

REMAKING THE PLACES OF BELONGING: ARABIC IMMIGRANTS
AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT ALONG SYDNEY'S GEORGES
RIVER

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a study which has compared the environmental knowledges and practices which immigrants bring from their homelands with their experiences in their new homes. Arabic immigrants have come to Australia in significant numbers since WW2, from a range of countries and religions, including Christians and Muslims from Lebanon, Palestine and Syria and Mandaean from Iraq. Many have settled in the industrial, working class suburbs along the northern bank of the Georges River, running through Sydney. These communities have sought out natural spaces in an overcrowded and politically-charged atmosphere. In particular, they have been frequent users of a series of parklands (including a National Park) along the river as well as the river itself for fishing, relaxation, jet ski and other power recreation. In the Georges River, Arabic Australians have drawn on their homeland environmental cultural knowledge and experiences but the expression of their expectations and strategies for relating to places has been strongly inflected by local environments and socio-political tensions. These immigrants can be seen to be 'making' new 'places' as they build attachment to their

new homes by drawing on origin homeland environmental cultural knowledges and experiences in the constrained conditions of contemporary life.

KEY WORDS: Arabic, Australian, Parklands, Environment, Culture.

Introduction

Whatever the circumstances of their travel, people who migrate grieve for their losses. Not only do they lose regular contacts with relations and friends, but they lose physical environments with which they were familiar and in which they often felt comfortable. This grief - over losing places as well as people – is experienced for many years, no less for being something which is not anticipated and seldom talked about (Mendes, 2010).

Such 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 doing everyday things, familiar from home, like fishing or going to the beach, in the new setting. But memories may also be obstructions to immigrants venturing out into the landscape, as they continue to remember experiences of warfare, danger or persecution. Most migrants today have 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 has been a way of refreshing but also of testing these memories from earlier lives.

This paper reports on one aspect of an investigation into how cultural difference shapes environmental relationships. In the Georges River project, we have studied an area in urban Sydney, Australia, where a major river flows through working class, industrial suburbs. Indigenous, Anglo-Irish, Vietnamese and Arabic Australians, who are all resident nearby, have been interviewed to learn how they understand and use the river and its surrounding parklands – and how they interact with each other in these natural settings. (Byrne, Goodall, Cadzow, 2012; Goodall, Byrne, Cadzow, 2011; Cadzow, Byrne, Goodall, 2011; Goodall, Cadzow, Byrne, Wearing, 2009) Indigenous people here are not international immigrants, but many have migrated from rural areas to the city. (Goodall, Cadzow, 2009) The Anglo-Irish are largely descended from early British settlers – and see themselves as ‘natives’. (Goodall, Cadzow, 2010) Each of the two recently immigrant groups, the Vietnamese and the Arabic communities, are internally complex, with a shared language – Vietnamese in one case and Arabic in the other – but still from many different places of origin, different religions and differing reasons for migration. (Cadzow *et al*, 2011; Goodall *et al*, 2011) Between 2002 and

2009, the project team conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with around 30 people in each group, both as individuals and in focus groups, as well as carrying out participant observations and archival research. This paper will focus on the Arabic Australians of the Georges River, looking first at what they bring to the river by way of beliefs, experiences and expectations and then at what they actually experience as they try to use the parklands and river in the ways they want.

By the time it reaches the suburbs of Sydney, the Georges River has become an estuary where fresh waters from the coastal ranges mix with the saline, tidal waters of the river's destination, Botany Bay, then flow past it to the Pacific Ocean. Over millennia, the river had shaped this area, cutting steep gorges into the sandstone cliffs and leaving marshy wetlands and stony beaches all down its lower length. When the British arrived in 1788, they expected any river land to be valuable for cropping or commerce, and so all Georges River waterfront land was rapidly granted away as private property. But it was quickly discovered that the sandy soil, swamps and stony creeks could not be farmed and so the river banks remained undeveloped, as de facto commons, with some eventually reverting to public ownership as parkland. After WW2, Australia began a push to industrialise, massively increasing immigration to provide workers for the new factories. Much of this industrial development took place along the Georges River in Sydney, with the new factories located on some of the wide 'waste' lands along the river. The government turned its old army barracks there into migrant worker hostels, dumping thousands of incoming migrants there from 1945 onwards to work in the factories. (Coward, 1988; Spearritt, 1978; Butlin, 1976; Winston, 1957)

