

The future of the “other Australia” within our smart cities

By Peter Fisher

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Urban adaptors - some wildlife immigrants making the most of their environment (Image via Wikimedia)

Dr Peter Fisher explores the relationship between the environment and urban technology and how nature imprints on our major cities.

IN CALLING FOR an [enquiry into population](#), Senator [Dean Smith](#) has noted that it would “perhaps give ourselves some time to breathe, some time to pause and reflect”. In deliberating during this pause, how should aspirations like those of [A24](#) fit with the “[other Australia](#)”, where its [deep time](#), beyond our cities' landscapes, is [in serious trouble](#) marked by spectacles like “[birdpocalypse](#)”?

A [recent dispatch](#) by prolific bird photographer [John Hutchison](#), from [Gundabooka National Park](#), south of [Bourke](#) in outback NSW, is particularly revealing:

It was late afternoon in winter and a severe drought has reduced bird species numbers and general abundance greatly across much of NW

Victoria, western NSW, SW Qld and SA. On a five kilometre, two hour walk through [Mulga Woodlands](#) I saw only one female fairy-wren, one emu and the six Mulga parrots. Another one hour walk the following morning yielded one male hooded robin, one singing honeyeater and a grey butcherbird. In good times, Mulga Woodlands can be very rich in birds.

"Urban development and drought have destroyed the habitat of the critically-endangered bird and its population is believed to be as low as 400 in the wild across Australia." <https://t.co/kEVZHBVRht>

— Extinction Symbol (@extinctsymbol) August 9, 2018

Move on or perish?
[Dr Peter Fisher](#) is an Adjunct Professor at the School of Architecture & Built Environment, Deakin University. Further east, parched paddocks and pastures have drastically affected [open grassland and grassland birds](#). These places have become dustbowls no doubt prompting the Nationals to put some words on their website about [tackling climate change](#) and whether these can be as much about [#nature](#) and the [#environment](#), as other aspects of city life.

Of course, we've been there before: The [exodus from the centre](#) prompted by the [Millennium Drought](#) saw the arrival of vast numbers of galahs, sulphur-crested cockatoos, little corellas and crested pigeons in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne. And from the eastern seaboard came lorikeets, whilst introduced European birds diminished. Our cities are beginning to resemble long flight aviaries.

Is our message to these non-human species “move on or perish”? And can we be sure that there will come a time when they can move back again to their former environments?

Alphabet cities: Built from the internet up

A driving new urban-centred approach has emerged in recent times, linked to open/big data (and the new star, [AI](#)) which turns on efficiency values — things like smart infrastructure, smart energy, smart mobility and so forth. It sees cities as single species habitats (in other words, gigs for humans) and [platforms for innovation and economic growth](#). [Sidewalk Labs](#) in Toronto – an urban design subsidiary of [Alphabet](#) (the owner of Google) – for instance, wants to [reimagine urban life](#) in five dimensions: Housing, energy, mobility, social services and shared public spaces. This is with an overriding aim to ‘*serve as a model for sustainable neighbourhoods*’ around the world. “Energy” has already been [targeted by hackers](#).

But, like in the video below, nature and natural processes hardly get a look in. And yet, for many if not most people and [especially iGen](#), life in cities has become profoundly disconnected from [the natural world and its underlying processes](#). Humans are part of the rest of life running to – and requiring – [wilderness therapies](#).

Poles apart

These cities are equally places where complex interrelationships between plants, birds, non-human animals and insects get to play out, intricacies which have been captured in the concept of the biophilic city of which Singapore is a stand-out example. But its proponents are pitted against urban tech headwinds driven by vast quantities of venture capital, with start-up accelerators

managing portfolios in city living and the urban tech space and looking to sell their wares into Canada, Europe and perhaps Australia. And, that’s leaving aside the homegrown varieties in China.

Starting over

That tech future as envisaged is largely devoid of [biophilic](#) values while aiming to grow cities by being more efficient and supportive of yet more inhabitants, often in nature-starved settings. How is this to fit with an obligation to look out for the other Australia?

In a very real sense, the genomes of its native plants and animals are an encoded treasure trove of the land's prehistory — they have the continent's 45 million years of isolation hardwired into their paws, beaks and twigs including the [global origin of the songbird](#). As the country [continues to dry out](#) under the influence of climate change, remnant populations of those paws and beaks will increasingly look to cities for refuge and food. Special measures are needed in our strategic thinking about cities which go beyond the urban tech mindset and even [202020](#) programs especially as such places are now thought to be [evolutionary hot spots](#).

Think big

Transport corridors, for instance, can provide entry points for wildlife (over and above restored watercourses) since they can be [roofed as in Hamburg](#) and Madrid and [vegetated like Barcelona](#), where plantings are keyed to local insects, birds and animals. Given that the therapeutic windfalls are no less important than those of mobility, then expenditures matching those of current rail and road infrastructure projects are entirely appropriate.

In view of the damage wrought on the other Australia over the past 200 or so years, it’s

the least we can do.

Urban Nature: Smart Cities and
Biodiversity - Essential for Climate
Change and Wellbeing
<https://t.co/zVdRR2KaU5>
[#SmartCities](#) [#UrbanDevelopment](#)
[#GreenArchitecture](#) [#Biodiversity](#)
[#climatechange](#)

— pdjmoo (@pdjmoo) [August 12,](#)
[2018](#)