sloping lands in-

between are intensively terraced and cultivated, ensuring that their memories are of fruitful, productive lands.

Many Arab Australians have grown up on that Mediterranean coast, swimming, surfing and fishing in warm waters. Others were inland farmers from lands fed by fertile rivers which they remember as 'working rivers', used to drive mills for grinding the wheat grown in the hills all around. Others again were pastoralists from the arid interior deserts. So they have all brought different experiences of water and changing landscapes as modernisation and development spread across the whole Arab world.

And finally, the faiths and traditions they brought with them, whether they were Mandaeans or Christians or Muslims, have brought different bodies of beliefs about nature and water, which contribute to the ways each community hopes to be able to interact with the outdoors and the natural world when they are building their new lives.

Where do Arabic Australians on the Georges River come from?

As this background snapshot shows, Arabic Australians who have been born overseas come from many countries, many different landscapes, hold different faiths and bring many different experiences with them. The interviewees in this study came as migrants from the Arabic populations of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, as well as some who came from Arabic-speaking peoples from Egypt and Sudan, and some others again who came from the neighbouring and

closely associated peoples of Iran and Turkey. Some came as refugees and spent some time in refugee camps either in the Arab world or in South East Asia before they arrived safely in Australia.

There are perhaps even more Arabic Australians who have been born and grown up in Australia. In Bankstown in 2006, for example, there were only 6.4% of the population who had been born in Lebanon or other Middle East countries, but over 17% of households where Arabic was the main language spoken at home.¹² Other Arabic Australian households speak predominantly English in the home. So while their parents may have been born overseas and some of their relations and friends may still be there, these young Australians identify strongly with both their Australian birthplace and their Arab world connections. This means that, as with all immigrant communities, there are numerous younger people, born in Australia, who have had very different experiences to their parents.



Some focus group participants discussing the Parklands Project at the Muslim Women Association, Lakemba, including, from left: Fauzia (from Pakistan), Nadia Deen, Amne Chemaisssem and Wafa Zaim, the focus group coordinator and interpreter.

And where do they live in the Georges River area?

Arabic Australians live mostly along the northern side of the Georges River although there are smaller groups of people who live in western Sydney suburbs like Parramatta and Wentworthville. Most Arabic Australians are in the area on which this project focussed: including Liverpool, Georges Hall, Revesby, Condell Park, Bankstown, Lakemba, Auburn, Punchbowl, Rockdale and Lugarno. However, because this study was shaped by an initial interest in the Georges River National Park, which lies in the westerly parts of the study area (Bankstown to Liverpool) we were unable to draw on an adequate number of interviewees from the significant group of Arabic Islamic communities in the more easterly areas along the northern side of the river, including Arncliffe, Hurstville and Rockdale. This would have offered other perspectives in addition to those included in this report, demonstrating further the point we have made above that Arabic Australian communities are diverse and complex. We hope that in follow up studies, more communities and more views will be included.

Even in the western parts of this study area, there is a valuable heritage of multi-lingualism: in Bankstown – over 80% of the population speaks a language in addition to English. It is also an important heritage in knowledge of many faiths and cultures. Over the last thirty years, the census figures show that faith has become increasingly geographic.¹³ The Georges River has so far formed a marker of diversity: south of the river, in the Sutherland Shire, just 2 per cent are Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu.

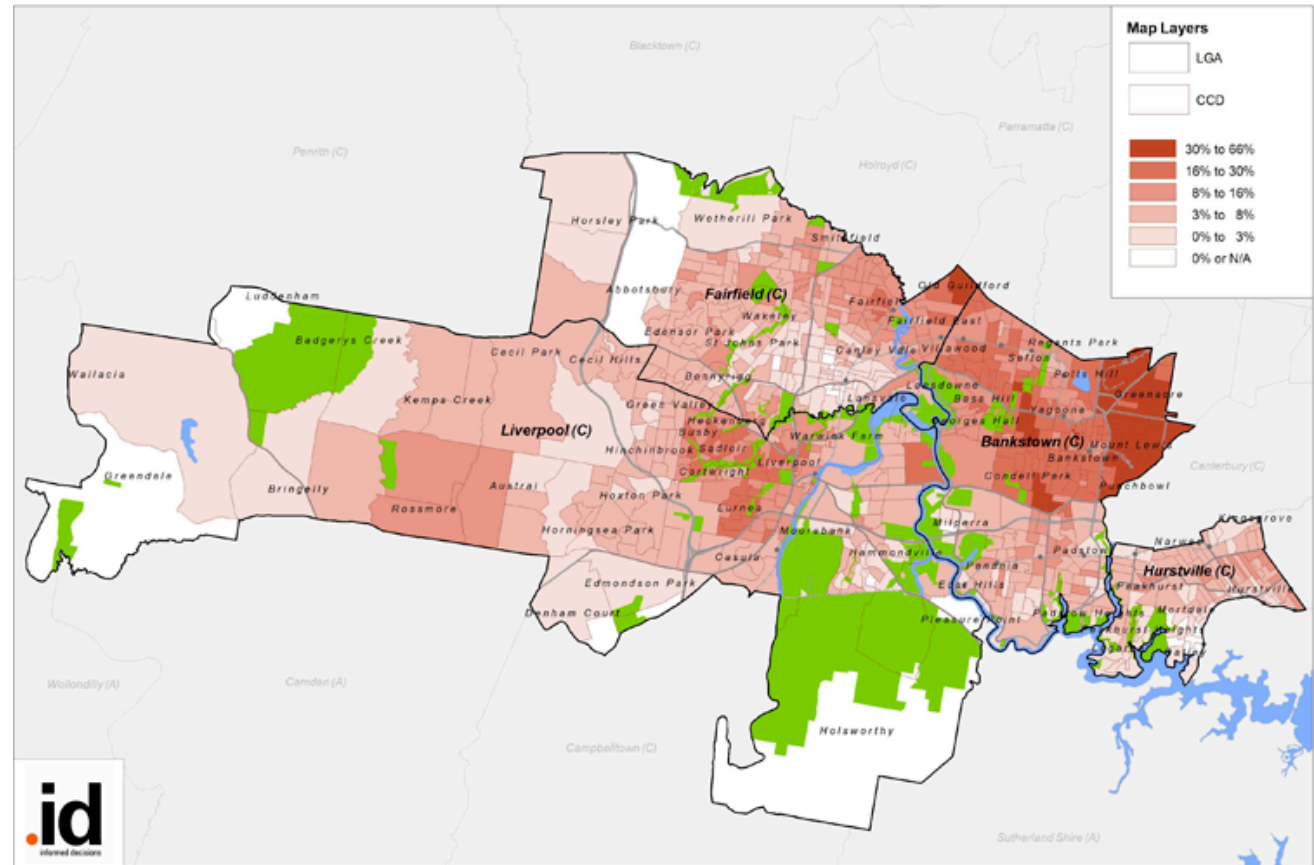
On the northern side of the Georges River, where our study was conducted, there are concentrations of religious identification which align with immigrant populations. While Buddhism is adhered to by 6% of the populations of Canterbury, Bankstown and Liverpool, in the area between them, at Fairfield, Buddhists form the major minority religion with 22% of the population affiliated with it. This alignment with Buddhism, along with Catholicism, together reflect the substantial proportion of Vietnamese Australians who have chosen to live in this area.

The pattern with Islam is different. As Professor Andrew Jakubowicz (UTS) has pointed out, Islam has always been multi-cultural, with those sharing the faith coming from many different countries.¹⁴ However, choosing places to live has also aligned with language familiarity. Muslims are a consistent 8-10 per cent of the population through Parramatta, Holroyd, Liverpool and Rockdale, but in the suburbs in the middle, the affiliation rises to 14% in Canterbury, 15% in Bankstown and 25% in Auburn, where there is a long-established Turkish community and the Gallipoli mosque. Lebanese Maronite communities, a Christian denomination similar to Catholicism, might share a language with their Muslim compatriots but have been more likely to live in Granville and Parramatta.¹⁵ Mandaean, while some live across a number of suburbs, have a concentration of community members around Liverpool.¹⁶

Many of these communities speak languages other than Arabic, but most do speak Arabic as well as their other languages. So the distribution of homes where Arabic is spoken at home is one indication of family connections to the Arab

People speaking Arabic at home, Georges River area 2006

(As a percentage of total persons excluding overseas visitors)



From ABS data 2006 Census.

world. This map of the four City Council areas along the northern bank of the Georges River, within our research area, suggests a focus of Arabic residence in 2006 in the areas away from the river in the electorates of Liverpool, Fairfield and particularly in Bankstown.

Our study points to the enduring richness of the knowledge and experience which immigrants bring from their countries of origin to their encounters with nature in Australia. These ideas, hopes and interests can allow them to enjoy their new homeland and to embrace opportunities for caring for its environments.

PART 3

WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND MEMORIES DO PEOPLE BRING TO THE GEORGES RIVER PARKLANDS?

The Arabic Australians who arrive in Australia bring with them a great deal of knowledge about nature, its usage and its conservation, arising from their cultures, their religions, their own life and their family histories.

How can this environmental and park care knowledge be drawn upon by park managers and enlisted to help care for places?

Park managers are often so concerned to package the information they feel they have to deliver to recent arrivals, that they forget that immigrants already have background of knowledge about environments and may also have had experience of national parks and of nature conservation programs from their home countries.

The challenge for Australian park managers is to recognise the value of such existing knowledge while at the same time introducing people to the particular features and challenges of the Australian environment. What clashes might exist and how could these be tackled sensitively?

This section offers some of the ideas about nature and water which arise from the religions and traditions of the Arab world and may continue to shape the Arabic cultures.

Traditions and cultural knowledge

Faith & nature: Islam, Mandaeanism, Christianity

All the four religions arising from the Abrahamic traditions of the Middle East, Judaism, Mandaeanism, Christianity and Islam, place a high value on the symbolism of water - it is used in the religious rites of each of these faiths. Three of these faiths are present in significant numbers along the Georges River - Mandaeanism, Christianity and Islam - although the most influential among Arabic-background people living today on the Georges River are Islam and Mandaeanism. Water has a major everyday, practical role which means that religious conventions about water quality and water management are well known and often discussed.

Islam and water

Muslim environmentalists have found precedents for water conservation in the Quran and in *hadiths* (collections of reports on the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), where support can be found for the idea of government responsibility for basic human needs, including

water¹⁷ and for the idea of human responsible stewardship, rather than ownership, of water.¹⁸ Hussein Amery points out that 'Islam adopts a holistic view of the natural environment, and spells out the rights of animals and plants to water resources'.¹⁹ Practicing Muslims use water in the ablutions which are necessary before prayers, and for devout Muslims this will be five times daily.²⁰ Furthermore, the Quran advocates the avoidance of any wastage, particularly of water, but overall the duty of wise usage of all resources.²¹

Hesham Abdo, interviewee and researcher in this project, indicated that water conservation was a way of life for him as a child, as it was for fellow Muslims in Australia before it was emphasised by government. This was echoed by Saleh, a bilingual educator who comes from Jordan, where water conservation measures have existed for some time and are promoted through appeals to the ethical behaviour endorsed by Islam.

Australian park education programs have a tendency to see immigrants as 'empty vessels' who will have no previous experience of water conservation policies or traditions. However, these themes in Arabic tradition suggest they might be better placed asking what compatible knowledges people have that they could share.

Hesham Abdo, when researching for the project, noted the value placed on water-saving taps by Muslim park users to whom he spoke.

“...it’s a simple religion, all you need to really prepare for prayer is a cup of water. If you were to put a good person in charge of Sydney water who knew his religion inside out with nature then there wouldn’t be any problems with water.”

Islamic Gardens and Parks

The tenth century Islamic philosopher, physician and scientist, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) said that ‘nature is the place where everything acquires meaning and God’s will is manifest’.²² Yet in Islamic views of nature, as explained by Attilio Petruccioli:

“Landscape is far from being detached from human processes. On the contrary, it is the mirror of a dialectic relationship producing permanent transformation of the environment.”²³

Gardens are important element of such transformations. In Islam, gardens are considered to be representations of Paradise, expressing the joys and beauty of life in the hereafter.²⁴ Gardens with proportionate, elegant layout and practical as well as beautiful use of water are understood to bring together rationality, an attribute of God to which humans can aspire, and the potential productivity of God’s creation of plants and animals. In Middle Eastern gardens water reflects the preciousness of this resource. Petruccioli argues that gardens ‘mirror Divine rationality versus harsh nature’ where the productivity of nature and particularly

the sculpted and engineered flow of water enables the apprehension of transcendent virtues.²⁵

Mandaeanism

For Mandaeans, water is central to all religious practice as well as symbolism. Their religion predates both Christianity and Islam and is derived from the teachings of John the Baptist. Calling their faith ‘Yardna: the Living Water’, Mandaeans practice full-immersion baptism frequently for all the faithful. This may take place least once a year but will often be more frequent. This religion directs its members to seek out fresh, running rivers in which to hold these large-scale community events.²⁶

Karim Jari, a skilled jeweller, antique collector and highly respected member of the Liverpool Mandaean community, has explained how the Mandaeans were organised around the river in Iraq, in which they not only baptised but near which they built a place of worship, which might itself also be on the bank of a river:

“In Baghdad, where we have the Tigris River, we have a place there that is special for Mandaean people. We have a religious place also - we call it Mendhi. A building on that site, on the bank on the river exactly. All the people gathering every religious day or Sunday for baptism or marriage, because we use the river at many times and for many reasons.

Our river is just very important in our religion so that all the communities, even outside Baghdad, each city has its place near a river.”²⁷

Social traditions and natural parklands

There are many family and community celebrations and rituals which are preferably shared in open, natural places. They are not strictly related to formal religious codes, such as prayer, but they nevertheless form an important role in the everyday practice of beliefs.

For Muslims, these include celebrations such as the welcoming and naming of newborn children, on the most personal level, through to the family and community sharing of food after sundown at the end of each day of Ramadan and then the larger feasts and gift giving at *Eid ul-Fitr*, at the end of the Ramadan month. The *iftar*, the meal at the end of each day of fasting, is understood to be a time to be enjoyed and shared with family and friends, while the Eid festivities are a celebration of the broader cultural community which has shared the Ramadan discipline. The ideal of sharing the *iftar* meals and particularly the *Eid ul-Fitr* holiday in natural surroundings is widely held and reflects a view that nature is a ‘great, awesome sign of God’s creation’, wherever it is found. So natural settings are a valued location to celebrate not only the larger rituals like Ramadan, the *iftar* and *Eid ul-Fitr*, but the more intimate family rituals like the celebration of the birth of a child.²⁸

For Mandaeans, the frequent baptisms are social as well as religious occasions. These are events when all ages participate not only in the formal religious rituals but in the cheerful social networking which takes place. Food is prepared and shared, fish are barbequed and the whole day is an opportunity to meet across families and across generations in an informal, relaxed setting.

Land, water and wildlife conservation: Arabic traditions of Hima and the protection of wetlands

Prior to the emergence of Islam, the region's land holders and mobile pastoralists practised a system of flexible controls over grazing and harvesting as *hima* (Arabic: 'inviolable zone'). Under local authorities and tribal headmen, *hima* allowed either resting and rotation or complete prohibition on grazing, hunting or cropping for extended periods of time. Other *hima* were dedicated to deities and authorized permanent protection of all flora and fauna within their boundaries.