As people left the hostels they settled nearby, in ethnically-focussed clusters which remained as long as the communities continued to be economically marginal. As individuals became more affluent, many of them moved to more middle class suburbs, but their places in the migrant worker hostels would soon be filled by a new wave of immigrants. This happened with the arrival of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants after the end of the war in 1975 and then with the Arabic immigrants fleeing occupation and then civil war in the Middle East in the 1980s. This has left these Georges River suburbs a patchwork of ethnic diversity in an area which is still overcrowded and economically insecure. So it also has high levels of conflict, often expressed in hostilities over the use of public space, particularly over the iconic landscapes which are used to symbolize the landscape, like the ocean beaches such as Cronulla near Botany Bay or the gum tree forests and wildflowers of the Georges River

National Park, the collective name for the string of remaining parklands along the river. These parklands are now embedded right in the heart of the most culturally-diverse population in the city, but they are still run by State and Local government park managerial staff who continue to be predominantly science-trained Anglo Australians. (Project Focus Groups, park management staff 27, 28 Nov 2007).

Migrancy involves a continuing relationship, in memory and day-to-day connections, with home countries as well as with new homelands. Our study confirms and adds to an extensive literature which describes how migrants can be ‘in two places at once’. For most recent migrants interviewed, the ‘old country’ maintains a vivid presence in their imaginations, their conversations and their plans. But the project has also demonstrated that migrants draw on what they know from their home country to explore and test out their new homes, seeking not to recreate a past home but to understand better the new and different place to which they have come. Localities may be said to be mobile, ‘places travel with the peoples through whom they are constituted’. (Raffles 1999:324) This is not to suggest that people carry around with them two quite separate landscapes, rather that facets of the two – the homeland and the new land – are constantly appearing, juxtaposing, and even momentarily merging in their consciousness. (Byrne *et al*, 2012)

While the phenomenon of migration is an ancient one, a more recent occurrence is the way many modern nations encourage those who have moved overseas to continue to regard themselves as citizens of the old ‘homeland’. Members of the diaspora are welcomed back on visits and encouraged to take part in the cultural life and heritage of their former home. (Coles and Timothy 20034:11) The nation in this sense has been de-territorialised – its borders being conceptually extended to embrace the members of its diaspora.

Geographers like Doreen Massey and anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai have been notable for their focus on the way that these transnational ‘worlds’ are not just conceptual but are ‘real’ spaces that people live in. Massey’s concept of ‘translocality’ is significant here. (Massey 1994; Appadurai 1996) The proximity of the migrant homeland is reinforced through electronic media and the internet as it is also by frequent return trips. Batrouney notes there were as many of 20,000 short term visits from Australia to Lebanon in 1993/94.

(2002:61) Ghassan Hage makes the point that the act of watching, reading, or listening to the news from Lebanon is never a matter of entertainment for the Lebanese he knows in Sydney. Rather, they feel connected to and ‘implicated’ in what is happening over there: ‘News items are subjects of discussion and sometimes of intense arguments and operate as classical triggers of nostalgic feelings’. (Hage 2002:194)

Migrants in Australia can be thought of as part of the present and emerging future of their homeland cultures, rather than as cultural cast-aways. This does not mean they are not simultaneously contributing to the present and future of Australia; it means that, like all of us, they are part of the 21st century world of late modernity in which people are wired simultaneously to multiple (including virtual) networks, some local, some global. (Byrne et al, 2011)

Arabic Australians today are a large proportion of the population in south west Sydney, concentrated in the suburbs along the northern side of the Georges River.

