

**A community-based survey:  
the knowledge and attitudes towards urban biodiversity  
of the residents and users of the Cooks River Corridor**

by Vasiliki Andrews and Linda Smith

Final report for an Urban Ecology Project at the University of Technology Sydney,  
October 2006

## **Executive Summary**

As the degradation of watershed ecosystems has occurred worldwide it has often been associated with poor management and lack of integrated government and public involvement. This project is one of many helping to restore a degraded catchment in an area which is growing in appeal as residents establish a sense of place and learn the value of their local biodiversity.

This report presents a working community-based survey, focusing on gaining an insight into the community's knowledge and attitudes towards urban biodiversity of the Cooks River and its foreshores. The project will determine:

- whether the community understand and value the area - linking the importance of vegetation and a healthy, natural river;
- their knowledge and awareness of native vegetation of the area including existing plantings and revegetation sites as well as preferences of plant species;
- their awareness of, knowledge of and attitudes towards native wildlife;
- their acceptance of a changing landscape from open space areas (grassland) to semi-closed areas (bushland) and;
- to gain a sense of how close the members of the community are to the area (strength of feeling, sense of ownership).

The project ran during 2006 over a three-month period (August to November) and included literature research and surveying of the community. Communication with industry supervisors and other organisations of interests determined the intent of the project.

The practical method of the project involved surveying the public and was done through face-to-face interviewing. Residents from Strathfield, Canterbury and Marrickville councils were selected from their proximity to current or previous revegetation sites along the Cooks River. However park users were randomly selected along the Cooks River concourse. Furthermore brochures were handed out to all participating respondents.

The data collected from respondents was treated as separate data sets i.e. park users and residents. Analysis of the data involved calculations of percentages and graphical representation of figures and tables. Briefly, 215 community surveys were collected during the duration of the study - 50 from each council area and 65 from park users.

From the results it was determined the community generally did link the importance of vegetation with a healthy river. In areas with high proportion of vegetation planted alongside the River, respondents concluded the river health was staying the same or improving. Meanwhile, in comparison to other areas, those away from dense vegetation believed that the river health was getting worse. When asked which

landscape would be best for the environment the scenario with dense vegetation in comparison to open landscape was the popular view with the community. Respondents however, were divided in their opinion between the two preferences (open landscape versus semi closed area) in the Canterbury region.

Community awareness of native vegetation beside the Cooks River found the majority of respondents stating they did know of plantings. On the whole park users were more aware of native plantings than residents. Yet still many park user participants felt they were unaware of native plantings. Between council regions a considerable number of residents felt they were unaware or unsure of native plantings including those in areas with mass native vegetation plantings. To increase community awareness it would be useful to introduce signs in and around the Cooks River explaining flora, fauna and history of the area.

It was also found that the community did want native plants to be planted alongside the river. This was primarily due to the 'aesthetic value' of vegetation rather than the practical benefits native vegetation can provide an area i.e. survey findings show vegetation beautifying an area was noticed by respondents more than enhancing the ecology of the place. Questions on wildlife established that the community would be pleased to see more types of animals in and around the River. However for various reasons a lot of respondents suggested this would depend on the type of animal. The most common types of native animals noticed by the community were birds followed by mammals and fish.

Residents and park users were pleased that mangroves were naturally recolonising along the river. Notably voluntary remarks of some respondents were making the connection that mangroves perform important ecological roles such as stabilising the bank, improving water quality and attracting biota, and were returning to their natural habitat. The most displeased towards mangroves re-establishing were residents from Canterbury and Marrickville (trap refuse, limit view and access to river, dense growth etc.) yet people less affected by mangroves were least displeased i.e. park users and Strathfield residents. Furthermore the majority of park users and residents liked Casuarina's and didn't mind them near the river. The most positive responses were from park users and residents in Marrickville and Strathfield.

One of the major concerns coming out of the project, expressed by many members of the community, was that related to pollution in the river, particularly refuse that can be seen. Findings also showed common approval for the community to maintain plants near their part of the Cooks River. The minority of those opposed were concerned with public inexperience and felt that it should be left to professionals. Of those residents asked about their willingness to pay an additional council levy to maintain plants specifically along the Cooks River the majority said yes and indicated \$0-25 per year was an adequate amount. This shows residents value native vegetation along the Cooks River corridor and want continual maintenance of vegetation in their area.

This report has provided an insight into the community's perceptions and awareness to urban biodiversity of the Cooks River catchment, and will assist in achieving long term sustainable management.