With the coming of Islam, *hima* were recognized by Mohammed, who decreed that they should no longer lead to any individual benefit; that instead *hima* would be dedicated to fulfilling God's work. Over the centuries, *himās* (protected areas) and *harīms* (areas in which development was forbidden) could be found across the region. There would invariably be *hima* on pilgrimage routes to Mecca, and in this case, they would be sustained by *waqf*, or the funds arising from the charitable contributions of worshipping Muslims in, for example, many different parts of the Indian Ocean. The *hima* therefore were not purely local protected lands, but were nodes in an active network of Muslims linking piety, travel and environment, which stretched from southern Africa to Indonesia.²⁹ Although it was difficult to sustain *hima* under the pressures of development, these protocols were still operating in some countries in the mid twentieth century.³⁰

The protections of various types of *hima* ensured the conservation of wetlands in the

Middle East, and Arabian peninsula, including the marshes of what is now southern Iraq. This was particularly important because this area is of crucial significance in the annual migration of birds between Africa and northern Europe. The wetlands of the Middle East have for millennia offered rest and refreshment as thousands of birds each year travel the long distances to breed and rear their young before they set out once again on the same route to return. The presence of birds features strongly in the traditions and religious writings of all the area's cultures and the resulting reverence for birdlife has - along with *hima* - protected this extraordinary migration process.³¹

Memories and experiences

Childhoods, surfing, farming, urbanisation, gardens, rivers

It is very clear from our study that people bring with them - and pass on to their children - many memories of place and environment when they migrate. People who migrate have suffered losses for which they grieve. Not only do they lose everyday contacts with relations and friends, but they lose physical environments with which they were familiar and in which they often felt comfortable. This grief - of losing places as well as people - is experienced for many years, no less for being something which is not anticipated and seldom talked about.

These memories of places do not determine in any simplistic way the behaviour of immigrants in their new home, but they do form an influence in their lives and the lives of their children. They may offer ways in which newly arrived immigrants can get to know their new

environments - by fishing or going to the beach for example - but they may also be obstructions to immigrants venturing out into the landscape, as they continue to remember experiences of warfare, danger or persecution. Finally, all the Arabic Australians to whom we talked had returned at different times to their countries of origin and they continue to have frequent contact with family and friends who remain there. The process of revisiting old homelands - included in this section - has been a way of refreshing but also of testing these memories from earlier lives.

Water - whether from the sea coast or rivers or drinking water - is a consistent theme among the homeland memories which were discussed by participants in this study:

Hesham Abdo, born in Australia, has talked about what he had learned from his parents about the importance of rivers and beaches to his family:

"...That's just something that's always been there, you know, the water. My father, he was Palestinian. He spent his time in Egypt, and then he went to Lebanon as well. He had family there. He was a fisherman. His family's from Jaffa and they're from the water. They're all from there. His mother is originally from Mena, from the water as well, in Lebanon. She obviously moved to Jaffa when she got married, to Palestine. So he spent his whole life at the water. Always water, water. I've got pictures of the Suez Canal. They used to swim in the Suez Canal, a long time ago. When we went there (on a visit) we went to see the Suez Canal as well. People don't really swim there much now, obviously for security reasons I think - the Egyptian Police are always

down there. But they were always doing that (when my father was young). And always fishing. It's all over the Middle East which is all around water. I've got some family, some aunties who cook everything in fish. You know, fish, fish! Every dish is mainly fish. Why is it? Because they grew up and were always eating fish. They grew up at the water. So it was their diet - that's what they used to eat... They can do 101 things with fish... There is one auntie of mine, she's got the scarf on and everything, and she's 52 or 53 years old. But she always goes to the beach.

...The Palestinians are amazing to watch... you can see the yearning for their home. The yearning for the water. The yearning for nature. They yearn for their beaches...

...And it shows when an old woman goes back to her house which has been taken over by the Israelis, it shows how she yearns for her trees, her garden and for her tap. The fresh water that comes out. Then when she drinks it, you know, she talks about the water that she's drinking and how she yearned for that water."³²

Aqualina is from a Lebanese family with Maronite community connections. They live near the Cook's River, the other arm of the waterways running into Botany Bay. Aqualina's mother has fond memories of her childhood in a farming village and to this day, whenever she is walking with her daughter on the river, she looks for plants like sorrel which she knows are edible and as she gathers them. She often talks to her daughter about her experiences in a fertile, abundant landscape, as Aqualina has

explained:

"...Whenever we go on these walks, she'll say to me: 'Oh you know we have this in Lebanon, you know this type of dandelion or this or this...' And she'll say to me - as if she's saying it for the first time - 'You know, if you lived in Lebanon in the wild, you'd never starve. Because the whole place is just full of things you can eat'... She'll always state this fact, whenever we are picking food around the River as if she's stating it for the first time. It's a fact that never ceases to amaze her."³³

Wafa Zaim, working with the Muslim Women Association in Lakemba, migrated to Australia from her childhood home in Tripoli on the northern coast of Lebanon:

"I grew up in a traditional Arabic house, there was a beautiful mozaiced courtyard within the external walls that housed the many rooms and this was the heart of our home. The centre of the courtyard was a water fountain, so there was always the sound of flowing water. This was very important to us because my family really valued



Jounieh Bay, Jounieh, Lebanon, 1928. Marie El-Khazen. Collection: FAI/ Mohsen Yammine. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.

all things natural. My grandma would spend hours every day tending to the numerous pot plants, and nurtured the jasmine trees that lined the courtyard like children. The fragrance of those flowers is something that stays with me even today. We had a great childhood and have grown up much attached to nature. We have started to talk about it these days but we used to DO it. It was part and parcel of our life there."

Karim Jari, the Mandaean Iraqi, was born in 1947 in Baghdad, and he remembers how central the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates were to the social activities of Bagdad and Basra.

"...Basrah has a river in the city and its clean and its beautiful. The river runs through the city - it is like Venice. Because its in the south it is different - there are marshes and it makes it Venician. In Basrah, they used to have many coffee shops and casinos on that river. And even in Baghdad, we have a main street on the River Tigris. There are casinos, fishing, restaurants - they use it as a commercial site - and its beautiful! We can do the same here, in Australia, because we have beautiful places."

Asia Fahad, a Mandaean who has been in Australia since 1992 and is a staff member at Sydney Water, explained that the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates are fed by snow melt and, until damaged by warfare, ran strong and clean with fresh water even through the cities.

Asia and Karim both concur with other Madaeans that the beauty of these rivers was in their freshness but also in their role in the social life of the cities as well of course as being central to the religious life of the Madaeans themselves. The baptisms too were rich social

events, in which old and young met and talked around the ceremonies and then shared food and hours of enjoyable picnicking each time a collective baptism took place.³⁴

Joy Suliman, born in Australia, is from a Sudanese Coptic background. She has discussed why her family chose to live where they did in Australia seeking a river connection:

"My mum's got a thing for rivers and I have a feeling that it comes from the Nile. In the Sudan she lived really close to the Nile River in Khartoum... I know that's why they picked Lugarno as a place to live, they liked the idea of being in a bush setting but the bush itself, they don't like... So to them it's almost a dangerous place, they don't like that I've played there. Even now my mum says you're not going off walking in the bush on your own are you..."³⁵

Hesham Abdo has spoken about how he and his Lebanese-Australian friends had gone canoeing in the Blue Mountains National Park and had encountered a waterfall where you could jump from the rock face into the water pool below. It reminded them of a place near Tripoli. Hesham recalls their pleasure in unexpectedly finding this connection to Lebanon in the Blue Mountains. One of his friends: *"...was talking about Lebanon and how they jump off and it's exactly like that over there. And they feel... he felt like... you could just see it in his face, how happy he was."*³⁶

In describing this place Hesham has said, *"It's sort of like a Bondi in Lebanon"*³⁷ suggesting the links which travel and communication foster between old homes and new ones, between the past, the present and the future.

Rapid development, pollution, warfare, refugee camps, journeys

While those discussed above are pleasant and largely happy memories of childhood and homelands, there have also been deeply disturbing memories arising from rapid development and particularly from warfare across the Middle East. Whereas childhood memories are often very localised, the pressures of development and warfare made massive impacts across the whole region. The Middle East has a very small area compared to the large distances in Australia, so this has magnified the impacts which are often felt far from the site of original pollution or conflict as people move in search of safer farming and living spaces. Both development and warfare have caused such displacements which often last for decades or longer. Both have caused damage to natural environments as well as buildings - from impacts like pollution as well as landmines - making nature dangerous when it had previously been nurturing. Hesham Abdo, speaking about Lebanon and Palestine, has said that in his observation people who had spent time in refugee camps in the Middle East were still afraid to go out and tended to stay at home - even after they had migrated to Australia. He felt they probably wouldn't attribute it to the civil war but in his view, that is the cause.³⁸ While the discomfort of interviewees in talking about negative memories makes it less likely that there are recordings in Australia of such effects, there is a large literature in the Middle East which records such impacts.

Parks and national parks

As has happened commonly in Asia,³⁹ the

establishment of national parks and protected areas in the Middle East has frequently involved displacement of local residents or disruption of their livelihoods. In Jordan, the introduction of protected areas, following the Western model of exclusionary national parks (i.e., exclusion of human habitation and human use to achieve conservation goals), was attempted relatively early, in 1992. There has been dissatisfaction, however, among local Jordanian residents who were less affluent than either the policy makers or the park visitors and who felt their livelihoods had been injured by their exclusion from the parks.⁴⁰ Another important example of displacement has been that of Palestinians from the 'National Forests' in Israel, which have been established on land acquired by taking over Palestinian farming lands and then planting those farms with introduced trees, beginning in the early 1900s and accelerating after 1948.⁴¹ This process has generated extensive analysis among both Israeli and Arabic researchers and has undoubtedly coloured the attitude to national parks held of the large number of the displaced Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (where they number around 2 million people) and across the region.⁴²

As will be clear from earlier sections, nature has been very important in the continuing cultures of all groups in the Arab world. This was not necessarily expressed in the creation of 'national parks'. Few national parks were set aside in Lebanon, for example, before the emergence of environmental consciousness among the middle class in the 1990s.⁴³ This was a period of relative calm following at least 15 years of intense warfare, and it saw the Lebanese government put considerable effort into establishing a series of protected areas, such as the Ihdin Forest and

Palm Islands. These national parks were the most successful of the environmental protection measures the government attempted to enact. Rania Masri, in her detailed consideration of the broader range of environmental challenges facing Lebanon, has pointed out, however, that the success achieved by these 'national parks' amounted to little more than creating 'islands of protection'. Across most of the country, environmental conditions deteriorated because the 'off park' environmental controls the Government attempted to impose were poorly planned, unevenly implemented and often sacrificed in the rush to rebuild and develop in the aftermath of such destructive wars.

Warfare and displacement across the region

In Lebanon, the rise in middle class leisure time and affluence, leading to greater parkland visitation, has been countered by the impact of warfare. Warfare has made access to natural areas, whether in National Parks or in the general countryside, both dangerous and difficult.⁴⁴ Rania Masri argues that there have been two powerful pressures mitigating against park visitation. One is development, which has often been fast tracked to 'rebuild' after the period of war and the other is the long term impact of warfare itself.

Lebanon had a thriving economy until the 1970s, but then civil war broke out in 1975 and neighbouring Israel invaded in 1978 and again in 1982, continuing in occupation until 2000. Israel invaded yet again in 2006, bombarding the southern areas even more intensely than in earlier invasions. In 1999 there remained over 200,000 land mines across the countryside.⁴⁵ Warfare is understood to have directly affected

at least 75% of all Lebanese residents and to have generated much internal and international migration throughout the region.

There have been large flows of Palestinian refugees forced out of Israel and the occupied territories into Lebanon but there has also been substantial internal migration as Lebanese citizens have tried to escape either internal civil war or invasion and occupation by the Israeli army.⁴⁶ Refugee camps, which are invariably overcrowded with impoverished people, have led everywhere to intense pressure on surrounding environments to fulfil the need for food, firewood and other resources. The urbanisation which is characteristic of modernisation has been greatly exacerbated by warfare, as farmers have been forced to abandon farmland and as the residue of weapons and unexploded ordinance left behind has increased after each invasion as more, and different weapons are used.⁴⁷

All of these impacts on people have had environmental outcomes on land use as well as on attitudes to protected areas which people may avoid because they feel vulnerable there. 'Farm abandonment' arising from warfare and weapons debris has been as much a cause of land degradation as has deforestation or overgrazing.⁴⁸

There have furthermore been direct impacts on the countryside itself. Intense bombing has incinerated forests, including those set aside as National Parks, and further damaged vegetation, waterways and wetlands and depleted the bird and animal populations. Residues of weapons have made farming dangerous even where infrastructure has not been destroyed, as it has

in many areas.⁴⁹

Warfare, Birds and Water

Water in a water-scarce region has been the subject of intense competition and therefore of military pressure.⁵⁰ So water sources - including wetlands, which are the essential refugia of migrating birds - have been damaged by both developmental 'improvement' to achieve more agricultural land and by 'strategic' military draining.

As well, and just as damaging, has been the collapse of land development planning processes from 1975 onwards with civil war and extensive occupation and invasion from the south. This has led to uncontrolled and exploitative development and to a failure to implement the environmental regulations which did in fact exist, like for example the limitations on hunters in shooting birds.⁵¹

All of this has had a major impact on the capacity to undertake nature tourism and particularly to carry out extensive walks on nature 'trails' or to observe migrating birds. People who would in safer surroundings be eager to undertake domestic 'nature' tourism have instead been confined to urban areas or those they considered to be safer. Researchers have eventually diverted their research from the purely ecological topics of bird migrations, for example, to the questions of how military and security infrastructure has obstructed those migrations.⁵² As a result, there has been a frustrating cycle of less nature tourism but also less of the research data which might encourage such nature visitation.

Warfare and polarising societies

Finally, an effect of warfare has been the rising polarisation of societies which had previously practised religious and social tolerance. So in some areas, Muslims have felt less welcomed than they had previously been, as in Israel for example, an exclusion which has been particularly painful when it was on land long regarded as Palestinian birthright. The people targeted have often been women because their hijab is such a visible marker of religious and social affiliation.

Just as distressing has been the persecution of Mandaeans in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussain and the American occupation. Now Mandaeans, who have lived in Iraq for close to 2000 years and far predate both Islam and European colonialism, are finding their young women being forced to wear hijab because of the rising dominance of Islamic religious thought in the newly governing parties under US control.

Such persecution of religious groups has driven many people of all faiths to undertake long and dangerous refugee journeys as they seek a safer place to live and raise families. The public discrimination and persecution they have faced in their places of origin have then shaped the way they may feel about public places in their new homes. They may continue to feel exposed and vulnerable in open public spaces, and so be hesitant about venturing outside to the parklands in their new homes. Discrimination they may face in their new homeland may be interpreted, in view of their pasts, as a continuation of the harrowing persecution they believed they had escaped.

Re-Visiting: circulating ideas about nature between new homes and old homes

The circulation of ideas about place is an important outcome of the continuing communication between immigrants long settled in Australia - and their children who are born and raised in Australia - with the homelands of the family origin.

A story in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2007, 'Home from Home' reported a formal record of the bonds between Australians of Lebanese background and the places of their old home. There are many members of the Lebanese village of Kfarsghab who now live in Australia, but who keep in close touch with their relations and friends still in Lebanon and at times revisit. The village has now renamed its main street 'Parramatta Road' and, as Ray Abraham, an Australian descendant of the immigrants has pointed out, there is a 'Parra cafe too'. When combined with the warmth of the young men in Hesham Abdo's experience, who found a little bit of Tripoli in the waterfall in the Blue Mountains, this suggests that there are continuing exchanges between the two countries as a result of Lebanese migration: a piece of Lebanon now exists in the Blue Mountains and at the same time, Australia has a presence in the landscape of Lebanon.⁵³

Re-visiting the homeland can, however, 'bring home' all kinds of changes that have happened since or during the process of migration. Some of these, far from celebrating the connections, can puncture the romanticised nostalgia which

may be circulating about old homelands. For Hesham Abdo who has grown up in Australia, trying to visit beaches in Palestine was a contrast to his childhood experiences of the Georges River National Park, despite his awareness, after 9/11 and the 2005 Cronulla riots, that freedom of access is not guaranteed in Australia either. But here is how he found Palestine:

"When I went to Palestine, and I wanted to go to the beach, I couldn't go to the beach... we were stopped on the check point. There was ten of us, all cousins, 13, 14 years old. They were all from Palestine, living there. And they wanted my passport. I said I didn't have a passport. "I don't carry a passport, it's with my mother." "You can't go through without a passport." And it was a problem because I'd taken a photo of the check point as well... See I wanted to take a photo. I saw the Israeli flag up, and there were all the Palestinians around the refugee camp living in slums, and... the nicest thing in the refugee camp was the check point! And the most well groomed people were the Israeli soldiers. And so at that age, I was thinking, what's happening? I took a photo of the checkpoint and a photo of the beach, a photo of the refugee camp. Just to see what is happening here. And they didn't like that. You know, they said that I could be a terrorist. And I explained, "I'm Australian, and you know, I wouldn't know, I wouldn't do that. I'm here for a holiday to see my family and we just want to go to the beach." ⁵⁴

Like this example of an awareness of constraint made more pronounced because of experiences

in Australia, there may be other aspects of Australian national park experience filtering back to places like Lebanon in the future. Ghassan Hage notes the presence in Beirut of the Koala *garderie*, a "childcare centre... which, more than the koala concept, has introduced an Australian concept of childcare to Beirut."⁵⁵ Migration, in these sense, is always has elements of being a round trip rather than just a one-way fare.