There was a trickle of immigrants from the Arab world from the earliest times of British settlement in 1788, coming as traders in goods and camels as well as travelling for various kinds of paid employment. Often called ‘Syrians’ they in fact came from a range of different countries and colonies in the Middle East, and brought with them different faiths, including Christianity and Islam. Most Arabic Australians, however, have arrived since World War 2, when the stringent entry restrictions of the 1901 White Australia policy began to be relaxed to meet labour shortages as the country industrialised. Migrants who arrived then 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. (Batrouney and Batrouney, 1985; Batrouney 2002; 2006; Hage 2002)

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. 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 – Christian and Islamic - 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. (Batrouney 2006; Hage 2002)

As this background snapshot shows, Arabic Australians who have been born overseas come from many countries, hold different faiths and bring many different experiences with them. There are now perhaps even more Arabic Australians who have been born and grown up in Australia than born overseas. In the suburb of 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. Other Arabic Australian households speak predominantly English in the home, yet sustain their identity with the Arabic Australian community. 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. (ABS, Census 2006)

Arabic Australians and Nature

Arabic Australians have been visibly numerous and frequent users of the parks along the Georges River 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 and other riverside parks as well as public beach parks such as that at Cronulla. This is the only beach side suburb accessible by rail line from south-west Sydney and so it can be reached with less resources and without private motor vehicles.

Misunderstandings about what immigrants bring from their country of origin has contributed

to friction. Some National 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.” (Project Focus Group, park management staff 27 Nov 2007)

Our research has shown that such assumptions are not the reality. Finding out more about Arabic environmental philosophies and practices may allow all Australians to better recognise the many roles Arabic Australians do and can play.

What do arabic immigrants bring?

1. Homelands.

Non-Arabic Australians often assume that Arabic migrants all come from arid desert lands, but 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 fertile 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 Christians or Muslims or the most recently arrived, the Mandaean (followers of John the Baptist, most of whom have come from Iraq and arrived since 1990) 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.

2. Traditions and cultural knowledge.

Faith & nature.

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. (de Chatel, 2005) Three of these faiths are present along the Georges River - Mandaeanism, Christianity and Islam. For Islam and Mandaeanism, both of which have a large following among Arabic-background people living today on the Georges River, water has a major everyday, practical role which means that religious conventions about water quality and water management are well known and often discussed.

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'. (Petruccioli 2003:302) 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."
(Petruccioli 2003:499)

Gardens are an important element of such transformations. In Islam, not only highly sculpted gardens but also more 'natural' parks are considered to be representations of Paradise, expressing the joys and beauty of life in the hereafter. (Qur'an, verse 44:45-57; Harrison 2008:140; Petruccioli, 2003:504-506).

Muslim environmentalists have found precedents for water conservation in the Qur'an 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 water and for the idea of human responsible stewardship, rather than ownership, of water. (Abderrahman, 2000:513; Amery, 1998) 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'. (Amery, 2001:485) Practicing Muslims use water in the ablutions which are

necessary before prayers, and for devout Muslims this will be five times daily. Furthermore, the Qur'an advocates the avoidance of any wastage, particularly of water, but overall the duty of wise usage of all resources. (Amery, 1998, 200; Naser *et al*, 2001; Wescoat, 1995; Rice, 2006: 373-390; Abderrahman, 2000:513).

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. (Mandaean Community, 2005)

3. Social traditions and natural spaces.

There are many family and community celebrations and rituals which by choice are 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, at the most personal level, these include celebrations such as the welcoming and naming of newborn children. At a broader social level they include the sharing of food by the family and community 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. (Project interviews)

For Mandaeans, the frequent baptisms are social as well as religious occasions. These are events when people of 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.

The Arab world and conservation: *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 known via the institution of the *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. (Kilani, Serhal, Llewellyn, 2007)

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, which was often defined as ensuring support for the economically vulnerable. Over the centuries, *himas* (protected areas) and *haraams* (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 worshiping Muslims in, for example, many different parts of the Indian Ocean. *Hima* lands therefore involved not only the local protection of lands, but were also nodes in a network of Muslims which stretched from southern Africa to Indonesia, linking piety, travel, social justice and environment. (Gari, 2006:213-228) 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. (Foltz, 2006:214)

The existence of various types of *hima*, over centuries, had 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 millenia 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. (Kilani, Serhal, Llewellyn, 2007; Buchanan, 2004)

Memories and experiences

1. 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. 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 as the following examples show.

