

Appreciation of informal urban greenspace by Japanese and Australian residents

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As more people live and grow up in cities, we need a better understanding of our everyday urban environment and how we interact with the natural urban landscape. Prominent examples of this landscape like gardens and parks have been widely studied. However, just as we tend to overlook the grass growing out of a crack in the pavement, **informal urban greenspaces (IGS)** such as vacant lots, street or railway verges and river banks have not been comprehensively examined in terms of its quantity and distribution in cities, its characteristics, its biodiversity value, levels of use, and the benefits it provides to urban residents.

IGS is characterized by dominant spontaneous vegetation (often called weeds) and by not being formally recognized or managed for recreation, agriculture or conservation. As a result, it looks very different from designed, formal, intended greenspace. IGS exists in our everyday environment and may therefore challenge our aesthetic norms as well as our sense of order or may be interpreted as a lack of maintenance. But because it has no clear rules, no right way to use it or an intended form of design, this freedom from purpose creates the potential for a great variety of informal use: unstructured child play, casual exploring, guerilla gardening or quiet dog walks.

This study examines and compares informal urban greenspace in **Brisbane (Australia) and Sapporo (Japan)** to understand how it is related to appreciation of urban nature by residents. For this purpose a mail-back survey of residents in both cities was conducted, asking for knowledge and perception of IGS, use in the present or during childhood and general attitude towards urban nature. Additionally, the quantity, distribution and some ecological characteristics such as the IGS vegetation structure and bird diversity in the sample sites was examined. IGS in both cities was extensively documented using photography.

The results show that most respondents used IGS as a child or teenager and know about IGS in their neighborhoods. Residents see both positive and negative aspects of IGS; they praise its potential use and contribution to a greener urban landscape but sometimes deprecate its aesthetic value and associate IGS with low environmental quality. Most respondents regard urban nature as something intrinsically valuable independent from human evaluation. IGS also provides interesting examples of how private space can be reclaimed as public space, and vice versa (e.g. informal gardening on private parking lots and publicly owned river banks). This has implications for how we protect and manage greenspace in cities and how we provide for recreational opportunities as well as opportunities to encounter nature. Planners and ecologists need to account for these spaces in the future.

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