A key premise of the edited volume *Australian Environmental Planning: Challenges and Future Prospects* is that everyone plans, that “[p]lanning is something that humans do every day” (p.258). A focus on human understandings and actions is central to a book which considers the role and work of planners, predominantly in the context of post-invasion Australia. A consideration of the breadth and depth of planning in Australia, from colonisation through to current challenges and approaches and into the future, is a strength of the book. This important contextual information will engage students and professionals working in planning in Australia and beyond–not only informing them of important historical issues and current trends but inspiring them towards thinking and action in a world which can no longer tolerate human planning that fails to take the environment into account.

Many of the book’s chapters look backwards in order to look forwards. As they do so they remind us of the narrow-mindedness and inability of so many policy-makers and practitioners to look beyond a human-centred desire to “progress” in terms of controlling and shaping what was (is) seen as an environment given to them solely for their use. Indeed, an environment built on unassailable private property legal doctrines (chapter 4)–sickeningly, due to the nation’s persistent failure to comprehensively acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander property rights (chapter 2). The lessons of this reflection are poignant, and sadly the book left me feeling that much remains to be learnt, especially as the examples of hopeful and exciting environmental planning initiatives seemed few and far between, and beset with problems.

However, surely the writing must be on the wall?! The amazing (if depressing for being short-sighted and environmentally- and socially-damaging) shifts the book charts, for
example in terms of dramatic housing development in Australian cities over the last half
century (chapter 14), perversely seem to hold hope that a sequel to this book in 50 years’
time will chart a similarly dramatic change in our planning policies. A shift which
reflects a deep and respectful acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
owners of Australia and their diverse and dynamic knowledges and practices, and a shift
which responds to a recognition of humans’ place within the environment and our attendant
obligations and responsibilities to care (see Bawaka Country including Suchet-Pearson et al.
2013).

Many chapters in the book highlight how uncertain our knowledge is; how much is
unknown; how unexpected connections surprise and appal us (reductions in water usage
leading to pipe corrosion, increasing urban trees leading to human-bat conflict). The
recognition of the limitations of a “superior” human-centred approach to planning, and a
focus on the importance of biogeochemical processes, is way overdue. However, the book
could have gone further in its efforts to challenge the human-centredness of planning—indeed,
the Eurocentric human-centredness of even environmental planning. Recognition of the
unknown could have been accompanied by celebration of the unknowable; recognition of the
everydayness of planning accompanied by celebration of the fact that each person’s everyday
is different (indeed, the linearity of planning and many of its assumptions of controllability
and intervention do not pervade everyone’s everyday—see Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006).
Planning is very often about setting boundaries and creating zones for particular activities,
and the book seemed to reinforce many problematic boundaries, not really making visible or
engaging productively with them. Many lost opportunities left the book lagging in terms of
challenging paradigms and positioning Australian environment planning at the forefront of
reimagining human-environment relations.

One such boundary is constructed between urban, city environments and non-urban,
rural or remote environments. The uneasy tension between planning as an urban pursuit—as an
endeavour borne from and focusing on city issues–and planning as a broader endeavour which “everyone does” is not explicitly discussed in the book, and its strange and uneven application means the geography of environmental planning is ignored and many assumptions remain unproblematised. For example, there is no qualifier in the title that the book predominately discusses environmental planning in an urban context–yet the opening sentence and majority of chapters (including two explicit urban sections) leave the reader in no doubt. This leaves those chapters which consider broader regional or strategic planning issues out on a bit of a limb. Not that those chapters don’t have incredibly valuable insights to offer–indeed, some of these are the strongest chapters. However, the failure to make such differences visible and to think through why place-based-density makes such a difference weakens many of the book’s broader messages by failing to consider the different ways in which environmental planning might matter and how place deeply affects this.

The book’s focus on the urban environment is highlighted by those chapters which focus on non-urban environments. For example, Ed Wensing’s chapter considers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ relationship to “country”, and in this chapter it is the urban environment which is sidelined. Although an excellent account of Indigenous relationships to place, land rights struggles, and the imperative for environmental planners to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the failure of this chapter to give due consideration specifically to urban Indigenous planning issues (in a book which focuses on planning as a predominantly urban pursuit) means that the invisibility of Indigenous people in the city–an injustice at the core of much urban planning–is reinforced. Indigenous peoples whose homelands are city-places are working incredibly hard to have their relationship to place recognised and their efforts attended to. The book’s failure to engage with these efforts, and the work of academics who support them such as Libby Porter, Louise Johnson and Sue Jackson, is extraordinary.
Similarly, the failure of many chapters to attend to the imperative discussed in chapter 2 to listen to Indigenous peoples means that a key message of the book is undermined throughout. Although chapters by Jenny Cameron and Deanna Grant-Smith and Jason Byrne and Donna Houston attend to Indigenous experiences, most of the other chapters ignore the Indigenous presence in cities completely, or pay only lip service to a tokenistic presence. In 2014 it is a sad reflection of environmental planning and the state of affairs in Australia that issues of social justice such as this can be put aside. Not only is this a lost opportunity to open environmental planning up to different ways of thinking and doing, but it also means that many key issues around power, capitalism, development and politics–real-world impediments to engaged environmental planning–were not considered in any depth.

*Australian Environmental Planning*’s central argument is that planning inevitably involves environments and that environmental planning, which recognises that humans are part of the biosphere, has a key role to play in creating new, more sustainable and just futures. Shifting planning from being a solely human endeavour (done by humans for the benefit of humans) is laudable. However, this is another area in which the book could have gone further. In particular, the book failed to take seriously the incredible work being done around more-than-human agency as the boundaries between humans and more-than-humans are challenged and reconceptualised. In what were useful overviews of urban planning around issues including water, wildlife and vegetation, opportunities were lost to drill into human-nature relationships and de-centre the simplistic notion of control that humans seem to think they have, and to reimagine what environmental planning could look like if planners were to acknowledge and productively engage with complex, sentient and active more-than-human worlds.

All places are unique and the particular histories, issues and make-up of Australian planning means it has much to offer broader considerations of environmental planning. The challenges put forward in *Australian Environmental Planning* are undeniably huge, and also
undeniably critical to the future of many places and the humans and more-than-humans who co-constitute them. In particular, environmentally sensitive design options, green urbanism and participatory planning offer glimpses into new ways of planning which will hopefully inspire current and aspiring planners. However, this needs to go beyond the gentle acceptance of biogeochemical processes as being essential for human survival. It needs to free imaginations so planners and students think not only about how to form boundaries and zones but also about how planning is something that people do very differently depending on where they are situated and how they relate to human and more-than-human worlds—a nuanced understanding of planning in which planners reshape and reconfigure practical and conceptual boundaries enabling human/more-than-human engagements which care for and nurture more just and sustainable presents and futures.

References


Sandie Suchet-Pearson
Department of Environment and Geography
Macquarie University
sandie.suchet@mq.edu.au

November 2014