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..... 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 it... 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... (Interview 11/7/2006)

Aqualina is a young woman 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.” (Interview 24/1/2007)

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 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.” (Interview, 20/12/2005)

Karim Jari, a Mandaean Iraqi, was born in 1947 in Baghdad and knew Basrah well. He remembers the centrality of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates to both cities:

“...Basrah has a river in the city, the Euphrates 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. 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.” (Interview, 30/4/2006)

Asia Fahad, a Mandaean woman who has been in Australia since 1992 and is a staff member at Sydney Water (the statutory State-owned utility managing all water supplies) 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. (Interview, 30/4/2006)

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 wanted to live, 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, they don't you know, even now my mum says you're not going off walking in the bush on your own are you..." (Interview, 3/11/2003)

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." (Interview, 21/7/2006)

In describing this place Hesham has said, "*It's sort of like a Bondi in Lebanon*" 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 are pleasant 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 Eastern landscapes are relatively small and densely occupied compared to Australia with its large distances and 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. (AlonTal, 2002)

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. (Masri, 1999:131) 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.

Nature has been important in the continuing cultures of all groups in the Arab world, although this was not necessarily expressed in the creation of 'national parks' as it might have been in former settler colonies like Australia. Few national parks were set aside in Lebanon, for example, before the emergence of environmental consciousness among the middle class in the 1990s. (Masri, 1999:120; Kingston, 2001) 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. (Masri, 1997,1999; Darwish, Farajalla, Masri, 2009)

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. (Al Khalil, 1992) 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. (Darwish *et al*, 2009)

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. Masri1997 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. (Darwish *et al*, 2009) Water sources - including wetlands, the essential refugia of migrating birds – have been damaged by both developmental ‘improvement’ to achieve more agricultural land and by ‘strategic’ military draining. (Amery, 1993; Masri, 1997; 1999; Platt, 2008; Shehadeh, 2007; Buchanan, 2004)

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 Mandeans in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussain and the American occupation. Now Mandeans, 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. (Project Interviews)

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.

Australian media have prominently reported the bonds between Australians of Lebanese background and the places of their old home. (Cameron, 2007) There are many members of the Lebanese village of Kfarsghab, for example, 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'. (Cameron, 2007) Along with those examples of reverse processes, like that Hesham described of young men finding places 'like Lebanon' in Australia, there are many demonstrations of continuing exchanges between the two countries as a result of Lebanese migration.

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. Migration, in these sense, has elements of being a round trip rather than just a one-way fare.

It is in this context that the reemergence of the practice of *hima* has particular relevance. Partly in response to the problems associated with the exclusionary 'western model' of protected areas, some Middle Eastern environmental and parkland advocates looked to traditional strategies for an alternative approach to ecological conservation. The concept of the *hima* was identified in 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. (Gari, 2006:221; Llewellyn, 2000; Haq, 2003:144; Llewellyn, 2003) The *hima* approach has been taken up actively in Saudi Arabia to shape a system of conservation reservations. Kilani, *et al*, 2007:2-10. In Lebanon, the concept is now explicitly included in the Protected Area category system which includes 'Protected Landscapes/Seascapes (IUCN Category IV)' which it describes as a 'Hima System'. (Ministry for the Environment, Lebanon, 2006) 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*'. (Ministry for the Environment, Lebanon) The major proportion of visitors to national parks, 'mountain trails' and conservation zones in Lebanon are international tourists and visiting diasporic Lebanese. 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.

How have arabic australians experienced the Georges River and its parklands?