Hima and implications for Australian parks

Innovations in national park policy are occurring in Lebanon and as such return visits continue, Lebanese-Australians may bring these back to be considered in Australia as well. Partly in response to the problems associated with the exclusionary nature of what was understood as the 'western model' of protected areas, some Middle Eastern environmental and parkland advocates looked to traditional strategies for an alternative approach to ecological conservation and management. An example is the revival of the concept of the *hima* (discussed in 'Traditions' above) which was initiated by research in the early 1960s by Omar Draz, a Syrian FAO (UN Food & Agriculture Organization) adviser working in Saudi Arabia where he observed some of the remaining *hima* in operation.⁵⁶ In Syria, a high proportion of the population continue to live in rural areas and continue to have experience with the *hima* system.⁵⁷ The *hima* approach has been taken up actively in Saudi Arabia where environmentalists and conservation policy makers have used this

form of indigenous knowledge to shape a system of conservation reservations.

It has been argued that it represents a return to the tradition of integrating local human interests with the need for conservation of plants and animals. The approach has been explicitly promoted as an alternative to exclusionary 'national parks' and 'protected areas' in which humans are marginalized and removed from areas where only non-human species are conserved – although foreign tourism is also encouraged.⁵⁸

The *hima* approach has also been taken up strongly in Lebanon, and is now explicitly included in the recently proposed protected area category system which includes 'Protected Landscapes/Seascapes (IUCN Category IV)' which it describes as a 'Hima System'.⁵⁹ The Lebanese Ministry for the Environment has been responsible for the declaration of a substantial number of 'Hima and Forests' since 1991, with many known as 'National Hima'.⁶⁰ The major proportion of visitors to national parks, 'mountain trails' and conservation zones in Lebanon are international tourists and visiting diasporic Lebanese (see following section). So such emerging trends in Lebanese and, more broadly, Middle Eastern conservation, will become known to members of Arabic Australian communities as they continue to keep in touch with and travel to visit these old homelands.⁶¹

PART 4

EXPERIENCING THE GEORGES RIVER AND ITS PARKLANDS

Expectations: what do Arabic Australians hope to do in natural settings?

The Arabic Australians who participated in this project, regardless of their religion or national background, all expected to do the same things as each other in the parklands around their new homes. These can be summarised as:

a) **practising faith and spirituality** - Arabic Australians, whether Mandaean, Muslim and Christian, all shared the enjoyment of feeling close to God in natural settings and this is one of the things that draws them to the parks. This feeling, common for all the Arabic Australian groups, was also frequently expressed by other interviewees from Vietnamese, Anglo and Aboriginal Australian groups.

Whereas buildings like halls and shopping centres are seen as places defined and claimed by the majority Anglo and European groups, Arabic Australians all suggested that they see natural spaces like parks and beaches as directly reflecting the divinity, rather than being the property of any one group or nation.

b) **building social relationships with family, community, country**: interviewees hoped to use parks to build stronger relationships with their family and friends, to refresh and foster their wider communities of identity (such as with other immigrants who have shared the same village of origin), and to take part in social

celebrations of belonging to their new country (such as Australia Day).

c) **relaxing**: the expectation of enjoying physical leisure, as well as informal and organised sports, in safety and security. This hope reflects the very long hours of work which immigrants have had to do if they wanted to support young families and make new homes. As many immigrants from all these countries found their homeland professional qualifications were not recognised in Australia, their only alternatives were jobs - and sometimes two or three jobs - in factories in areas along the Georges River.⁶²

d) **exploring** the environment of their new homeland to feel a greater sense of belonging, both socially (through interactions with other users of the park) and environmentally (often using practices and technologies they remember in their places of origin, like gathering herbs for food or by fishing, but now adapting and innovating in their new home).

Experiences: Faith & nature

Islam

Muslims contributing to this project have welcomed the opportunity to use the public parklands around the Georges River and they are a large and highly visible component of the visitor population. They have felt that being in the open spaces of natural settings allowed them to be in touch with God and to participate in their religious rituals like prayer with other

Muslims without the obstructions or hostility often found in the built environments of Australian cities. These buildings seldom cater for Muslim worship which requires prayers five times a day and a ritual washing (or ablution) beforehand. Most Australian buildings have no prayer rooms and their washing facilities are not suitable to be used for the ablutions needed for prayer. In the natural parkland setting, not only does God feel closer for practising Muslims, but there is no need for prayer rooms and usually no shortage of ablution facilities.

One of the most holy periods in the Islamic calendar is Ramadan, the 30-day period during which devout Muslims fast completely - with no food or drink of any kind - between sunrise and sunset each day.⁶³ This time of restraint and self-discipline offers Muslims time to reflect on religious principles and on the ways they might strengthen their principles of living. While there are many sombre dimensions to Ramadan, there is a joyous, social side which is expressed each evening at sunset when families and friends celebrate their efforts through the day by sharing a meal - *iftar* - to break their fast. Many of the Muslims interviewed for this project said they would prefer to share *iftar* in the open air, in natural settings created by God, in order to strengthen their sense of that universal presence. This enjoyable, daily ritual is one which, unfortunately, cannot be carried out in a national or State recreation park, because these are closed to the public at sunset. Many people spoke of their sadness at having to share *iftar* in smaller and less comfortable surroundings in

adjoining Council parks, because these parks have no fences and so they are not able to have a 'closing time'.

One of the women in the Muslim Women Association focus group, for example, said that her family often went to Paul Keating Park in Bankstown to break their fast. Even though this is a small and very geometrically laid out park, she said it was beautiful there during Ramadan month.⁶⁴

Hesham Abdo, interviewed as a 16 year old, said he and his family, who live at Picnic Point, near the Georges River National Park, are of course not able to share *iftar* there. So they would go to Botany Bay near La Perouse to break their fast during Ramadan. They went to the ocean because, like many Lebanese people who come from the Mediterranean coast, his mother's family had initially lived at Coogee (where they had a fish shop). So they still have an attachment to that part of Sydney. When they break their fast they 'like to be outdoors... so everybody comes and they bring their camping lights and all that, their gas burners', and they stay there well into the night.⁶⁵ They sit around eating and talking and having coffee and tea, while the younger ones go walking and shining their torches into the sea to see the fish jumping up and down.⁶⁶

Although *iftar* cannot be shared in National Parks or other parks closed after dark, this is not the case with Eid-ul-Fitr, a major celebration to mark the end of Ramadan when food is shared all day and gifts are exchanged. This is an exciting event held by the extended Islamic community, which celebrates the learning achieved through the fasting of

Ramadan and endorses the personal and community ties which will sustain people through the rest of the year. This celebration - because it takes place through the day - can be held in National Parks as well as in other parks and on beaches around the area. As is the case with the Vietnamese Australian community and their New Year celebration of Tet, these major Eid festivals have grown beyond the bounds of smaller suburban CBD parks into a major event. There are very large Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations held in big venues like the Showground at Homebush.

But there are also many smaller Eid gatherings of family and friends, which take place in small parks across the Georges River area. One council park where people gather to celebrate Eid is East Hills Park which has picnic tables, grassy areas and river/bush backdrop. According to Hesham:

"East Hills Park is used every week, and then at the end of Ramadan, I can't remember how long for but whether it's raining, whether it's sunny, even an earthquake they still go there... all the



EID Festival. Photos by Crina Belevi.

*relatives go there. They go there at ten o'clock in the morning, after Ramadan, they have their breakfast and they sit till the afternoon and organise where they're going for the rest of the day."*⁶⁷

There are other less formal events which draw communities together and which at the same time are nurtured by religious rituals. A notable one is the Islamic welcoming of a new child, comparable to the baptism of infants practised by Christians.

Welcoming (babies)

Wafa Zaim, in views similar to those of many other interviewees, said that like other migrants, and like Aborigines, Muslims have a special attachment to nature.

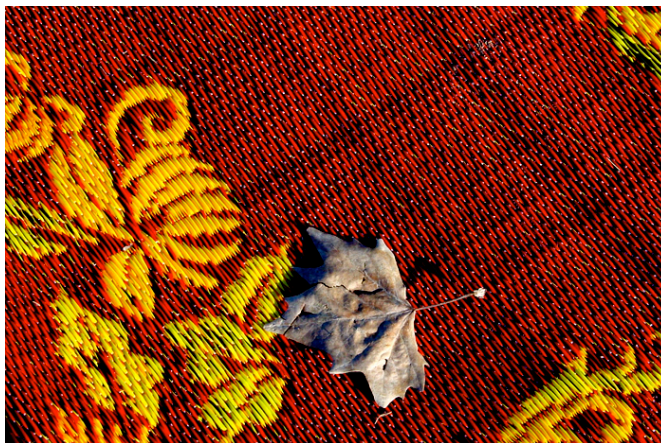
*"When you talk to Muslim people, you'll realise we are very close to nature... when we have big ceremonies like the birth of a baby, we like to have them outdoors in the park."*⁶⁸



Hesham has pointed out that it was not purely a matter of numbers either – it was about the mood associated with being outdoors too – which encouraged peacefulness.

These photographs are from the ceremony to welcome a new baby girl into Hesham's extended family, the Abdo family. This large family celebration took place in 2009 in Black Muscat Park, a Council park on the Georges River near Chipping Norton. These photographs show both the warm, social dimensions of this gathering and the comfortable way in which religious celebrations are threaded through this social event. The prayer mat can be laid out anywhere, creating a reverential space in these natural settings, close to the talking and sharing going on among those family members who do not choose to pray. Hesham's photograph of the prayer mat with the autumn leaf blown onto it reflects his sense of the interactions of meditation and nature.

Photos by Hesham Abdo



Individual contemplation: Nature as Mosque

Within all our interviews, a similarly strong connection was made between worship and nature. For Muslims, religious faith and worship are not mosque-bound – rather the whole of nature, including the park environment, is seen as a mosque.

Interviewed at the age of 16, for example, Hesham Abdo described his pleasure in walking through the bush in Georges River National Park near his home and spoke about nature as being “*one of God’s beautiful creations.*”⁶⁹ He acknowledged that buildings were made of resources that were also created by God, but a building “*still doesn’t compare to a tree; trees, you know, are much more amazing than buildings.*” In his later interviews and in those he conducted with other young Muslim Arab Australian men in their late teens or early twenties, this same sense of occasionally seeking restful and peaceful settings for individual contemplation were present.

Mandaeans Baptisms: from the Nepean River to Liverpool

Since their community members began to arrive in Australia after rising persecution in Iraq, Mandaeans have lived in a range of different areas but a significant community now lives around Liverpool where they appreciate the natural settings of the parklands along the Georges River. But given their keen interest in water and water quality, they have become very well informed about the conditions in Sydney’s various other waterways. One of the very active members of the Mandaean Culture Club in 2006,

for example, Asia Farad, has been on the staff of Sydney Water for some years. The community is therefore very aware of the levels of pollution in the Georges River, which since at least the 1960s has been plagued with high readings of industrial and sewage pollution, being closed in 1962 due to high levels of e. coli among other contaminants.⁷⁰ Just as important however has been the tidal nature of the Georges River

around Liverpool: not only is the water saline, but because it is tidal, it does not appear to flow freely. At times, as the Mandaeans repeat often, it seems to be ‘stagnant’. Finally, they have also been concerned about the potential intrusiveness and hostility of other members of the public in the heavily used parklands places where they might consider gathering on the Georges River.



Hesham on the boardwalk.

They sought out instead a freshwater river and found Tench Reserve, at Regentville, located on a quiet place on the Nepean River near the Olympic rowing site. Not only is the river fresh water and free flowing, but it is relatively unpolluted as well. Importantly, the parkland on the river bank forms an amphitheatre, with the grassy picnic area sloping gently down to the small boat ramp they used to enter the water for baptisms. So their gathering is relatively secluded and shielded from casual public gaze.⁷¹

Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow were invited to attend a large ceremony held in March 2005 at the Penrith site, celebrating the Five Days of Creation, which marks the time when the whole universe, not just the Earth, was created and submerged under water. For Mandaean, as Karim Jari explained to us, *“Water is the life force’ - it is everything”*. Those who are going to be baptised wait patiently in lines of men and women, separate but side by side, until they are led into the water by their religious leaders and called by their special baptismal name. The ceremony is performed in the Mandaean’s ancestral language of Aramaic, while participants are gently immersed and take some of the river water into their mouths. After attaching a sprig of myrtle bush under their head shawl, and speaking a prayer they have each composed for themselves, the participants emerge from the water. They told us that their baptism leaves them feeling cleansed and less burdened by troubles. We were encouraged to take the photos for this report. A young woman there explained to Allison Cadzow the Mandaean approach to landscape, saying that everywhere Mandaean people went - Australia, Sweden, Jordan - they had found a freshwater river in which to baptise.⁷²



Mandaean Baptism, 20 April 2005.

Amad Mtashar [Translating for one of the members of the focus group]:

“The philosophy of our religion is that we need... fresh flowing water and the stagnant water is not suitable for that, that’s the reason we didn’t do our baptism in lakes we do them in the river or sea... so this is the most suitable place that we can get. We have an agreement with Penrith City Council. This is one of the places with most fresh flowing water and this has come in with the consensus of religious people.”⁷³



BBQ and socialising at the Baptism event, 20 April 2005. Photos Allison Cadzow

The Mandaean community had initially chosen the site for its water quality, relatively secluded parkland and concrete boatramp. The Penrith Council then contributed by erecting an explanatory sign for members of the public but also by arranging for a set of special steps to be built, so that people could get down into the water easily for their baptism. At the same time, these steps protect the bank from erosion. Although the steep, grassy park is shielded from casual passers-by, the Madaeans’ chosen section of the river is still frequently traversed by

speed boats, bringing noise, petrol pollution and inquisitive audiences, all of which continued to make Mandaean, and particularly young people, uncomfortable there.

The river baptisms, as well as being religiously satisfying rituals, were also clearly enjoyable and exciting collective gatherings, in which celebrants gathered round each other supportively as they waited for their turn on the stairs, swathed in specially made pure white cloths for the immersion. There was a great deal of laughter and talk about relations and particularly it has been a time to warmly remember those community members who have passed away. Young people and older people were all taking active part in the baptisms in 2005, while friends and family members watched on with cameras and video recorders to remember these enthusiastic events.

Rising concerns with both water quality and with intrusive public observation have however brought further change to the ways in which Mandaean have created their religious environment in Sydney. The community has now built a Mendhi, a house of worship, closer to Liverpool on the Georges River, where many community members live. Inside the small Mendhi, a pool with fresh and flowing water has been built, offering both the intimate seclusion and the high quality of water, which neither the Georges nor the Nepean Rivers could any longer provide.⁷⁴ The small space available at the Mendhi, however, means that the maintenance of the rich social events which were fostered by the riverside baptisms will be more actively fostered in Georges River parklands like those described in the following section, *Experiences: building social networks*.

