



# Communiqué: Nature Positive Cities Symposium

## Summary

The concept of delivering improved ecological outcomes in urban settings has been with us for some time, yet in practice, this idea appears to be in its infancy.

In March 2024, EIANZ held its inaugural Nature Positive Cities Symposium. This communiqué outlines key takeaways from the event and makes recommendations to policy makers and regulators.

The Symposium heard that:

- Connection to nature in cities has been shown to have a range of health and economic benefits such as increased physical and mental wellbeing<sup>1</sup>, improved property values<sup>2</sup> and reduced crime rates<sup>3</sup>
- The development of Nature Positive Cities is essential to addressing the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand
- Developing nature positive cities requires striving for Biodiversity Net Gain – which must be supported through both legislation and philosophy of design
- Successful nature-based solutions necessitate a truly multidisciplinary approach with the urban resident at the centre
- More concerted and genuine efforts must be made to incorporate the vast knowledge of First Nations peoples into the planning and design of cities.

<sup>1</sup> White, M. P., Alcock, I., Wheeler, B. W., & Depledge, M. H. (2013). Would You Be Happier Living in a Greener Urban Area? A Fixed-Effects Analysis of Panel Data. *Psychological Science*, 24(6), 920-928. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612464659>; Morrison N, Barns S, Dunshea A, Paine G, Pry J, Sajan J, Thompson S, Van Den Nouwelant R (2021). Making healthy places: NSW built environment practitioners' perspectives on place-making opportunities that help deliver health and wellbeing outcomes. *Marudulu Budyari Gumal* <https://doi.org/10.52708/LCWA1416>; Marina G. Cavuoto, Liam Davies, Ella Rowsthorn, Lachlan G. Cribb, Stephanie R. Yiallourou, Nawaf Yassi, Paul Maruff, Yen Ying Lim, Matthew P. Pase (2024). Cross-sectional associations between neighborhood characteristics, cognition and dementia risk factor burden in middle-aged and older Australians. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, Volume 41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2024.102696>; State of New South Wales (Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure) (2024). Biodiversity in Place: A framework to improve urban biodiversity in NSW. <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/biodiversity-in-place.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> CRC for Water Sensitive Cities. How much do we value green spaces? (2017). [https://watersensitivecities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IN\\_A1-1\\_How\\_much\\_do\\_we\\_value\\_green\\_spaces\\_V1.pdf](https://watersensitivecities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IN_A1-1_How_much_do_we_value_green_spaces_V1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> S. Scott Ogletree, Lincoln R. Larson, Robert B. Powell, David L. White, Matthew T.J. Brownlee (2022). Urban greenspace linked to lower crime risk across 301 major U.S. cities. *Cities*, Volume 131, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103949>

EIANZ calls on policy makers and regulators to:

- Recognise that developing nature positive cities and meeting the targets set by the [Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework](#) (GBF) requires striving for Biodiversity Net Gain – which must be supported through both legislation and philosophy of design
- Implement governance arrangements that make climate change and biodiversity loss a central consideration in policy and decision-making on urban planning
- Agree upon priorities for cities and nature through well thought-out regional and strategic planning and assessments
- Address the skills shortage in the environment industry by supporting the training of more practitioners (including First Nations peoples)
- Genuinely and authentically engage with First Nations peoples in the development of nature positive cities.

## Background

Most of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's major cities exist within ecosystems that have numerous threatened flora and fauna. Many cities in our region also face significant water supply challenges, pollution, and a loss of connection to nature. Meanwhile, Australia is one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet yet has seen an alarming rate of species loss in the last 240 years. Notably, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand have both committed to the GBF's '[30x30](#)' target to protect 30% of land and ocean globally by 2030.

As governments look to increase housing supply to meet growing population demand, this can come at the expense of good planning and decision making, where outcomes for nature are not integrated into planning or design. The consequences of this are deferred costs to the community in the form of extra heating/cooling costs, health consequences, and poorer pollution and water management.

Nature in cities, and the ecology of our urban spaces, are important not only due to the demonstrated economic and social benefits, but because nature provides both the ecosystem upon which a city depends and habitats for threatened species.

Although environmental and planning laws have for many decades attempted to minimise and/or protect impacts on nature, we are continuing to see its decline.



