



MEDIA RELEASE

NATURE IN A PANDEMIC: CITIES GRAPPLING WITH HOW TO BALANCE SAFETY WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 22 April 2020 - As cities around Australia continue to enact high levels of restrictions¹ for community movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, experts from urban greening initiative [Greener Spaces Better Places](#) have come together to impress the importance of following government guidelines of physical distancing to safely use green and open spaces - critical for mental health and wellbeing during a time of increased community stress².

The significant toll on people's mental health³ has been recognised by the Australian Government, with a \$74 million boost for mental health services⁴. Physical health can also be impacted by social isolation required to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus⁵.

Dr Lyndal Plant from Urban Forester, a city greening policy strategist, says the physical and mental health benefits from nature could be even greater at this time, because of increased stress people are experiencing - especially in high-density urban areas such as apartment precincts without in-dwelling access to green space.

"We already know that even small doses of green space are essential. For those not required to self-isolate, a 30 minute visit to a local park (practicing physical distancing) could leave you with an important dose of nature; with one Brisbane study finding a 7% reduction in self-reported depression and a 9% reduction in high blood pressure⁶. Nature is there to help us stay physically and mentally strong and these benefits could be exponentially higher - at a time when we need it most," said Plant.

An expert on the human-nature relationship, Professor Tonia Gray, Western Sydney University explained nature gives joy to people on many levels, particularly in their ever-isolated lives. Given the unknown, but likely lengthy duration expected of isolation measures⁷, Gray said access to nature will help maintain morale, so it's vitally important these spaces remain accessible.

"We must follow self-isolation and physical distancing guidelines⁸, and stay at least 1.5 metres away⁹ from each other while outside. Avoid peak times if you live in the city, aiming for early morning or evening, so that we can continue to spend time outside during this time."

1 As of Friday 3 April, exercise as a reason for leaving the house is permitted in most states and territories. [Latest here.](#)

2 WHO announcement, 18 March 2020 accessible [here](#)

3 Interagency Standing Committee, February 2020 accessible [here](#)

4 Media statement, Prime Minister of Australia, 29 March 2020 accessible [here](#)

5 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, September 2019 accessible [here](#) (impact)

6 Health benefits from nature depend on dose; June 2016, accessible [here](#)

7 Media statement, Prime Minister of Australia, April 7 2020 accessible [here](#)

8 Media statement, Prime Minister of Australia, 29 March 2020 accessible [here](#)

9 NSW Health, accessed 7 April 2020 [here](#)

“The restorative effects of nature cannot be underestimated, particularly in lieu of human to human connection. It’s a situation that causes us to reflect on our relationship with the natural world, and also, not take it for granted once our freedoms are restored.” concluded Gray.

City of Melbourne environment portfolio Chair Cr Cathy Oke explained how critical it is that we take all necessary steps to slow the spread of COVID-19, and that the City of Melbourne is committed to supporting these measures.

“We also understand that access to nature and green spaces is important for wellbeing – especially during times of stress such as the current global pandemic. The current advice is that people need to stay home, with a few exceptions, including to exercise.”

“Our 480 hectares of beautiful parks and gardens are still open. People can walk and jog, and ride a bike where permitted – but please maintain 1.5m distance from other people and only exercise with one other person, or with people in your household, unless otherwise advised by the Chief Health Officer.”

“Greening our city with trees and other types of vegetation is a key way that we are adapting our city to the impacts of climate change. Urban greening remains an important focus for the City of Melbourne,” said Clr Oke.

Adrian Gray, manager of urban design, Brimbank City Council, explained that Brimbank City Council has been upgrading parks and streets for over a decade, investing \$36m in upgrading 111 parks as part of its ongoing implementation of Creating Better Parks Policy and Plan. In addition, around \$24m has been invested in delivering around 33 streetscape/activity centre projects. This has meant that the community now has access to a network of well designed, green places all across the municipality that people can walk, cycle or drive to.

“Without this investment the community's resilience to deal with restrictions imposed by COVID-19 strategies may have been much less. A well-designed city supports people and liveability through mitigating the shocks and stresses from climate change and, now, a novel coronavirus,” said Gray.

Sutherland Shire Council is rapidly prototyping a risk and management plan to ensure tree planting teams continue. Katie Denoon, canopy coordinator of the 3,000 trees project, said, “If we need to slow this down to take extra precautions as the COVID-19 situation changes we will. We’re confident we have the practices in place to keep our planting contractor and the community safe.”

****Note to editors: Full case study on Sutherland Shire Council + Brimbank City Council efforts below.***

Hort Innovation Head of Research and Development, Byron de Kock, reinforced how important it is to continue finding ways to install and maintain green spaces, “There are a variety of ways to install plant life into urban and densely urban areas. One such way is green walls. Green walls allow plants to be grown in dense urban areas where spatial constraints may limit the presence of traditional urban forestry, such as parks and [street trees](#).”

-ENDS-

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About Greener Spaces Better Places: [Greener Spaces Better Places](#) is a national initiative that brings together academia, business, government, community groups and the green industry to share knowledge

and find new ways to work together to make sure that as our cities and towns grow, so too do our green spaces. Greener Spaces Better Places is funded by Hort Innovation using a nursery industry levy collected on the sale of plants and trees. Learn more at www.greenerespacesbetterplaces.com.au

Best practise reporting for Editors:

- Facing mental health challenges? If you or anyone you know needs help call Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Not sure what rules during self-isolation apply to you? Please refer to each state and territory guidelines for up-to-date advice on movement restrictions in your area.