A Coptic Christian Easter festival: Sham al Nassim

Joy Suliman is a young woman in her 30s living in Lugarno. She was born in Australia and is a cultural worker in a community organisations and museums. Joy is a photographer and web designer who uses the riverbanks for fishing and some bushwalking and bush regeneration.

Joy's mother is a Coptic Christian and chose to live at Lugarno, because it reminded her of living by the Nile River in Khartoum, Sudan. A Coptic Christian ceremony at Easter, known as *Sham al Nassim* is regularly held at Chipping Norton. Over the years of sharing this enjoyable celebration, Coptic Christian community members have built up strong attachments to this place. Joy explains *Sham al Nassim* with references back and forth between countries:

"There's a pretty cool event in our culture...my mother's family is Coptic Orthodox and their Easter is often at a different time. On Easter Monday they have Sham al Nassim which roughly translated means 'the smell of the new breeze'. You go out at the crack of dawn on Easter Monday and you have these preserved fish and onions and eggs. Its really smelly food but its great!

*...and then later on you'll probably have a barbecue and traditionally you've always had that at a waterside location. I think because in the Sudan our families used to have it on the Nile, so there's that connection, so that's an event that we always go down to the river for, even if it's Lake Gillawarna or Chipping Norton."*⁷⁵

Experiences: building social networks

Picnics in the park - what do all communities have in common?

Picnicking in large groups is a common parkland activity for Arabic Australians, as it is for many other groups of relatively recent immigrants. There are some similarities among all picnicking groups, but there some distinctive characteristics too about Arabic Australian picnics which will become clear below.

But first it is important to discuss one thing which is NOT different. There is a widespread assumption among Anglo-background Australians - and often circulating even among immigrant groups - that picnicking in large groups has never been something Anglo Australians have done.

In fact, picnicking in large groups was exactly what Anglo-Irish Australians along the Georges River did fifty years ago. There are many accounts in oral history interviews with older Anglo Australians, as well as myriad newspaper reports and other records about the large gatherings of people in the 'Pleasure Grounds' which opened up in many areas along the Georges River in the 1880s and continued to operate until the 1930s. These parklands - often located in what often continue to be parks today, like Fitzpatrick Park and at Picnic Point and East Hills as well as at Hollywood further upstream, contained children's and adults play equipment like swings and razzle dazzles, as well as dance floors, hotels and tea shops, jetties for ferries and private boats to dock, and organised bush

walks into the surrounding sandstone Eucalypt forests. Not only did extended families meet for picnics, but corporate bodies like church fellowships, Scout and Girl Guide troops, local councils and factories all organised large collective gatherings in the parks right up until the 1960s. The reduction in Anglo large group park usage may have come about due to wider use of personal motor vehicles, changing patterns of recreation and changing patterns of Anglo family size and dispersal.

It is not that Anglo Australians do not have a tradition of large group picnics, it is simply that over the last fifty years or so such picnics have become much less frequent. Before that time, their use of the parks was very similar. Today, however, the practices of these groups do unquestionably look very different. Arabic Australians are often seen visiting parks in large picnic groups, while Anglo Australians visit in small picnic groups, often in nuclear families, or they come for exercise, either individually or in small groups of joggers or walkers.

.... and some differences

Two important differences also occur today which shape interactions between Arabic and Anglo Australians. One is the composition of family and larger group picnics. In immigrant communities, parents often expect young people, including teenagers and young adults in their early 20s, to participate in family and community gatherings in parks and other locations, as a way of strengthening their sense of community identity. Anglo Australian park visitors are more often in family groups with some combination of young dependent children and elderly relations. Young Anglo adults are

seldom present with parents and older family at family picnics - more often they are off with their own age groups taking part in activities in other places. Indeed older Australians expect them to be away doing other things, with people their own age. So Arabic Australian picnic groups LOOK different because they have substantial numbers of young adults. The most noticeable of them of course are young men, often playing informal games like soccer or volley ball (both games commonly played across Europe and the Arabic world).

The next important difference is that many Arabic Australians, and all practising Muslims, avoid alcohol. They do not use alcohol themselves and they are often uncomfortable around others who are consuming it. Unlike Anglo park visitors, who would be hard pressed to recall if any picnic groups they walked past had alcohol at their barbeque, Arabic Australians are usually very aware of alcohol drinking taking place in the parks while they are there. It often makes them uneasy - and with good reason. They have commented frequently in their interviews for this project that they fear that those drinking alcohol are more likely to become aggressive, either to their fellow group members or to outsiders. Furthermore they fear they will become the target of any Anglo drinking which turns ugly. This concern has increased in the recent past, as has been discussed below, in the section called 'Community Concerns'.

The Centrality of Family: Families and 'whole families'.

Picnicking, sharing food and socialising are seen as relaxing events by Arabic people. Many interviewees have stated this and it is confirmed

by community workers like the bilingual educators for the Office of Environment and Heritage who work frequently with Arabic Australian communities. Arabic people like to picnic in large groups in parks close to home, the educators explained, because they need to bring a lot of food with them. They also bring their elderly family members and small children, so picnicking grounds have to be close to parking. Parks should have large open spaces with plenty of water, tables, shelters and open areas for the children to run around.⁷⁶ Arabic Australian children born in Australia, like the older generation, also spoke about the need to have picnicking facilities as a priority in parks, even though in some cases they said they were occasionally bored at these events.⁷⁷

Mariam Ismail was 15 years old when she was interviewed at Islamic Saturday School. She described how relatives on both her father's and mother's sides gathered at her grandparent's house on most weekends. Leaving some of their cars there - around 70 people in all - would go in the larger vehicles to Chipping Norton. This group would include 'cousins and their cousins'.⁷⁸ There is nothing in her description that suggests she considered this a large number of people to be picnicking together. She had grown up to see this as normal.

*"Yeah, the whole family gathers around and brings their own food. We just sit around and, you know, under a tree where there's some shade. It's just a place where you bond with other family and our cousins and things like that."*⁷⁹

Jenan Baroudi has explained the attractions of Georges River parks for Arabic Australian

families, including many of the elements identified as important across other interviews – size of groups, the importance of bonding with nature, playgrounds.

“...I assume no-one's house would be able to take everybody, like 30-40 people ... and not to mention that the places we went to were also green and beautiful. And you've got so much space, and you've got access to playgrounds. In some parts of the river, we even used to swim. So ... what's accessible to you in the park is not the same as being at home. And it's also about getting out of the house. We didn't really ask why.”

Because you can go down on your own, but it's not the same as going with your family. So I think that was also an incentive for us to keep going on these picnics on a regular basis because we were there with the family. I mean extended family obviously. Sometimes if you didn't go on that picnic you might not see your family for another week or two weeks.”⁸⁰

Typically, Arabic Australian picnic groups consist of closely related families. One of the women participants in a focus group said there were five families who often went to the park together with her family; another said her ‘whole’ family’, as distinct from her immediate family, included three or four families while another described her picnic groups as comprising 10 to 12 families who gather for a ‘one dish party’ (everyone brings one dish).⁸¹ On any one occasion, however, the component families might include cousins and other lateral kin.

Another woman described Arabic Australians as constituting a ‘family oriented kind of community’.⁸² She explained what she meant by saying that some friends, as distinct from relatives, might accompany a family group to a

park but the core of the group was the family or extended family. It was rare for a group of mainly friends to go to a park. However, as our study also found with Vietnamese Australians, this is likely to apply mainly to adult and older people. Younger Arabic Australians, like young Vietnamese Australians, often do visit parks with their friends.

Young men, family and friends

Hesham Abdo said his family went on picnics every second or third weekend to the riverside parks. Fifty or more people went on these picnics, including cousins, aunties and uncles.⁸³ Hesham was unique in this project as he was first interviewed when he was 16, a bike-riding teenager who loved hanging out in the park with his friends, also on their bicycles, having met up after cycling from home some distance away. Later however, at the age of 19, Hesham was again interviewed for the project. His patterns of recreation and movement had changed.

As he grew older, Hesham gave up bike riding as more and more of his friends acquired cars, delighting in working on them to improve their performance but also to personalise them and make them distinctive. Hesham more frequently met up with young men friends in the parks along the river, where they swapped hints about their cars and riding jet skis as well as on other keen interests they all shared.

At an age when young Anglo Australian men in the Georges River area expect - and are expected - to be with other young men in venues like hotels, and to be consuming alcohol as a rite of passage - Arabic youth who are practising Muslims have a different pattern of recreation. They do not drink alcohol, and it means that they are excluded from one of the main arenas of socialising used by young Anglo men.

Hesham, from a committed Muslim family and with an interest in natural as well as built environment, became interested enough in the project to apply for employment in it as a researcher among young Muslim men in the area to learn their views on parks. Consequently much of the following accounts of young men's social life in the parklands arises from Hesham's interviews with 10 young men as well as from his own experience.

The BBQ: “So much happens around this little thing.”

Overall, as for all park visitors, food is important at a gathering: it is a means of sharing which fulfils social, personal, cultural and sometimes religious goals. And in Arabic Australian families, just like in Anglo Australian families, there are clear gender divisions in how outdoor cooking is done. So, as a number of young Arabic Australian participants told us, at their family barbeques the boys look after the fire and ‘Mum does the meat’.⁸⁴



The barbeque is often held up as the quintessentially Australian pastime but actually it has connections with other countries' traditions of street food, eating outdoors and in general living much of life outdoors. Hesham Abdo has discussed the familiarity of the barbeque from Arabic street vendor use. It has been adapted and reinvented here - shaped by the conditions of factory metal work in which many Arabic Australians have found themselves. As a result, it has become a focal point for family gatherings of Arabic Australians in Sydney.

"It's a traditional barbeque - they use them overseas as well to make corn on them. I saw them on the streets in Egypt, in Palestine and Jordan. They're used all over the Arab area. It's galvanised metal, and they have sort of perfected these BBQ's.

A lot of the men worked as sheet metal manufacturers in Australia. My dad when he first came here made stainless steel sinks... They used to work the hardest on these sinks and they would ask to take the spare metal home. 'We just want to take it so we can make our own barbeque'. So they'd take the metal home and they'd shape it... and then they'd take it back to work and they had this sort of a welding tool, they'd zap the corners together and zap the legs on. Then a chicken wire holds the coal underneath and they'd heat the coal up by putting fire in, then the meat sits on the chicken wire and it actually cooks through the smoke and the heat. So it's intense heat and they'd take turns, like shift work, everyone's standing there and the meat comes out really, really good."

What happens at the barbeque?

"...They do that all day, they're sitting at their barbeque. First they use the barbeque to do the coal for their pipes, then they start with the meat, and the women are chopping the salad. They do their meat and they keep it going and take turns. When I go with my friends, I don't use the barbeques but they (the older people) are really into it! For a while, the meat's on, then it's taken off and put in the bread, the chicken and beef and after the meat is finished, next comes the corn. Corn is put on and after that they take the corn off and everybody gets their desert and that's it. Then after they're all done they don't put water into it - I actually put water into one of them and I got told off, 'You're crazy! You can't put water on, you're going to crack the metal!'

They put the coal on the ground, pour water over it, wait for it to cool down, then they scoop it up, drain it, then it dries for the rest of the evening, then they pack it up and take it home. And that's the barbeque!

"So much happens around this little thing!"⁸⁵

Hesham argues that his family doesn't like using the public electric and gas barbeques provided because 'they have to keep on pressing the buttons!' Most people interviewed however explained that Muslims in particular were reluctant to use the public equipment because they were worried that non-halal meats had been cooked on the grills. So to be safe - as well as to replicate the style of cooking over hot coals that they knew so well from their the Arab world - they preferred to make their own equipment.

Jenan Baroudi has explained how central the barbeque was for her family as well:

"There was always a barbeque without fail, the word picnic goes with the word barbeque. And I'm a vegetarian so that was always a problem for me. Lots of salads, chips and drinks. I think of the esky, I think of a picnic! So with Arabic food - there'd be tabouli and another Lebanese salad - but definitely the main thing on the menu was meat: barbeque chicken, barbeque lamb."⁸⁶

Mandaeans: Social networks, refugees and water

Mandaeans use many of the smaller parks around their homes in Liverpool to share social times with family, friends and community. They mentioned the large, grassed park on Castlereagh St in the centre of Liverpool, but they have particularly enjoyed the River Park on the main Georges River, under the main bridge which leads into the commercial district. At these local parks, Mandaeans have gathered to meet friends and sometimes fished and had barbeques.

The baptismal gatherings in particular had been richly social times and even though these were at a distance, on the Nepean River at Penrith, they still knitted together the community which lived around the Georges River. At the baptisms there had been not only encouragement for cross-generational conversations, but a ritual structure to do so. Participants prepared food for ancestors & those who are absent, which was of course a substantial number of people given the persecution in Iraq from which so many have

had to flee. The baptismal ceremony in the river park setting had enabled participants to talk about the people they have lost as they washed this food carefully in the river. Then they offered it to those absent loved ones with prayers, as they gathered together and prepared to eat their own meals.

Karim Jari has reflected on the strengthening of social relationships which occurred at these ceremonies as people travelled together to reach the baptism site:

“We enjoy it because the trip to there is like a journey. You do your baptism and then you gather the family, they go on their own, they’re chatting, they’re playing, there’s a park there, they enjoy the park and they enjoy the atmosphere there so it’s like a little picnic.”

Amad Mtashar translating for Kabil, a young man present at the Mandaean focus group, described the Nepean River parkland for its social dimensions:

“The park is there is very nice almost isolated for our people, there is facility there the council has provided with the stairways and all these kind of things. So it’s suitable and we enjoy that picnic.”⁸⁷

As the baptisms are now held indoors in the more intimate setting at the Mendhi in Liverpool, this valuable social role is being fulfilled closer to home in natural settings in the parks local to the Georges River or in homes themselves. All these social gatherings - at the smaller Georges River parks as well as the baptisms in the Nepean - have been particularly important opportunities for Mandeans who have been



Toula Village in Lebanon.

through the harrowing experiences of escapes from persecution in Iraq and Iran to build a supportive community network to allow them to settle successfully in their new homes.

As Amad Mtashar has said recently:
“Mandaeanism is not only a religion. It is culture as well, identity as well for us. So its good to keep this identity and Australia encourages this kind of multicultural society.”⁸⁸

Parks and Belonging

A key point emerging from our research was that parks are integrated into family, community and – for Muslims and Mandeans and Coptic Christian - into religious life as well. Parks become part of the everyday social neighbourhood for Arabic Australians - they are not just physical places but social hubs where family and community connections are frequently refreshed and strengthened in public settings.



The Toula Association, Georges River 2009.

Belonging: The Toula Association: remembering Lebanon

Arabic Australians use parkland experiences not only to remember people who have passed away or have had to be left behind in the home country. Many take the opportunity to remember whole places in which they lived - and with which they usually maintain many current connections. As well, they gather in Australia - in the parks - with the people who all emigrated from the same village or region. The gathering allows lots of stories to be exchanged, memories to be refreshed - or extended - and young people who have now been born in Australia to be taught about the places and people whom they might meet if they revisit old homelands.

Our project came across one such gathering, taking place in the Georges River National Park in 2009. This was a network of people who had all emigrated from Toula in Lebanon, who had formed themselves into the Toula Association.

They meet regularly in the informal surroundings of the National Park to remember their old homes and to share stories as well as to learn what each other is now doing and to keep in contact in their new homes.

Belonging: Australia Day

It is not only such nostalgic gatherings celebrating past connections which are held in parks. Every year Australia Day, originally the anniversary of the British landing at Botany Bay, is celebrated for different reasons throughout the Georges River area. Aboriginal people prefer to celebrate Survival or Yarbun Day in parallel picnics or concerts in parklands, commemorating not the invasion but their sustained presence over the next two centuries. Yet again, newly arrived families are often celebrating the achievement of citizenship by one of their members and others are aspiring to do so on some Australia Day soon.