In Australia, all levels of government have the powers and resources needed to create nature positive cities. Governments also have legislative and policy commitments to implement [ecologically sustainable development](#) (ESD), defined as 'using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased'. Yet the three levels of Government do not always align powers and resources in regional planning and implementation. Western culture's focus on property rights limits the effectiveness of Planning Codes and health of urban ecosystems.

Following COP15 and the development of the GBF, there has been an increase in the use of terms and concepts such as Nature Positive, Nature-based Solutions, and urban ecology; however, there are generally no globally accepted definitions. One key principle behind many of the terms is that of Biodiversity Net Gain, in which a project results in a quantifiable *gain* in biodiversity. It is of vital importance that proponents and practitioners exercise caution in the use of such terms to guard against potential greenwashing and ensure that the principle of Biodiversity Net Gain is not lost.

### Where to from here?

Successful nature-based solutions require a truly multidisciplinary approach with the urban resident at the centre. The different disciplines bring different skills, experiences, vocabularies, and approaches. To be successful, dedicated effort will be needed to achieve positive collaboration.

Governments, urban planners and environmental practitioners have much more to learn from First Nations peoples. More concerted and genuine efforts must be made to incorporate the vast knowledge of First Nations peoples into the planning and design of cities.

Urban planners, policymakers and environmental practitioners need to holistically design for: nature positive (and Biodiversity Net Gain), vibrant human communities, genuine collaboration with First Nations peoples, and climate resilience. Addressing each of these singly does not lead to rapid progress. Consensus and compromise will be required to achieve sustainable outcomes.

### EIANZ's vision for Nature Positive Cities is as follows:

- Urban design integrates nature as an essential part of our experience
- Residents can walk, cycle or take public transport to services, dramatically reducing reliance on fossil fuel-powered cars
- Residents have access to free meeting areas, parks and play areas that include natural areas and native plantings
- Native plants that use less water, provide shade in summer and reduce our energy and water use are the default for public and private spaces
- Water and energy can be stored and used, and water infiltrates the ground rather than leading to flash floods
- Heat islands are a thing of the past, and heating and cooling are affordable to all residents
- Creeks and rivers are clear of invasive weeds and litter
- Cities provide their residents with the proven positives of nature.

### As stated above, EIANZ calls on policy makers and regulators to:

- Recognise that developing nature positive cities and meeting the aims of the Global Biodiversity Framework requires striving for Biodiversity Net Gain – which must be supported through both legislation and philosophy of design
- Genuinely and authentically engage with First Nations peoples on the development of nature positive cities
- Agree upon priorities for cities and nature through well thought-out regional and strategic planning and assessments
- Address the skills shortage in the environment industry by supporting the training of more practitioners (including First Nations peoples)
- Implement governance arrangements that make climate change and biodiversity loss a central consideration in policy and decision-making

### EIANZ calls on its members and all environmental professionals to:

- Work with a diverse group of people, including First Nations Peoples, urban residents, planners, social scientists, engineers, and developers, to establish sustainable needs and solutions
- Put Nature at the heart of urban design, making it a key stakeholder
- Refer to international frameworks such as the IUCN's [Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions](#) to develop robust and equitable solutions



- Make use of rapidly developing tools and solutions that are becoming available to support the development and understanding of the importance of nature in urban areas, while remaining critical and avoiding greenwashing.

**Over the next three years, EIANZ will:**

- Seek to form a Nature Positive Cities Community of Practice (within the [Ecology Special Interest Section](#)) to promote good urban ecology practice amongst its members and environmental practitioners more generally
- Hold a follow-up symposium to review progress and set new objectives before the end of 2026
- Strengthen our link with allied urban planning, land management and impact assessment professions
- Encourage all members to engage with First Nations perspectives in their work and promote these perspectives wherever possible.

The Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) is Australasia's peak body for environmental professionals and part of a global network of more than 25,000 environmental practitioners. We are a not-for-profit organisation representing members from a diverse range of technical disciplines including environmental scientists, policy makers, engineers, lawyers, and economists. Our members are at the forefront of challenging and complex issues such as climate change, sustainability and preserving biodiversity. Through our Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, EIANZ sets high ethical standards for environmental practitioners.