Greener Spaces Better Places advocates available for interview:

- Lyndal Plant, Urban Forrester
- Professor Tonia Gray, Western Sydney University
- Katie Denoon, Canopy Coordinator, Sutherland Shire Council

Greening the future: Sutherland Shire Council case study (NSW)

Some Councils are managing their tree planting program with practical and innovative measures to ensure their green spaces are increased and improved in spite of the pandemic. Katie Denoon, Canopy Coordinator for Sutherland Shire Council (SSC), explained the range of measures SSC are were taking to ensure their 3K Trees 2020 project will proceed to plant 3,000 street trees in 4 suburbs across the Sutherland Shire, as part of the NSW Government initiative to plant Five Million Trees for Greater Sydney by 2030.

“Whilst face to face community consultation events have been cancelled, residents can use the [interactive map](#) to view, comment or request a free tree to plant on their own private property. Communication can still occur through website enquiries and we can respond readily by phone, with changes being made to the map while we speak. The majority of calls we are taking relate to relocation for access for caravans or boats etc or swapping species to another like sized tree, but once we resolve their concerns residents are pleased with the outcome.

We’re doing as much work as possible from home; when field work is required dedicated iPads and phones are being used so that data can be updated live in the field, so there’s no sharing of devices.

Whilst our nursery is closed to the public, it offers great spatial distances for pick up and rollout of the planting project, and we’ve also pre-ordered our planting supplies, to ensure ready when we need them. Nursery staff have the scheduled plants that are rolling out that day lined up, and signing them off is electronic and requires no contact between staff and contractors.

Tree planting is something we can do largely in isolation, with additional methods applied for extra measures to keep staff and the community safe.

We’ve reduced teams into 2 person teams, and focused their roles on either preparation or planting, and we’ll keep these groups independent from one another for the duration for the project.

We’ve staggered precinct commencement dates starting in April with Jannali, with the aim to get 30 trees a day into the ground. If we need to slow this down to take extra precautions as the COVID-19 situation changes we will, but we’re confident we have thorough practices in place to keep our staff, Contractors and the community safe while planting trees for the future through these suburbs.

Community engagement is the primary focus for the 3K Trees 2020 project, because we know if we can build the connection between people and these trees, they will care for them into the future and support future planting projects. When people value the canopy around them and understand the benefits it provides them, then they want to protect what they have and want more.

We’ve experienced some great success with our community engagement tactics, such as [#TreeTuesday](#). Published on the Sutherland Shire Council Facebook weekly, it’s about fun tree facts and stories from local residents and council staff.

For anyone interested in finding out more about the Sutherland Shire Council's 3K Trees 2020 project, visit Council's website www.sutherlandshire.com.nsw.gov.au/trees or get in touch with Katie Denoon via greenstreets@ssc.nsw.gov.au.

Greening the future: Brimbank City Council case study (VIC)

Adrian Gray, Manager Urban Design, Brimbank City Council explains that currently, there are several significant park and streetscape upgrade projects underway under our council's capital works program.

"We'll continue to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 virus on current and proposed projects and any changes to the construction industry.

The completion of these current projects are important to keep local contractors in employment while providing the community with something to look forward to. These upgraded (and greener) public places will give the community somewhere to gather and resurrect a social life, sometime in the future."

Brimbank City Council has been upgrading parks and streets for over a decade, investing \$36m in upgrading 111 parks as part of its ongoing implementation of Creating Better Parks Policy and Plan. In addition, around \$24m has been invested in delivering around 33 streetscape/activity centre projects. This has meant that the community now has access to a network of well designed, green places all across the municipality that people can walk, cycle or drive to.

Without this investment the community's resilience to deal with restrictions imposed by COVID-19 strategies may have been much less. A well designed city supports people and liveability through mitigating the shocks and stresses from climate change and, now, a novel coronavirus.

A decade ago residents across Brimbank had very little connection to well-designed green spaces. The investment in quality spaces and green infrastructure supports the physical and mental wellbeing of the community. With many social destinations and park infrastructure closed, Brimbank's parks are in big demand as many people use the tree lined paths to walk, run, cycle and walk the dog, while practicing social distancing - which we're receiving direct positive feedback from the community on. Last week a resident was compelled to write to council as follows:

"As a resident in Keilor Downs for over 40 years I would like to thank the team at parks and gardens for their magnificent job taking care of the maintenance of all the parks around our area in particular the Green Gully, Singer Ave and Taylor's Lakes reserve. We use these parks nearly every day for our evening walks and take the grandkids to the play equipment. Must comment on the Taylors Lakes reserve is excellent with the adult exercise equipment on offer. Would love to see the singer avenue reserve updated with these gym equipment as well. Also for more varieties of trees to be planted along the fences behind hallmark street houses similar to the trees being planted on the Copernicus reserve.

Great job and money well spent. Thanks once again

Cheers Lyn"

The success of Brimbank's park transformation through the delivery of Creating Better Parks Policy and Plan is now being directed to the development of a Creating Better Streets policy where the streets are seen as important in sustaining community health and wellbeing. Streets need a design that rethinks the balance between people, green infrastructure (water and plants) and cars. To have streets designed in a way that supports a healthy community and urban landscape will create a more resilient city into this climate change century.