Although supportive of Aboriginal organisations in the area, Arabic Australians are enthusiastic participants in Australia Day picnics in parks across the area. They can be seen in the National Park as well as the smaller council managed parks, along with members of many other immigrant groups, including the long-time settlers from the UK and Ireland.

Experiences: Relaxing

Relaxation, the bottom line for adults

Parklands offer different types of experience for different age groups. A number of Arabic Australian adults interviewed stressed their view of parks as a place to relax. Relaxation was



Young Arabic Australian men playing volley ball, Georges River, Australia Day 2005. Note Australian Flag in centre in background.

counter-posed to 'activity', which they saw as appropriate for young people who, for instance, might want to play football but not for adults. Bushwalking in particular was seen as the antithesis of relaxation and was not something adults would want to do. Relaxation was associated with picnicking and barbequing, which offered a context in which people could chat with each other in a low-energy environment.

This preference for a 'relaxing' time at parks reflects on the heavy physical labour which many Arabic Australians have done when they first arrived as immigrants. As their overseas qualifications were seldom recognised without expensive retraining and reaccreditation, and they were faced with high living expenses as they tried to establish young families, many Arabic immigrants have had no choice but to work two and three unskilled jobs at the same time as they tried to make ends meet. Women



A picnic group of Arabic Australians, some in hijab, Georges River, Australia Day 2005. Note the woman baiting her line in background.

have similarly faced the additional burdens of paid employment, often in factories, the primary responsibility for home-making and child-rearing.⁸⁹ As well, the high energy activities expected by park managers in national parks, like hiking and camping, are often reminiscent for Arabic Australians of the dangerous journeys to escape persecution and the difficult conditions of refugee camps, which they or their relations have had to endure. For many Anglo Australians, who have lived securely in a peaceful environment over many generations, the idea of camping in wilderness seems to be an attractive, safe and unusual adventure. For many Arabic Australians, such activities present an unnerving reminder of their own difficult experiences in a past which is only too recent.

Welcoming parklands

For people arriving in Australia with different cultural conventions about use of open natural

spaces, our research has provided clues as to why people feel welcomed or excluded from any one or any particular type of park. For visitors who go to parks for picnics in family groups which include small children the presence or absence of play equipment can be a deciding factor in choosing a park. For Arabic Australians interviewed for this project, decisions are sometimes made not to visit a national park because there are no play facilities for children there.

One woman who participated in the Muslim Women's Association focus group had actually come to the conclusion that national parks were intentionally designed for visitation only by older people:

*"I think a national park is more for the older [people]... not so much for the children."*⁹⁰

She felt there were not many 'cues' that they are child friendly places – and young kids do love playgrounds!

*"...if there is good resources where people can feel the shelter is adequate and children's play area is adequate for their children, they will go there... The set up of the park could make people feel welcome and they want to be part of it. For example, some of them have water, like what we have in our countries. Others have special areas for barbecue so people feel comfortable barbecuing because it's allowed there. Other areas might have a small canteen (or a café). They're happy to see it there, because again they will feel more comfortable and they will feel that there are others that have that purpose to be in this area."*⁹¹

Enjoying parks as gardens

A number of the Arabic Australian school children who participated in the project's focus group said that parks need to have ponds: *"I just like looking at what is in there – frogs... I really like frogs"*.⁹² Wafa Zaim also said parks needed to have ponds, with fish and water plants. These were things that were in parks in Lebanon. She wanted things that reminded her of home and 'reminded' her children of places from home.

Water, present in various forms in parks, thus seemed to be one of those landscape reference points that gave people a sense of being in two places at one – e.g. Lebanon and Australia. Participants in our Muslim women's focus group spoke of fountains and ponds as being attractions in parks, particularly where the ponds had beautiful fish that you could feed.⁹³

Arabic Australian school-aged children at Arabic Saturday School spoke about how they like waterfalls. 'They're beautiful, they're absolutely beautiful', one of them said.⁹⁴ Even these young people said that 'a good view' was important in a park. There should be water, greenery, flowers.⁹⁵ A number of the Arabic Australian women in the MWA focus group also said they wished there were flowers in the Georges River National Park, like the parks in Lebanon. While today's park managers prefer 'wild' native flowers to cultivated ones in 'national parks', this is was NOT the case when local Anglo-Irish communities campaigned to create the Georges River National Park in the 1950s. They valued the cultivation of wildflowers, and established a native flowering plant garden, called Sylvan Grove, which displayed and propagated native plants brought across from Western Australia, as

well as those which grew prolifically on the sandstone of the Georges River in the local park. Sylvan Grove was initially a celebrated section within the boundaries of the National Park but now, as this experimental and commercial cultivation of native plants has fallen into disfavour, the continuing Sylvan Grove garden has been relegated to anonymity, exiled to just outside the fences of the National Park.

Family and hours of opening

Other than at the particular time of Ramadan, Arabic Australians also commented that the sundown closing time interrupted relaxed family time during the rest of the year. The Mandaean interviewees pointed repeatedly to the cafes and restaurants they recalled placed on the riverbanks in cities in Iraq, which they said offered popular locations for family meals in the early evening. Participants in a focus group for Muslim women seemed mystified as to why the parks were closed at particular hours in the evening, especially when in summer it was still daylight when they closed.⁹⁶ One of the women said of Georges River NP, *"That one closes really early and we usually go in summer and so we're all sitting around and you have to get up"*. Another said you would not want to visit a park before about 4pm in summer, *"after the sun's set a little bit"*. Roua, one of the focus group participants described the scene:

"The barbeque is on but there's nothing on it, as in just the heat there, and, you know, you're just having a family time. You don't want it to end but you know you're eventually going to have to go home... but in the time that you're there you'd like sufficient lighting."

In council parks, where there is no closing time, these women were all worried about a lack of lighting for comfort as well as for safety. They spoke of having to turn the car lights on in order to see. They explained - as did the young men interviewed by Hesham Abdo in a separate segment of the project - that Arabic Australians take gas lamps and kerosene lamps into the council parks at night to allow themselves to see. *"They need lights for when they play their cards or when they do their meditation, sometimes they need lights to read books."*⁹⁷

Relaxing: space, playgrounds, sport, young people and safety

Young men, fast boats and big spaces

If adults stressed their preference for relaxed parkland experiences, young adults had predictably different interests. As mentioned earlier, there are significant numbers of young men at Arabic Australian family picnics involved in family, community and religious events. They



Football photo from East Hills Park. Photo Hesham Abdo

have talked about enjoying active recreation but often do so in a collective way. Their involvement in informal soccer and volleyball, often with younger members of the family network, has been mentioned. Cricket, a game taking up similar amounts of space which is often played by family groups of Anglo picnickers, is not one of those which young Arabic Australian men choose. Their games need space and with big soccer balls, it has been one of the points of concern for both young Arabic men and for other park users that balls can overshoot the group and bounce into neighbouring picnics.

The other interest which young men in the Arabic, Vietnamese and Anglo Australian communities share is in using jet skis on the river near the parks. Jet skis are cheaper than boats so are more within the reach of young adults and they have the same excitement of speed that motorbikes hold for many young men too. It is mostly young men who ride jet skis, suggesting similar gender differences to those occurring in other cultural groups between those who handle



Others watch and wait for their turn

fast machines and those who are passengers or audiences. However we photographed some young Arabic Australian women riding jet skis at the Georges River also.

Hesham talked about jetskiing with a number of the young men he interviewed who all stressed the enjoyments were speed, distance and a sense of freedom:

"It's a rocket! The feeling is like you're flying! A friend and his brother in law they purchased jet skis and they used to ride them in the George's River to Brighton. We used to all drive down to Brighton and onto the beach comes our friend and passenger and his brother in law. So four of our friends would be down there and we'd eat Oporto's together and then they'd get back on their jet skis and they'd go back down the Georges River. We'd meet them back over there. That was fun - they'd get there and they're all red and cold and shaky and it was just a rush!"



A young woman on a jet ski

The interviews with young Muslim Arabic Australian men suggest the conditions in which they use jet skis are often group and family settings, where many people share in the rides:

“When you’re riding a jet ski, there’s like one jet ski and twenty guys and we’re all watching. People feel intimidated by it, it’s not like two people on a jet ski and one person watching, it’s the whole family! But it’s just something that you do.”

The issue of jet ski use is a widely debated one. Vietnamese Australians reported that they had observed and experienced tensions with young Arabic Australian men, due partly to competition for space on the quite narrow river and partly due to over-assertive behaviour of young Arabic Australian men.⁹⁸ Hesham argues however that the criticism his friends have been aware of has not been from other communities on the riverbank, but from the Waterways inspectors, called in, particularly at Chipping Norton, by a local commercial canoe-hiring business. One of the issues of conflict has been that jet skis need to be registered like boats or cars, and the young men Hesham knows have not always done that, sometimes through ignorance.

“So the Waterways turns up in this huge boat, like water police and the jet ski was just about to take off and they said “stop right there.” They saw the jetski was not registered - I didn’t know it needed rego - but they started saying ‘We’ll give you this fine.’ We pay our rates, we live in the area and we’re entitled to use the river, and we know we’re not allowed to use jet skis anywhere else but we know these are the areas we’re allowed to use jet skis. That’s what we know through word of mouth. But they said ‘Get

the jet skis out of the water and we don’t want to see you again.’ We pulled out the jet ski and we were never down there again, we took the jet ski and sold it.

There’s not many people I know now, it’s mainly Anglo people that jet ski. The guys got intimidated by Waterways when they say “We don’t want to see you down here again!”⁹⁹

Lack of Facilities in Liverpool for young people

Some Mandaean in the focus group with the Mandaean Culture Club expressed concern that the parks in the Liverpool area had too many young people of all backgrounds in them without their families, and this made it daunting for older people or families to attend. This concern was answered - by other Mandaeans - as being the result of less expenditure by Local Government on facilities for young people in Liverpool compared to the Penrith area where the Mandaean groups had also used parks. In their view, the lack of Council attention in Liverpool to the needs of young people had led directly to many young people being in groups in the parks, particularly in the evening, without older family members.

Young Muslim women: intergenerational differences & feeling safe in hijab

For young women, sports games and jet skis were less of a source of excitement. They stressed they were looking for safety to enjoy the parks. In our interviews, women noted their greater comfort in open, spacious areas. This was particularly the case with those wearing *hijab* (whether in the form of a headscarf or

burqa) who feel vulnerable to harassment or even assault.

However the views of older people about what constituted safety for young women did not always accord with those of the young women themselves, who appreciated supportive company, but were at times interested in making their own way in public places.

Mariam Ismail spoke of how she and her girlfriends from school (she attended a Muslim school) often went to neighbourhood parks by themselves to walk and talk.¹⁰⁰ But sometimes one of their parents would take the group of them to Georges River National Park. When her friend’s father took them there he was very protective and would not let them walk far from the carpark.

“Like, because we’re all girls... we’re all seven girls and we all have the scarf on; he’s just worried that, you know, that some group of guys



Two young Muslim women from a picnic group, enjoying the water view at the Georges River National Park, Australia Day 2005. Photo Heather Goodall

might just come and try to muck around with us and he doesn't like that."

Mariam explained that, 'having the scarf on', whether in a park or on the street, *"you just find that people just stare and guys just make remarks and things like that"*. So, in the park, her friend's father would worry that if that happened the girls would feel 'we don't fit in'. Actually, she and her friends wouldn't feel that.

"Oh, like, us girls, we don't really care what other people think. If we were allowed to go other places by ourselves we would go. We wouldn't really care what people thought of us, because we know how we are and we're proud of who we are."

But the security of company is important for the girls themselves as well. Sometimes the girls would also ask older cousins to take them to parks. That allows them to go for walks in the bush which they would not have done by themselves.¹⁰¹

Experiences: Exploring and making new connections

Fishing: exploring new places and new people

The role of water has been stressed by all our interviewees in talking about the landscapes and cultures of their old homelands. Many Arabic Australians grew up on major rivers, while even more have come from coastal cities and towns. So surfing, seafood and fishing are key elements of experience which Arabic Australian immigrants miss and which they are hoping to find again in Australia. In fact, much of the

representation of Australia overseas shows surf beaches, seashores and rivers as defining landscapes.

Consequently, many Arabic Australians enjoy fishing. Hesham Abdo, both of whose parents come from coastal cities in Lebanon and Palestine, spoke of going to the Carinya Road end of Georges River National Park, near the boathouse, to fish with his father or uncle or cousins.¹⁰²

*"There's no fish really in the Georges River but we still throw the line out."*¹⁰³ *"It's just the joy of throwing out the line and, you know, waiting and waiting... it doesn't get boring, I like it."*¹⁰⁴

He believed that Arabic Australians from places like Lebanon and Egypt had an affinity with water and fishing because these two things had a major part in their lives back home. He spoke of his Aunt, who lives in Sydney. She was, he explained, in her 50s and wore a head scarf but she loved the water and the beach and so she was going to sew a swimming costume for herself. This is what a number of Muslim women who spoke to this project have done: they want to swim and so, finding there is little swimwear which meets their needs, they set about making their own.¹⁰⁵

Hesham has talked at length about his uncle who, ever since he migrated to Australia, has found fishing was a way to explore his new home. He has travelled around NSW seeking good fishing spots and learning about the country. His has recorded his travels by annotating a map to mark every place where he has traveled to find good fishing. He has shared this map with his family and allowed Hesham to

photograph it for this project, showing as it does the way that the skills he learnt as he grew up in coastal Lebanon have enabled him to learn so much about his adult home.

Another group of Arabic Australian men from the Picnic Point area, Hesham reported, also fish regularly in the Georges River at night, both in the Salt Pan Creek area and near Menai on the south side of the river.¹⁰⁶ They use rods and use 'bloodworms' as bait.

For Mandaeans too, fish and fishing have been important in exploring their new environment. Karim Jari for example is one man from the community who has fished widely, but particularly in the years immediately after his arrival. He had enjoyed fishing so much in the Tigris in Baghdad that he searched for the same experience for himself and his children in Australia. He was troubled by the pollution in the Georges River however, and, although he has fished there sometimes in the past, he has more



Hesham pointing out the locations his uncle has marked to show memorable visits. Photo Denis Byrne.

often lately fished closer to the coast, where he feels the water is cleaner.¹⁰⁷

Fish were an important part of the baptism events, before which participants fast for some days. After the immersions at the Nepean, there were barbeques of the freshwater fish the Mandaeans favour, like carp and also mullet, some species of which are from rivers while others are caught in coastal waters. The carp is an introduced fish, which are deeply disliked by many Aboriginal people and long term residents in inland rivers, but one which the Iraqis know how to cook to perfection and which they enjoy



Family members of the Mandaean participants in the Baptism on the Nepean River, barbequing carp for the picnic on the community's barbeque, built by one of the community members. Photo Allison Cadzow

partly because it reminds them of home.¹⁰⁸

Fishing has been important for many young Arabic Australian men. Mahmoud Dehn was born in 1983 in Auburn, and both of his parents came from Syria. Much of his leisure time as a child with his family was spent on the Georges River, where he explains fishing was part of his upbringing. He still lives at Auburn and continues to love fishing, so he travels to Tom Ugly's Point where he particularly likes throwing his line in.