The project found that Arabic Australians often tried to fulfill the beliefs they had brought with them when they used the natural places of their new home, despite realizing that this was different to the ways in which other Australians, including other immigrants, utilized these spaces. At times, they appeared to be hoping to use the new natural spaces in ways which they had been unable to do in their homeland because warfare. Rather than recreating past homelands, however, they were just as often drawing on their existing knowledge in order to explore and build a connection for themselves to this new space. (Experiential data below all from Project interviews, see further discussion in Byrne *et al*, 2012; Goodall *et al*, 2011)

In all these goals, however, they were frequently – and increasingly – frustrated by rising hostility from dominant Anglo groups towards their very presence in natural public spaces. This increased hostility to all people of Arabic background – of whatever religious affiliation – had emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the rising use of Islamophobia to justify military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Positive experiences

The Arabic Australians who participated in this project, regardless of their religion or national background, all expected to do similar things in the parklands around their new homes. There were four key themes raised in these interviews. (Goodall *et al*, 2011)

One was freely 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. Madaeans had negotiated with a local government council to use a relatively secluded section of the Nepean River for their regular baptisms. Although this site was at some distance, the Nepean had the advantage of being fresh at that point rather than the saline water in the Georges River closer to their homes.

Muslims gathered in family groups to pray regularly throughout long picnics at the parks, in view of other park users, utilizing the fresh water available from taps located in the washing

areas of public toilet facilities. They also gathered in parks to share *iftar*, the meal which breaks the daily Ramadan fast after sunset. However, because National Parks close at sunset, they were forced to travel further to share *iftar* in other types of public space. 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 saw natural spaces like parks and beaches as far more directly reflecting the universal presence of the divinity, rather than being the property of any one group or nation.

The discussions during all the interviews about feeling comfortable about carrying out religious practices were invariably accompanied by comments on the condition of the water available and the protocols for its use. Mandaean were troubled by the pollution of the water in the Georges River, a result of the high density of population and the unreliability over many years of government regulation of industrial or domestic sewage pollution. It was this interest in water quality which had led a number of Mandaeans, like Asia quoted earlier, to take up employment in water utilities. Muslims were concerned about river water quality, particularly as they wanted to fish in the Georges River, but were also concerned about the positioning of fresh water taps so close to public toilet facilities. They argued for greater hygiene and a clean source of fresh water for drinking and religious ablutions. Just as importantly, they were troubled by what they saw as the wasteful behaviour about water among other park users, including Anglo-Australians, who would leave taps dripping and seemed to take far more water than they needed. Muslim interviewees referred to the Islamic scriptural responsibilities to conserve water but also to share it equally, and explained that Arabic countries like Jordan had drawn on such religious and ethical teachings to build a public water conservation campaign which placed social equity at its centre.

While none of the Arabic Australians interviewed discussed the reemergence of the concept of *hima*, their discussions of water in particular and the parklands which they used so actively, drew consistently on the principles of conservation which are embodied in *hima*. These are firstly the protection of the quality of environments but just as important, the social connections between environments and people. This belies the misapprehension that many Anglo-Australian park managers indicated that the concept of conservation – even for ‘wise use’, let alone for the nurturing of biodiversity – is alien to Arabic immigrants.

The second common goal which all Arabic Australians expressed was to build social relationships within family and community. This was partly to sustain stronger collective support networks and ethno-specific identities in conditions of migrancy. Interviewees hoped to use parks to refresh and foster their communities of identity (such as with other immigrants who have shared the same village of origin), and often to share activities like fishing with younger members of their family as an opportunity to teach them about practices and memories from their original homeland. But they were also eager to take part in social festivals of belonging to their new country, such as the annual Australia Day holiday which marks the first British settlement, on 26 January, and which is often celebrated by picnics and outdoor activities. The activities which Arabic Australians undertook in parks were often a composite of social activities which they enjoyed in their old homes, with those that were iconic of their new country. A good example among Arabic Australians is the sharing food cooked over open coal fires. While this might be a spit-roasted lamb or fish in the Middle East, in the Georges River parks it is carried out in the very recognizable everyday form of the barbeque, a widely shared practice among all Australians.