*"At an early age and through my teenage years, my parents used to take us down to Georges River, to fish, to relax, to just get out of the sort of environment we're in where it's mainly like flats and buildings, you know just get out of there. To get into nature, have some fun, and learn how to fish..."*¹⁰⁹

His father and other family members taught him how to use the traditional fishing rod which many of them continue to use when they fish on the Georges River:

"...we use traditional, I guess Syrian or Lebanese rods where there's no reels. It's about like metre long, and it's telescopic, if that's the word. So it comes out to about four metres, and some of them are six metres. Then all it is, is from the end tip, the fishing line is tied to the top and then you put a sinker, and then the floaty and then another line down with the hook. You just put simple bait - maybe prawns that are peeled or a little bit of dough - put it on the hook. Then there's actually quite a long line off the rod more than half the, the way (again) the length of the rod, so that's to get distance and to get depth into the water. The only movement you do is

when you've put the bait on the hook, you hold the rod in one hand, and then, you hold the line and hook in with the other, and then you sort of bring it back, in a backwards motion towards you. Then you let go of the line and the hook and then it sort of just nicely slots into water there. Then all you have to do is wait, wait until the floaty goes under the water, or if you see it like, you know, slowly... and then you might pull it back and that way that movement might hook the fish. So, that, it's pretty simple, the only thing is the longer rods, they tend to be heavy, and it can be it can be a bit strenuous on the arm."

Some people now use the rods with reels, because you can catch larger fish with them. But learning to fish with these traditional rods, and mastering the skills needed to use them, allowed many leisurely conversations about what life had been like in the Arab world. So young people could grow up in Australia learning not only about traditional fishing techniques but about earlier lives in far away homelands.

Mahmoud felt that fishing is seen as important to the way young men affirmed connections and friendship with each other

"... in the community in the Auburn area, there's a lot of younger men that are actually going on trips especially for fishing... It's like football - it bonds us together. And we do it just to take some time out, you know, to relax, have some fun... There's a lot of waiting when you're fishing but, you know, the excitement when you got a fish on the line! And to see what you've caught, what type of fish, how big it is! That competition you know? Generally I guess the males have competitiveness about them."

Mahmoud explained that fishing offered not only bonding among young men from within the Arabic Australian community, but opportunities for interactions outside that community. There was in fact a multicultural recreation environment at Tom Ugly's Point.

"It's not really any particular cultural background that fishes there - it's unlimited... Young and old, some people even just park their car and watch the other people fishing... So they're not even really there for fishing, they're just there to relax, time out, have a look at what the people are doing... It's a nice place, just even if you just want to relax, have some time out, private time."

Hesham Abdo also talked about fishing as an activity which bound people together across community and cultural divides. At Picnic Point, his family were for many years next door neighbours with an Italian family. Hesham grew up knowing the family well and became particularly close to the father. When the elderly man eventually passed away, Hesham's Muslim family attended the large Catholic funeral and Hesham was one of pallbearers. He affectionately described the many common interests he shared with his neighbour.

"He was a farmer - it was like a farm in his backyard. He had his tomato plants which he'd take care of. Broad beans. Everything. He used to have his own vegetables, and he used to have his own meat as well. Rabbits. He used to breed rabbits... He gave me rabbits and I started breeding rabbits. He had a shed. I was always brought up with them, and their house, and they go fishing. They've bought a motorboat. That was every weekend - always fishing. So we'd go

*fishing. I used to do that. He was Catholic. We're Muslim. But we'd do those things together. He was like --- He was my grandfather. We'd go fishing. I had the honour of carrying the coffin... the honour of carrying his body, and I tell people that --- We've lived together for how long? When my father came from overseas he lived in that house there and we all grew up together. You know, we did our fishing. Did everything. And there were no problems. There was no conflict at all."*¹¹⁰

Walking

Taking long walks in bushland was not common among Arabic Australians we interviewed. They told us that when they go to national parks further away, they go for the purpose of fishing or sightseeing and they prefer to stay in motels. Even children who were born in Australia reported that they have 'trouble' with bushwalking, kayaking and similar activities, because they have not been exposed to them in their own culture. As noted earlier, arduous walking and camping are liable to provide reminders of the harrowing times which some Arabic Australians have experienced as refugees, and most have no interest in revisiting these experiences. Furthermore, in post 9/11 Australia, as the following Community Concerns section suggests, there has been a rising sense of anxiety about walking in secluded bushland parks, no matter how scenic.

Yet this does not apply to everyone and one person we spoke to, Joy Suliman, has had a very different experience. As her Sudanese family settled on the Georges River, Joy grew up familiar with the area, living first at Punchbowl then moving downstream to Lugarno. Being very

interested in bush landscapes, Joy has found the open grassy spaces at Chipping Norton park to be barren, preferring bush areas on river. Nonetheless she recognised how Chipping Norton's facilities and location made such gatherings easier for community members to organize:

"It's on the river... but it's just huge cleared areas of grass... and these huge sheds and barbecues. I guess why they go there is because it's got these sheds with seats so you can have a big group there and the barbecues are free and the toilets are near by and there's lots of parking. But as a beautiful place, it's just never grabbed me... but for that kind of function it's what they look for."

Joy began exploring the bush around her house, which was in sight of the river, as a child - and she remembers her parents could sometimes be persuaded to come along on the bushwalks she and her friends organised:

"Several times in my childhood I remember in school holidays, taking an outing with family friends who would come to our place and then we would arrange for my dad to drop the lunch around in two hours time and we would set off, you know like all the mums and all the kids. Three or four families for this bush walk as an outing, those other families would come to our house to do it. Or, we would tell people with kids, 'come early so we can do the bushwalk'."

Parents would come 'only when we dragged them' - Joy believes her parents chose their current home site at Lugarno because it was close to the river, as their home had been in Khartoum, but that her parents were

apprehensive about the bush around it.

"They liked the idea of being in a bush setting but the bush itself, they don't like. To them, it's almost a dangerous place. They didn't like that I've played there, even now my mum says 'You're not going off walking in the bush on your own are you?' and I'm like, 'I'm in a street basically, I'm always 100 metres from a house, there's no real danger there.' But they see it as being an unknown place."

But Joy has continued walking, despite her parents' concerns, and this has allowed her to find a very different way to see her suburb:

"One of the things about walking along the river in my suburb - and also walking along that walk from Henry Lawson Drive - it gives you a different perspective of how the urban space operates. Because the river goes places that roads don't. The river actually blocks access for roads to get to places, like 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."

*So you see, walking along the river becomes a different access to the area - a different way of seeing that same place. This 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. 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."*¹¹¹

Collecting wild herbs

The unfamiliar vegetation of the Australian bush has troubled some immigrants but others have been enthusiastic about discovering edible plants, particularly those which might be like some they recognised from their homelands. Aqualina has described her mother's enjoyment of walks along the parklands of the Cook's River because it allowed her to talk about the edible plants she could find, some of which are introduced plants often growing on the side of the roads and regarded as weeds by Anglo Australians, like types of dandelions, wild sorrel and wild fennel. These walks are not only an

enjoyable reminder of the productive landscapes of Aqualina's mother's village in the mountains of Lebanon, but an opportunity for her to explain to her daughter the different uses of plants she remembers from her childhood, ways to cook with them and stories about meals and family times in the kitchens and around the dinner tables of her youth.¹¹²

Very similar times are described by Hesham Abdo - photographed here on the verge of a road outside the Georges River National Park. He is showing Violetta Najdova (Office of Environment and Heritage), some of the herbs which women in his family have gathered from



Hesham Abdo pointing out the various edible herbs collected by his family to Violetta Najdova, outside the Georges River National Park. Photo Denis Byrne.

the roads and riversides, sharing with their families their memories of home. These food plants, so often ignored by Anglo Australians, have become a way for Aqualina, Hesham and many other young Arabic Australians to learn about their parents' old homelands but also make their own homeland in Sydney a more meaningful place, because the presence of these edible



Don't let rubbish become part of the scenery

Clean Up Australia Day 2007

Date: Sunday 4th March 2007

Time: 10am-2pm

Meeting Place: Lakemba Mosque

Sunday the 4th of March is Clean Up Australia Day. The Lebanese Muslim Association is asking for your help in making Australia shine.

Volunteers will meet at Lakemba Mosque at 10am. Sites marked for cleaning include Wangee Rd, Lakemba St, Haldon St and Lakemba Train Station. Free BBQ for all participants who take part at day's end. For more information please contact the LMA office on 9750 6833.



Flyer for the MWA Clean Up Australia gathering, 2007.

plants have come to mark out the enjoyable times they have shared with older relations.

Cleaning Up

Another way in which Arabic Australians have used the parks and rivers as a way to explore their new home - and take on a role in its stewardship - has been their growing participation in the various Clean Up programs which have taken place along the river. In particular, Clean Up Australia Day has become one in which many local Arabic Australian groups participate, as this poster shows for the 2007 effort organised by Wafa Zaim, a teacher working with both children and adults at the Muslim Women Association.

Wafa explained that, long before the organised Clean Up days, she had often taken groups of



The Nile Cultural Organisation, during their Clean Up Australia Day activities at Black Muscat Park. Photo Denis Byrne.

children on Sunday outings with some other neighbouring mothers (one was an Australian and another a Lebanese woman) - but as she said, "I was usually the only scarfed lady". They would take bags and clean up the park next to their homes.¹¹³

*"Whenever I have a group of women who are willing to do it, we put our gloves on and go around and pick up the rubbish from around our street, because we believe that we need to do as much as we can for the environment and for the children, for the future children and the future generation."*¹¹⁴

Wafa organised the Muslim participation in Clean Up Australia Day with a particular interest in education. She has used her education background in her roles teaching both adults and children. Wafa believes that Australian education should emphasise conservation and this can also be found in religious teaching.

*"Children should be taught from a very early age the importance of taking care of their world by looking after the environment, our natural resources and by recycling."*¹¹⁵

Other Arabic Australians associations have enthusiastically taken up the Clean Up Australia occasion to put into action their sense of responsibility about being stewards of the parklands. The photograph shows members of the Nile Cultural Organisation, based at Liverpool, taking part in the Clean Up Australia Day event at Black Muscat Park near Chipping Norton in 2009.

Seeking Aboriginal perspectives

Jenan Baroudi was among many of the Arabic Australian interviewees for this project who felt that Aboriginal contemporary and historical park use was absent from park experiences:

"... I want to know how Indigenous communities used and connected to the land... and its significance to the community. I find that when I go to parks and any nature place, I feel that information is lacking unless I go and deliberately search for it... So for me as an Australian, this is a side that's lacking. I want to know more about the history and even current use of parks by Indigenous communities. I'm really interested in the cultural significance, the historical significance."

She wanted to see it foregrounded more, with Aboriginal tours such as those done at Parramatta Park. While the National Parks and Wildlife Service does offer Discovery Tours which include Aboriginal educators and information,

the concerns of well-informed Arabic interviewees suggests that these are not well promoted. Jenan voiced a commonly expressed concern when she continued:

*"I mean I think that is the minimum thing as Australians in terms of respecting that environment that we can at least know its significance to Aboriginal people. And I feel that's missing."*¹¹⁶

Like Jenan Baroudi, many Arabic Australians interviewed for this project reported that they had sought out knowledge about Aboriginal perspectives on the parklands and river. As so many recent immigrants of Arabic background have themselves faced dispossession and dislocation, they are particularly sensitive to the desire of Aboriginal people to be recognised as the traditional owners of their lands and to have protection from government interference in family integrity.

It is also evident, as this photo shows, in the

number of Arabic Australians who participate in Discovery Tours when they are aware of them. This one took place at Oatley Park on the Georges River and was run by National Parks Aboriginal staff in association with Hurstville City Council.



Talk on local Aboriginal heritage delivered to participants (including Jamal Bassam from Hurstville Council) by Aboriginal staff members from NPWS.

PART 5

COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Personal safety in parks after 9/11

There have been lasting impacts on Australian society of the World Trade Centre attack in New York now known as 9/11. These have direct implications for the ways in which public parklands are managed and the strategies for strengthening their role in fostering productive cross-cultural relations. The alternative is that parklands will continue to be - as they were so tragically at the public beach and parklands of Cronulla in December 2005 - the sites of ugly, intensifying polarisation between communities of Australian citizens.

The belief that the 9/11 attacks against America had been conducted by Muslims had rapidly led to the stigmatisation of Muslims all over the western world as violent and threatening to 'western values' - a term which many Anglo Americans and Anglo Australians used to mean 'themselves'. The common origin of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Mandaeism was forgotten and the major influences of Islamic civilisations on the west through science, medicine and literature were ignored. In Australia, Arabic people were all assumed to be Muslims, leading to great anxiety for all people of Arabic background, whether they were Muslims, Christians or Madaeans. Suddenly, Muslim families who had been unquestioned citizens of Australia for decades found themselves being eyed with suspicion and fear.

An awareness among Arabic Australians and among Muslims of this shift in Anglo Australian public opinion was evident soon after 9/11, and it did not go away. Violence against Arabic Australians and against anyone who could be identified as Muslim, flared into international media prominence with the riots by drunken Anglo Australian youths on a Saturday afternoon in December 2005, in the public parkland at the iconic Cronulla beach. This park and beach are just south of Botany Bay and the Georges River, and have been a popular destination for some young Arabic Australians (of all religions) from the densely settled Georges River suburbs. These young people, as will be evident from earlier sections, were from families which had been accustomed to surf and beach life on the Mediterranean shore for generations before they migrated to Australia. The young white attackers at Cronulla abused the Arabic Australians they found in the park, whom they assumed to be Muslim, by telling them they had no right to 'our beach'. This accusation met with amusement from Aboriginal Australians who pointed out that the beach did not belong to Anglos either. The riots were followed over the next few days by sporadic forays of retaliations by groups of angry young Islamic men travelling from the nearby Georges River suburbs. Overall, despite many public apologies and attempts at reconciliation, relations between Arabic and other Australians continued to sour.

In 2007, results of research by Anne Aly and Mark Balnaves (Edith Cowan University) were

made public, confirming the findings of earlier studies nationwide about what it was that made Australians fearful and what they had done to address their fears.¹¹⁷ Their conclusions were deeply disturbing, echoed in the coverage of their report the *Sydney Morning Herald* headline: ***Muslims feel cut off, left isolated by fear.*** Professor Balnaves explained that most Australians experienced generalised fears, but that:

*"For Muslims it wasn't a generalised fear," he said. "Where non-Muslim Australians may have a fear of travel on planes, Muslims had a fear of going out of the house, of going out into the community." He continued: "There is a fear of government, distrust of the media and the [consequent] closure of the [Muslim] community is quite worrying."*¹¹⁸

This rising anxiety was evident among all the Arabic Australians interviewed for our project from 2002 until the present. They ranged from older women, through young men and children, to young women and adult men - all anxious about the rising hostility they were meeting, particularly from Anglo Australians. This spilled over into their confidence in public parklands. For some it meant that they had become more reluctant than before to go to public parks and for others it meant they were only confident in parks if they were in a group or, for Muslims, if they were among other Muslims.

Awareness of changing attitudes

But this was an option which many Muslims did not want to have to choose. Wafa Zaim, the social worker at the Muslim Women Association, was very clear about her preference for mixing with all fellow citizens of this country, rather than to be confined through fear only to places seen as ‘Muslim’.

*“Why do we need to go through the experience if we can keep ourselves safe [by staying apart]. But to keep ourselves safe, it’s a way which we don’t agree with in the first place. **We prefer to be part and parcel of the community and be safe with others, not only by ourselves.**”¹¹⁹*

Muslim women wearing hijab or ‘the scarf’ feel most at risk, but as Wafa pointed out, it is not only them:

“Because of what’s happening now, people do not feel safe. For us as Muslim women, because of the scarf, we are like a target. People can just say yes, she is Muslim, from the way I am dressed. At the moment, it’s actually not mainly people with hijab, it’s people with Middle Eastern appearance, it’s mainly people - not looking Australian, a hundred percent! But I don’t look Australian so how am I going to feel when I am in public places?”

The hostility has encompassed everyone of ‘middle eastern appearance’ including all Arabic Australians whether they are Mandaean, Christians, atheists or of any other conviction. An example is the concern held by Asia Fahad, a Mandaean. She explained in 2006:

“...What happened after December at Cronulla, before even December, I don’t like. I don’t encourage my two sons to go there (to Cronulla), I’m still a little bit worried about their appearances, a little bit ‘Middle-Eastern appearance’ so maybe they’ll be mistaken as Muslims. I just don’t encourage them to go there, sometimes they go to Wollongong to spend a day there but not to go to Cronulla...”¹²⁰

The atmosphere in parks had changed in the direct experience of the people who spoke to us. Wafa Zaim had come to Australia as a young woman, so she had had a long time to observe changes. She explained:

“Maybe if we’re talking about five years ago, the welcoming atmosphere meant that it was totally different to what it is at the moment. Because five years ago you used to go to any public space, any park or common area, and you would not feel that people were staring at you or moving away from the area that you are going to sit at. You would feel that you are part and parcel of the people around you.

I never had any difficulty in the previous years, using any of the parks... it was beautiful. We grew up in an area where everyone is welcome, and so for us it was a great opportunity for everyone to use whatever is available to us. That’s why we took place in your project actually because we did use a lot of these parks and we know our women’s group go on at least a weekly basis, to have a barbecue or to take the children out for a swim or just for canoeing activities or whatever is available in some areas.”¹²¹

Hesham Abdo noted the changes in his own

neighbourhood at Picnic Point where the people he once counted as friends had become distant and hostile since the Cronulla riots and, visibly notable in the Picnic Park vicinity of the National Park, were suddenly displaying Australian flags. Maha Abdo commented on the change in approaches to gatherings of Muslim groups during a child’s welcoming barbeque at the Black Muscat park in 2007. She said they had deliberately organized the celebration for Saturday not Sunday. More people used the area on a Sunday, and she felt they would become suspicious and wary of Arabic people being in big groups. Maha and the others now felt like they needed to watch the kids in the playground much more. She said of other visitors to the park, “They get very ‘this is my space’ - territorial - so it’s harder for Arabic people as a big group to use it as they’d like to. She believed this was very different from the way it had been 20 or so years ago. Back then people would come and talk, and try out their food. She pointed out everyone was welcome to the food on the long tables, it was not separate, but instead was intended to be inclusive and welcoming.”¹²²

Arabic Australians forced to change behaviours

Wafa Zaim has explained how fear of abuse has changed her behaviour:

“...personally I don’t really encourage my own family members to use public transport at the moment. Even though, I am one of the people who before that would encourage everybody to use the train, even the bus, instead of just using cars, that do more harm to the atmosphere around us. So if I am going by car, I’m making

*sure I'm locking the door, closing the window, again using the AC... I always like to have my window open and forget about air conditioning, I like the fresh air to be around me... I prefer to have nature all around, but for now you can't do that, because you don't know what will happen to you... a friend of ours, they stop them in the light, they open the door... and then she went home terrified."*¹²³

For others, even young men, rising anxiety has led to an increased need to be in groups in public settings. As a teenager, for example, Hesham felt uneasy about being in the riverside part of the park where people sometimes 'called out names' at Arabic-speaking people.¹²⁴ He felt it was safer for him to be in a group of friends and to stay in the most public parts of the park – near the car parks, for instance.

Fears of attack are one of the factors which make many Arabic Australians reluctant to venture close to dense bushland. One of the perceived advantages of Chipping Norton over Georges River NP was that it was safer for children – there were 'no hidden spots' so it was easier to keep an eye on them. The large lawned areas in parks like Chipping Norton and Georges River NP were valued by women in the MWA focus group because they said they felt safe there.¹²⁵ Describing what was distinctive about council-managed parks like Chipping Norton, one woman there said:

*"...you find that they're more open, less tree for people to hide behind...you know you can walk there and feel safe. You don't think that someone's going to pounce in front of you any second. There's no hidden areas in public parks."*¹²⁶

In an even more extreme case of changing behaviour, Hesham Abdo described a neighbour to his father near the park in Picnic Point, who found that his children were being bullied and harassed at school. Furthermore, the neighbours complained to him about the presence of Muslim people in the neighbourhood. As a Lebanese Muslim Australian, he found it intolerable and so eventually he sold his house and moved away from the park, to suburbs where he felt closer to family and could therefore avoid harassment.¹²⁷

Anxiety, surveillance and protectiveness

Jenan Baroudi recalled the change in approach of her family at Lake Gillawarna picnics:

"So... it's a bit stressful, I think are people looking at us differently? Why do we have to be more careful than others about... the space that we use and how we use it... And it's called public space after all..."

...at the last family picnic for example... probably only about 6 months ago... now we really worry. If you drop a piece of rubbish which of course before you would pick it up, but now, you don't just pick up your rubbish, but you pick up other people's rubbish because you don't want people to think that (its yours). Already there are so many negative stereotypes, you feel that you watch yourself even more than you already would ...

So now I feel that you do have that fear that you might be discriminated against. I mean you face racism everywhere, but you do feel protective about your female relatives who wear the hijab

*and who might be targeted in the park. So that's how things have changed..."*¹²⁸

There was variation among the women interviewed as to whether they would feel safe by themselves in a park. While most said they would not visit a park alone, one focus group participant said she would sometimes walk in a park alone, that she felt comfortable doing so if 'anything wants to happen to me there are enough people around to know that something's not right'.¹²⁹

Chipping Norton, as discussed earlier, tends to attract Arabic Australian picnickers to a greater extent than Georges River National Park. One woman in the focus group put it this way: 'It's so popular because it's so safe'.¹³⁰ The key factor for her in safety was visibility.

The rising anxiety suggested in all these interviews arose from experience or knowledge of incidents of intimidation to which Arabic Australians - and particularly women in hijab - have been subjected.

Wafa Zaim has described such an incident in 2005:

"I went with the Muslim Women Association on an outing, where we took lots of women to celebrate one of the festivities... we were having lots of fun, having games, activities and so on. We had just packed everything and wanted to go back to the car, due to us having women and children, but when we returned, we found a few of the cars had been scratched with keys and the wheels been slit with knives down to the floor, so it wasn't a real good experience. Also, recently, we just went to have a barbecue as we always do

and we realised that people started moving away from the area where we were seated. So you can feel that the atmosphere is changing altogether from the normal harmonious atmosphere as it used to be when people wanted to be together and communicate all on one level.”¹³¹

PART 6

PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS: SIX KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Six recommendations arose from the interviews for this project, all aimed at making parks more secure and more welcoming for everyone. The possibility of establishing of Community Reference Groups was discussed at length at a focus group of Parks staff and their identification of obstacles to it is included in the discussion of 2 below.

- 1. Make Parks safer for everyone with more on-park staff**
- 2. Establish Community Reference Groups, with specific reference to water quality, equity and conservation and to park opening times**
- 3. Enhance cleanliness in park facilities**
- 4. Recruit culturally diverse on-park staff**
- 5. Recruit community liaison officers from key park user groups**
- 6. Increase on-park presence of Aboriginal people and interpretive facilities about their relationship to Country, the river and parklands.**

Safety for everyone: more park staff presence

It has been a common theme for many different communities that they were seeking greater presence or higher profile presence of park staff, particularly in order to moderate tensions or

defuse conflicts.¹³² This was a common request of many Arabic Australian interviewees, who were not seeking heavy handed or intrusive security staffing but simply a more visible presence of park staff to act as arbiters or witnesses in disputes. This is of particular importance in the context of the findings of the Aly and Balnaves (Edith Cowan University) national survey into community fears, 2007, discussed earlier, which indicated that Muslims have been the subjects of hostility or abuse in public places and have increasingly feared being in public places for this reason.

The focus group of Muslim women brought together by the Muslim Women Association for our project discussed this question at length and had done so before. Their proposal was carefully thought out and it is explained here by Wafa Zaim, who was translating:

Some of the women said: *"We would love to see more authority people around us if we want to go and use a public places like parks and what have you. Why can't we have two guards stay in the park so if we need help or of we need to relate back to them and report something, at least we'd have hands on assistance at the park or at the public place?"*

This question is commonly asked of the Muslim Women Association, to say that we feel better if there is people around us who are in authority, like a patrol car, a police car. It will make the

people in the area feel a bit safe, because they can see the police is around if people need them. So it's the same with the safety issue with the public space, if people can have two or three officers in the park during the operation hours, that will give the people the feeling of safety, to feel there is someone there who can help us if we need help.

*Women at the MWA have experienced help from police and security people before - that's why they're asking for it in the public places or in a park. One woman said they had had some harassment by teenagers in a park and the parks officer (who was there to lock up) was their witness in what took place and he even stopped the teenagers. This woman had her husband and her other kids with her, she felt that they responded better to a person with authority. So that's why she came to the MWA with the idea. She thought, 'Well if we could have that all day long, I don't think any of us should feel threatened or not feeling safe in our place like that.'*¹³³

In the continuing discussion, it became clear that in this example, the woman and her family had decided that if the men in the family had tried to intervene to calm the situation down, their actions would have been interpreted as a challenge by the harassing teenagers, thereby leading to worse abuse. So it was far safer to call in an Anglo Australian 'authority' to be a witness and to enforce National Park regulations which

restrained abusive behaviour.

Wafa Zaim acknowledged the fear that many Muslim women in Australia now feel about their safety in public space. But she was determined not to allow that fear to dominate her experience of national parks.

*"...if you ask me, I would have said I love to go to open ground places with lots of natural sites, with lots of trees and beautiful scenery so I can sit and relax, and don't have to be worried about who's going to be behind the trees, because we're supposed to have a safe environment, especially if it's a national park. We are paying entry fees, so the guard should be there to make us feel in a safe atmosphere."*¹³⁴

Establish Community Reference Groups

Establishment of community reference groups would assist Park Managers by input from high park users.

Community Reference Groups from the main cultural groups in local government areas already provide valuable advice and feedback to Local Councils. In some cases, such as Bankstown City Council, the Community Reference groups have been able to contribute innovative and constructive assistance to produce activities and displays, such as Cross Currents, which have drawn key communities into more participation in parks and on the riverbank.

In focus groups of National Parks and Wildlife Service on-park staff, convened for our project,

some staff reported that they experienced friction with young Arabic Australian park users. In such a context, access to a series of Community Reference Groups drawn from the groups who are highest frequency park users could be of critical importance in anticipating conflict and/or reconciling conflicting parties. In relation to the Arabic Australian communities, there are well organised and highly respected community groups who have offered to assist in establishing such a Community Reference Group, such as the United Muslim Women Association. To date, however, they have not been called upon to do so. While NPWS park managers occasionally have speakers from one community or another,¹³⁵ this is not a substitute for the continuous advice which a Reference Group could offer in developing practical strategies and in contributing to park Plans of Management to anticipate and minimise future conflicts.

This research demonstrates that there are particular issues in which the members of each cultural group have a high interest and consequently expertise which could contribute to management approaches. Two such areas of interest and expertise which Arabic Community Reference Groups, were they to be established, could focus on would be the special role of water and the issue of night-time opening of parks for family and community cultural events.

Specific issues for Community Reference contributions from Arabic Australians

Water

Both Muslim and Mandaean communities draw from cultural and religious traditions which have

a prominent, everyday practical significance for water.

Mandaeans, in practising full immersion baptisms frequently, have paid much attention to water quality in the various rivers around Sydney. Some have taken up employment in water authorities to put their interest to socially productive work. Others have made representations to local government about the need for improving river water quality and community-driven strategies to do so. The river is a particular focus of Mandaean concern and their community is eager to be consulted about strategies to enhance the river's quality and accessibility.

With Islam requiring ablutions before prayer, a number of times each day, there is a great deal of religious teaching about water quality but also about the need to share and conserve water. Water quality, equity and conservation are precisely the issues which are of concern to Catchment Management Authorities and land and water managers throughout Australia. While Muslims have expressed concerns about river water quality, they are also deeply concerned about the provision of accessible clean and well-contained water for ritual ablutions. They seek water points located outside toilet blocks and ones which are well serviced so they do not leak and are paved, so as not to leave muddy puddles when used. Their interests are to have clean, fresh, well-conserved water in positions which are available to all park users, with no waste and without making competition for scarce resources more acute.

The high level of attention to water brought by Arabic Australians - both Mandaean and Muslim -

could be a valuable contribution towards improving water quality, equity and conservation in what is after all the driest continent and in cities where water resources are highly problematic.

A further issue which would be enhanced by advice from Arabic communities and the consequent increase in support from those communities would be in improving water quality for fishing and similar recreational activities. As suggested at the outset, there is a strong river and maritime history for Lebanese, Palestinian and Egyptian immigrants and a desire not only to seek out familiar pastimes but to use known skills like fishing to explore and bond with the environments of their new homeland. Fishing is an important social and individual recreational activity among Arabic Australian men as well as some Arabic Australian women. A number of interviewees indicated their awareness of and interest in recent approaches like catch-and-release as strategies for conservation. Many interviewees linked improvements in river quality with improvements in the numbers and health of fish species. Given these strong incentives to support improvements in river quality, there exists an opportunity to foster mutual communication and collaboration between all communities to achieve environmental benefits for all.¹³⁶

Evening opening for family and community use, particularly for *iftar* at Ramadan

Muslim and Mandaean interviewees all commented on the enjoyment of spending evenings in parklands, especially close to rivers. The Mandaeans who spoke with us were from urban backgrounds, and they suggested that the

commercial possibilities of having cafes, tea shops and restaurants in riverside settings might foster improving river water quality.

The Muslim community is particularly interested, as all interviewees have stressed, in the national parks and other gated parks staying open after sunset during the 30 days of Ramadan. They suggested parks could remain open in specific areas with good lighting so that *iftar*, the daily breaking of the fast at sunset, could be shared with family and friends in natural settings.

Both these issues - water and evening opening - could be productively considered in consultation with and support from Community Reference Groups if they were actively involved in decision-making.

Obstacles and Solutions identified by Park Managers

Park managers, in a separate focus group session in 2007, explained they had considered and at times tried to establish such community groups, but that in their experience, such groups 'fell over' very rapidly. However they went on to explain that they had been able to have little input because they felt overwhelmed by their maintenance workload, including not only 'looking after the bush' but 'cleaning toilets':

*"...we have no increased allocation in funding to the field staff even though we have a whole lot more toilets to clean. We have no additional rangers even though we've doubled our land mass in this last 10 years, we have no extra staff. This agency doesn't have a whole lot of money."*¹³⁷

In particular, they had had no additional staff to manage community consultation or to manage volunteer programs which require sustained supervision and education.

*"...people think it's a great idea to get volunteers to come in and do the work, but they have to be taught. They have to be supervised. They have to be gathered up. They have to get together. We actually have to invent work that they can do because there's a lot of what we do that they can't do without specialist skills. So we're inventing more work. By the end of it you think, I'll just do my own job myself. This is too hard. It's incredibly difficult to manage and operate volunteer programs. I know it sounds like such a goer. But God you're making me tired just mentioning it."*¹³⁸

Underlying these other problems, however, the staff from a number of south western and western Sydney parks admitted that they felt awkward approaching and sustaining contact with people from ethnic groups different to their own. A number of on-park staff made comments about establishing community reference groups and increased ethnic participation such as:

Staff A: We're having trouble reaching cultures...

Staff B: We don't know how to approach people.

Staff C: We've only reached out to the people who it's easy for us to reach out to which are Anglo Saxons.

Staff B: You know, people aren't homogenous are they. So you can't get six Arab-speaking people in the room and assume you're speaking to the Arab community. So it's not always that helpful.

The ones you get to are the ones who are most facilitated to speak to you. So there are probably least like some other sectors of the Arab-speaking community. It wouldn't hurt (to establish a community reference group), but it would be very very hard with any ethnic community that we tried to get a representative body. I'm not saying it's not worth trying, but I guess because it's such a challenge for us, and because there's so many other options for what we fill our day with, that that keeps getting, you know, dropping off.¹³⁹

The concerns of park managers repeatedly focussed on their limited staff, limited skills in appropriate languages and limited confidence in identifying and communicating with non-Ango cultures in order to reach out to and maintain communication with community members or groups. Each of these problems would undoubtedly be addressed by an increase in community input, in the form of Community Advisory or Reference groups but, in a circular argument, limited resources block the steps which could resolve the problems. More direct steps to assist park staff are those covered in recommendations 4 and 5, namely the recruitment of on-park staff from communities who form major segments of the park's user groups in any area and the recruitment of community liaison officers to work with on-park staff to build stronger relationships with the ethnic communities among the park's user groups.