The third common theme is relaxation, 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. The Parks service, however, continues to see the fundamental use of 'national' parks to be strenuous exertion such as bushwalking and camping in austere and isolated settings. For most Arabic immigrants, this has too many resonances of dangerous lonely war-torn environments and refugee camps. Where the expectation of 'wilderness' appreciation is not recognized as a culturally-specific model, Arabic Australian disinterest in it may be interpreted by Parks staff as an inability to appreciate nature at all. (Wearing, Goodall, Byrne, Kijas, 2008)

The fourth theme, for many of the people interviewed, the skills they brought with them from their old homes were put to use in exploring the environment of their new homeland. Their goal was 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). Fishing for example is a common pastime in Lebanon, where so many of the population live on the coast on or the major inland river system, where they fish with a telescopic fishing rod which does not use a reel for the line. The very specific skills of using this rod are taught to young children by their Arabic parents in the Australian parklands along the river, thus enabling continuing memories and connections with the Middle East. But Arabic Australians of all ages have also embraced the various forms of rod available in Australia, and can frequently be found fishing along the river where they point out they are able to chat casually to fellow fishers, whatever their ethnic background, about baits and what is biting. These relaxed and informal conversations, or simply companionable silences, are unlikely ever to take place in the settings of the public street or shopping mall and, as the next section indicates, have become even less common in those formal settings than they were before. In another Arabic Australian family, a fishing uncle have travelled around the countryside, following the fishing magazines to find good spots, and keeping maps of the best locations so he could share the stories - and itineraries - with his relations. Another aspect of this fourth theme was the commonly expressed interest in learning more about Aboriginal perspectives on land and water. This interest was said by interviewees to reflect an appreciation of the importance of Aboriginal prior ownership but also a desire to compare and exchange ideas about landscape and responsibilities among those who were custodians in the present.

These four types of ways that Arabic Australians use the parklands in the Georges River draw, to differing extents, on the rich and varied traditions and hopes they bring with them. The managers of these Australian parks are seldom interested in what people bring and are most often concerned to impart their regulations about the proper use of fragile Australian environments, taking the view that recent immigrants are 'empty vessels' needing to be 'filled up' with very specific rules and prohibitions. Yet as this brief summary suggests, Arabic Australian immigrants have brought with them beliefs and philosophies about nature, as well as very practical and everyday knowledges about water quality and the conservation of landscape and water, which could all play a major positive role in improving environmental quality for everyone.

Negative experiences

Just as there are positive and negative memories from homeland experiences, the realities confronting Arabic Australians have, since 2001, been of rising hostility in public places.

There have been lasting impacts on Australian society of the World Trade Centre attack in New York now known as 9/11. 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'. 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 Mandaean. 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 no matter what their religion, by telling them they had no right to 'our beach'. This accusation amused 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, Aly and Balnaves from Edith Cowan University surveyed Australians nationwide about what it was that made them fearful and what they had done to address their fears.

(Levett *SMH*, 20 Aug 2007) Their conclusions supported earlier findings. (Jakubowicz, Browning, 2004; Whitten, Thompson, 2005) The Aly and Balnaves findings were in the *Sydney Morning Herald* headline on their report: *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." (Levett, 2007)

This 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 worried about the increase in antagonism 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.

Yet 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.* (Interview, 20/12/2005)

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? (Interview, 20/12/2005)

The hostility has encompassed everyone of 'middle eastern appearance' including all Arabic Australians whether they are Mandaeans, Christians, atheists or of any other conviction. An example is the concern held by Asia Fahad, the Mandaean quoted earlier. She explained a year after the riot:

...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...(Interview, 30/4/2006)

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 [before 9/11], 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 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 this 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 part 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. (Interview, 20/12/2005)

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.

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 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. (Interview, 20/12/2005)

The anxiety suggested in these and other interviews arose from experience or knowledge of incidents of intimidation to which Arabic Australians - and particularly women in hijab - have been subjected, such as having the van tyres slashed when a group of women in hijab had taken children from a daycare centre for a picnic not far away.

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. 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. (Interview, 8/7/2002)

Jenan Baroudi, who belongs in a Muslim family but does not herself wear hijab, explained how the increased stress and self-consciousness has now cast a pall over her family’s picnics along the river.

I almost feel like people are 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? ...It’s called public space after all ...