Enhance cleanliness in park facilities

Associated with the concern of Arabic Australians about water cleanliness, availability,

equity and conservation, many interviewees proposed strategies for achieving cleaner facilities in parks. Their goals were always to make parks more welcoming and comforting for all, including families (as Mahmoud Dehn the young fisherman suggested – see above). The women in the Muslim focus group were particularly concerned that toilets be clean and spoke approvingly of the self-cleaning facilities in Paul Keating Park in Bankstown. Young people in the Arabic Saturday School were just as concerned about clean facilities as the older members of their communities.¹⁴⁰ They asked for external (water-saving) taps for clean and accessible water, set well away from toilet blocks. They also asked for self-cleaning toilets, again with water-saving washing facilities,¹⁴¹ and for the provision of shaded, washable and easily cleaned tables and benches.¹⁴²

Their suggestions overall were very likely to find enthusiastic support from other cultural groups and particularly from mothers with young children from all sectors of the community.

Prioritise recruitment of culturally diverse on-park staff

There is an urgent need to recruit on-park staff from more diverse cultural backgrounds. A focus group with NPWS staff demonstrated the structural constraints which lead to the monocultural composition of the very small numbers of staff employed for on-park duty. Cultural diversity targets set by State Government are met in overall NPWS staff numbers but the vast majority of NESB staff are in administrative roles, in off-park positions. So the very culturally diverse park users in the Georges River parks

see no-one like themselves in on-park roles.¹⁴³

It must be stressed that the Arabic Australians who asked for a higher visibility of on-park authorities to act to moderate conflicts were NOT asking for park staff from their own national or cultural group. Instead they wanted more staff from any national background but who were invested with the authority of the park management body in order to symbolise - and if necessary to enforce - public order and park regulations.

However, there was a common view among most Arabic Australian interviewees that there were few if any Arabic background park staff nor were there many instances of the translation of signage or other interpretive material into Arabic or, indeed, most other non-English languages.

Changing the park staffing profile requires long-term strategy as well as short term, stopgap measures. Were Community Reference Groups to be established they would enable greater awareness of park management careers and training opportunities among Arabic Australian youth and thus very likely increase the flow of recruits into appropriate training.

In the meantime, cultural awareness training could be more systematically developed in consultation with BOTH Community Reference Groups AND with existing Park Managers in order to meet the needs and interests of both groups.

Recruit community liaison officers from key park user groups

Community liaison officers for State and Local Government parks could be appointed and trained in a much shorter time-frame than it would take to appoint and train NPWS park rangers. Such community liaison officers would be selected from some of the key cultural groups who use parks most in any one area. They could work productively at the interface between park users, community organisations, on-park staff and park management. The presence of Community Reference groups would enable sound selection and an effective flow of continuing advice into the parks service. In the other direction, the engagement of community liaison officers with park managers and staff would enable a greater flow of knowledge of park staff concerns and needs to return to

communities, maximising ongoing communication at all levels. These Community Liaison officers could be involved in cultural awareness training of existing and incoming on-park staff - and like the bilingual educators, whose work is a useful model for this community liaison role, this would broaden the capacity of community workers to address needs across cultural boundaries.

Increase on-park presence of Aboriginal people and interpretive facilities about their relationship to Country, the river, and the parklands.

A frequently proposed recommendation from all the interviewees was to increase their access to Aboriginal perspectives on the environment of parks and rivers. There was a strong interest in

learning about Aboriginal history and about Aboriginal use of the land for productive food harvesting as well as the major creation narratives of Aboriginal tradition. Many Arabic Australians who spoke to us were acutely aware of their ambivalent role as lately-arrived immigrants, adding to the processes of dispossession which had stripped Aboriginal people of ownership of their land. So for reasons of interest and of respect, there was a hope that Park Managers would be able to increase the presence of Aboriginal people themselves in on-park staffing and in tours, such as Discovery Tours like those run by National Parks or other events tailored for the communities in the area, such as Operation Blue Tongue, run by the OEH Bilingual Educators program and the Ethnic Communities Council.¹⁴⁴

PART 6

CONCLUSION

These proposals are aimed at taking up the opportunity offered by the high community interest in and commitment to parks shown by Arabic Australian communities in their use of parks and natural spaces on the Georges River. They are active users of all the parks in the area despite living in the most distant parts of each LGA along the river. They bring a fund of

knowledge about nature and high motivations to care for natural surroundings. Communities are already making a range of innovative and creative attempts to take part in park and river care activities.

Park Management bodies have an opportunity to nurture a body of public opinion which is

strongly committed to parks and their care. To realise this opportunity, existing community knowledge and interest needs to be recognised, appreciated and incorporated into management strategies.

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- ⁵ ABS 2006 Census; SMH, 22 Apr 2011
- ⁶ Senior Park manager, DECCW Focus Group: On-park staff and park managers, 27 Nov 2007, Hurstville.
- ⁷ DECCW *Migrant Communities and the Environment*, 1996
- ⁸ DECC *Who Cares about the Environment?* 2004, p67
- ⁹ Burnley, 1991, p71
- ¹⁰ Batrouney 2002: 39-40.
- ¹¹ Interview with Hesham Abdo 21 July 2006
- ¹² ABS, 2006 Census.
- ¹³ SMH, 'Leap of Faith', 22 Apr 2011, citing 2006 Census figures.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2006 Census.
- ¹⁶ Mandaean Focus Group, Mandaean Culture Club, 30 Apr 2006.
- ¹⁷ Abderrahman 2000: 513.
- ¹⁸ Amery 1998.
- ¹⁹ Amery 2001: 485.
- ²⁰ Amery 1998, 2001; Naser *et al.* 2001; Wescoat 1995.
- ²¹ Rice 2006: 373-390; Abderrahman, p. 513.
- ²² Ibn Sina (Avicenna), *Le livre des directives et remarques*, trans. A.-M. Goichon (Beirut: Commission internationale pour la traduction des chefs-d'oeuvre, 1951) p302, cited by Petruccioli.
- ²³ Attilio Petruccioli 2003: 499.
- ²⁴ Quran, verse 44: 45-57; Harrison 2008: 140.
- ²⁵ Petruccioli 2003: 504-506.
- ²⁶ Mandaean Community in Australia: *Yardna: living water: a Mandaean website* 2005 [accessed 2005]. <http://www.yardna.org>.
- ²⁷ Karim Jari, Mandaean Focus Group, Mandaean Culture Club, 30 Apr 2006.
- ²⁸ Quotes from United States Muslims about preparations for Ramadan, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/august-28-2009/ramadan-is-here/4093>.
- ²⁹ Gari 2006: 213-228.
- ³⁰ Foltz 2006: 214.
- ³¹ Rob Buchanan: 'Up in the Air', *Outside*, January 2004. Online magazine accessed 26 Mar 2010. http://outside.away.com/outside/features/200401/200401_up_in_air_1.html.
- ³² Hesham Abdo, 11 July 2006
- ³³ Aqualina interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 24 Jan 2007.
- ³⁴ Mandaean Focus Group, Mandaean Culture Club, 30 Apr 2006.
- ³⁵ Joy Suliman interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 5 Nov 2003
- ³⁶ Interview with Hesham Abdo 21 July 2006.
- ³⁷ Interview with Hesham Abdo 21 July 2006.
- ³⁸ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 30 June 2007
- ³⁹ See for instance, McElwee 2001, 2006.
- ⁴⁰ Irani and Johnson 2000.
- ⁴¹ See Pappé 2006: 227-228.
- ⁴² Alon Tal 2002: 69-112, 327-366. Tal reviews the debates and assesses the impacts on both Arab Israelis and on Palestinians in refugee camps outside Israel but within the region. For an Arabic voice, see Khalidi (1997: 115, 188, 145, n65) and for an Israeli dissident, see Pappe (2006).
- ⁴³ Masri, 1999: 120; Kingston 2001.
- ⁴⁴ This discussion is based on Masri 1997, 1999; and Darwish *et al.* 2009.
- ⁴⁵ Masri 1999: 131.
- ⁴⁶ Al Khalil 1992.
- ⁴⁷ Darwish *et al.*, 2009, *passim*.
- ⁴⁸ Masri 1997.
- ⁴⁹ Darwish *et al.*, 2009, *passim*.
- ⁵⁰ Amery 1993.
- ⁵¹ Masri, 1997; 1999.
- ⁵² Platt 2008; Shehadeh 2007; Buchanan, 2004.
- ⁵³ Cameron 2007.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁵ Hage 2002: 12.
- ⁵⁶ Gari, 2006: 221.
- ⁵⁷ Gari, 2006; Llewellyn, Othman A. 2000; Haq 2003: 144; Llewellyn 2003. Llewellyn is an American born Saudi who grew up in the United States and fondly recalls excursions in National Parks there. He has been a prolific advocate for the relevance of *hima* in contemporary conservation management.
- ⁵⁸ Kilani *et al.* 2007: 2-10.
- ⁵⁹ Ministry for the Environment, Lebanon, 2006: *Protected Areas in Lebanon*. Announcement of proposed new conservation categories for Lebanese protected and conservation areas: <http://193.227.177.166/MOEAPP/ProtectedAreas/sispamcatsystem.htm>, Last accessed 20 April 2010.
- ⁶⁰ Ministry for the Environment: <http://193.227.177.166/MOEAPP/ProtectedAreas/categories.htm>, accessed April 2010.
- ⁶¹ Current research conducted by Professor Ghassan Hage, University of Melbourne, in relation to Australia and Lebanon, and Professor Anton Escher, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, in relation to Lebanon and Germany.

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- ⁶² Many interviewees referred to this issue, and the Australian refusal to recognise most international qualifications without expensive retraining and certification is well known. Among our interviews, see for example Aqualina, interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 24 Jan 2007.
- ⁶³ The timing of Ramadan is determined by the phases of the moon, like Easter, and so it falls at different times of the year, lasting around 30 days. In 2009 it was from August 21st till September 19th, in 2010 from August 11 till September 8. In 2011 it falls 1 August to on or around 29 August. In 2012 it runs from July 20 until roughly 18 August.
- ⁶⁴ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ⁶⁵ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 08 July 2002.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 29 May 2001.
- ⁶⁹ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 08 July 2002.
- ⁷⁰ Goodall, Heather, Allison Cadzow, Denis Byrne, 2010: 'Mangroves, garbage and fishing: everyday ecology on an industrial city river', in *Cities Nature Justice, Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol 5, no. 1, pp 52-83.
- ⁷¹ Mandaean focus group, Heather Goodall and Amad Mtashar interviewing, 30 Apr 2006.
- ⁷² Mandaean baptisms Nepean River, 20 Mar 2005.
- ⁷³ Mandaean Focus Group, 30 Apr 2006.
- ⁷⁴ ABC TV, *Compass*, 17 July 2011, features extensive interviews with Dr Amad Mtashar, Asia Farad, Karim Jari and their adult children about their decision to move the baptismal events from the rivers to the constructed Mendhi at Liverpool.
- ⁷⁵ Joy Suliman, interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 5 Nov 2003
- ⁷⁶ Arabic speaking members of DECC bilingual educators group, Waterloo, 4 Mar 2008 .
- ⁷⁷ Muslim teenagers, Saturday morning school focus group, Jo Kijas, 31 Aug 2002.
- ⁷⁸ Mariam Ismail, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ Jenan Baroudi, interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 8 Jan 2004.
- ⁸¹ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ⁸² Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ⁸³ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ⁸⁴ Bankstown City Muslim Youth Advisory Focus Group, notes by Stephen Gapps 27 Oct 2003.
- ⁸⁵ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 7 July 2006.
- ⁸⁶ Jenan Baroudi, interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 8 Jan 2004.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Karim Jari and Kabil Al Suhairy, Heather Goodall and Amad Mtashar interviewing.
- ⁸⁸ Dr Amad Mtashar, speaking on ABC TV, *Compass*, 17 July 2011.
- ⁸⁹ As one example among many, see Aqualina interview with Allison Cadzow, 24 Jan 2007
- ⁹⁰ Participant, Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim translating, 4 July 2002.
- ⁹¹ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 20 Dec 2005
- ⁹² Muslim children's Saturday morning school focus group, Jo Kijas, 31 Aug 2002.
- ⁹³ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ⁹⁴ Muslim children's Saturday morning school focus group, Jo Kijas, 31 Aug 2002.
- ⁹⁵ Muslim children's Saturday morning school focus group, Jo Kijas, 31 Aug 2002.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁷ Hesham Abdo, Saltpan Creek field work, Denis Byrne, 2007.
- ⁹⁸ Coung Ngyuyen, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 26 Aug 2002.
- ⁹⁹ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 7 July 2006.
- ¹⁰⁰ Mariam Ismail, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰² Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 19 July 2001.
- ¹⁰³ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁵ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 11 July 2006.
- ¹⁰⁶ Hesham Abdo, Saltpan Creek, Field work, Denis Byrne, 2007.
- ¹⁰⁷ Karim Jari, Mandaean focus group, 30 Apr 2006.
- ¹⁰⁸ Karim Jari and others, notes from Mandaean Baptism, Tench Reserve Regentville, 20 Mar 2005.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mahmoud Dehn, interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 20 Nov 2003.
- ¹¹⁰ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 11 July 2006.
- ¹¹¹ Joy Suliman, interviewed by Stephen Gapps 5 Nov 2003.
- ¹¹² Aqualina, interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 24 Jan 2007.
- ¹¹³ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 29 May 2001.
- ¹¹⁴ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 20 Dec 2005.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* See poster for event organised in 2007 by Wafa, with volunteers asked to gather at Lakemba Mosque.
- ¹¹⁶ Jenan Baroudi, interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 8 Jan 2004.
- ¹¹⁷ Jakubowicz, and Browning, 2004; Whitten and Thompson, 2005.
- ¹¹⁸ Aly and Balnaves, cited in Connie Levett *SMH*, 20 Aug 2007.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁰ Asia Farad, Mandaean focus group, notes, Heather Goodall 30 Apr 2006.
- ¹²¹ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 20 Dec 2005.
- ¹²² Maha Abdo, Black Muscat Park, 30 June 2007, informal interview with Allison Cadzow.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁴ Hesham Abdo, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ¹²⁵ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ¹²⁶ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ¹²⁷ Hesham Abdo, Interviewed by Heather Goodall, 7 July 2006.

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- ¹²⁸ Jenan Baroudi, Interviewed by Stephen Gapps, 8 Jan 2004.
- ¹²⁹ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ¹³⁰ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ¹³¹ Wafa Zaim, interviewed by Heather Goodall, 20 Dec 2005.
- ¹³² *Who Cares about the Environment?* Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Report, 2004 p67.
- ¹³³ Muslim Women's Association focus group, interviewers Heather Goodall, Jo Kijas and Wafa Zaim, 4 July 2002.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid.
- ¹³⁵ Claire Farrugia, 2011.
- ¹³⁶ Sham in Berry Young Muslim men focus group interviewed by Hesham Abdo, 16 February 2007.
- ¹³⁷ Focus Group organised by Violeta Najdova, DECCW, 27 Nov 2007, with DECCW on-Park staff.
- ¹³⁸ Ibid.
- ¹³⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁰ Muslim teenagers, Saturday morning school focus group, Jo Kijas, 31 Aug 2002.
- ¹⁴¹ Mariam Ismail, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 8 July 2002.
- ¹⁴² Hesham Abdo at Black Muscat Park, discussion with Allison Cadzow and Denis Byrne, 30 June 2007.
- ¹⁴³ Focus Groups organised by Violeta Najdova, DECCW, 27 Nov 2007 (DECCW on-Park staff); 28 Nov 2007, (DECCW administration and managerial staff and educators); 4 Mar 2008 (Ethnic Communities Council and bilingual educators).
- ¹⁴⁴ Leandro Mendes, 2010, pp193-203.