At the last family picnic for example, now we really worry. So if you drop a piece of rubbish, 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...(Interview, 8/1/2004)

Conclusion

When asked about their hopes for the future, the interviewees offered a range of suggestions about improving water quality and accessibility, providing more hygienic fresh drinking and washing water. The Muslim interviewees in particular wanted more parks to be open after sunset, particularly during Ramadan, in order to better accommodate the family and religious sharing of *iftar* each evening. All suggested more education for everyone about the different ways that people used parks, which would involve mutual recognition of culturally diverse uses. They were particularly interested in having more access to an on-park Aboriginal presence so that new immigrants and others could learn more about Indigenous meanings for and uses of the local environment. All wanted better safety for everyone. While they suggested more Arabic Australian on-park staff would enable cultural translation, most often they felt that the increased visibility any park staff at all would be an improvement. It would add authority, they believed, to the public order regulations and so would minimize tensions

without further inflaming ethnic conflict. Their suggestions – and particularly this last one – reflected the insecurity in public spaces which the current political climate has created.

This comparative study of the ideas which Arabic immigrants bring for engaging with nature with what they do and experience in parks in Australia indicates that they are indeed ‘making’ a new ‘place’, in which traditional understandings of nature are inflected by the conditions of real life in the new environment.

The first positive theme in accounts of experience, that of practicing religions freely, was very closely related to an expression of cultural knowledge brought to the new country from an original home, a transition which was made easier by the universalist concepts of both Islam and Mandaeanism, which recognize the universal divinity in all natural spaces, rather than located in the particular formations of any one place. The fourth theme, that of utilizing homeland skills and practices to explore the new place and make meaningful connections with it, is another situation which draws very directly from homeland experiences but which is just as intensely focussed on the new place. These two, although drawing on homeland knowledge, are ‘place making’ very directly in Appadurai’s sense, building attachment to new places through practicing familiar and meaningful ‘everyday’ activities. It can be imagined that these experiences would foster a perception of complex, ‘merged’ or ‘dappled’ landscapes.

More inflected still by the specific political conditions of the new country are the second and third theme. The second, strengthening community and family bonds in relation to old homelands, was undertaken by drawing on homeland experience but was nevertheless particularly needed in conditions of migrancy where such everyday support and community networks no longer existed. This moreover was more important still in settings where there was hostility to recent immigrants. The third theme, that of seeking rest in view of heavy workloads and long working hours, can be seen to be even more directly related to the conditions of discriminatory employment in the new homeland, additionally exhausting as new languages and new conventions were being learnt.

The reluctance of park management policies to recognize ideals of ‘wilderness’ park use - AS cultural rather than universal - have no doubt shaped the interactions between park managers and Arabic Australian visitors. However the key impact from local circumstances, inflecting

all four types of positive experiences, has been the rising hostility to the presence of Muslims in iconic public natural places like national parks and ocean beach parks. Experiences in open, natural places have been made more stressful and more challenging due to the increase in antagonism directed specifically towards Muslim immigrants but applied far more broadly to all people 'of Arabic appearance', regardless of their religion or place of origin, since the 9/11 attacks.

Arabic immigrants' knowledge and practices could strengthen emotional and collective attachment to place, increase the commitment to the conservation of species and resources and ensure a greater community responsibility for environments. Understanding this rich body of belief and knowledge – as well as recognizing the commitment of recent immigrants to becoming engaged with their new places – could lead to far more effective parkland and environmental management.

However, this will require Anglo Australians, who remain the dominant group in numbers and cultures within both government park services and civil society environmental movements, to stand back from their habits of claiming places to symbolize the national. It is perhaps because this claim is already under challenge from Indigenous Australians that Anglo Australians have needed to be so strident about it.

For Arabic Australians, the natural spaces of the city reflect the universal presence of God, rather than being symbolic of any exclusionary national or ethnic ownership. Drawing directly from the religious and cultural knowledges they brought in both Islam and Mandaeanism, they saw these places of nature as being spaces to which they had a right, as humans, which transcended the 'national' rights of citizenship. This challenge to the claim that iconic species and environments embody the nation – a strong cultural component of the period when Australian Federation occurred in 1901 – will ultimately be a creative broadening of the ways in which people can understand their environments. This will, however, require a degree of active communication on all sides to recognise and engage with the environmental knowledges which immigrants bring.

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