



# *Missing Trees:* **The Inside Story of an Outdoor Nation** Key Findings

national  
tree day

PLANET ARK



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A research report commissioned by Planet Ark and sponsored by Toyota Australia.



## Introduction

The research report *Missing Trees – The Inside Story of an Outdoor Nation* focuses on Australia's relationship with the great outdoors and builds upon previous research commissioned by Planet Ark and Toyota that shows a direct link between childhood contact with nature and a range of health and wellbeing benefits. It is being released in the lead up to National Tree Day on Sunday 28 July 2013.

For the first time since its inception in 1996, National Tree Day has expanded to include backyard and street plantings in addition to its much-loved community and school planting events. In light of this broadening of the campaign, Planet Ark and sponsor Toyota have commissioned an independent survey to explore Australians' current relationship with the backyard, and attitudes and behaviour in regards to outdoor activity and contact with nature in general. The Planet Ark Outdoor Lifestyle Survey aimed to establish:

- How people define what it means to be Australian in 2013 and whether outdoor activities are a key part of this;
- If there is a link between backyards and the amount of time adults and children spend participating in outdoor recreational activities, as well the types of outdoor activities they do;
- Whether people are concerned about the decline of the backyard.

This year, 1002 Australians aged 14-64 years old were surveyed online in March 2013. The sample was nationally representative in terms of age, gender, location and metropolitan/regional split.

This factsheet summarises the report, which is available at [TreeDay.PlanetArk.org/MissingTrees](http://TreeDay.PlanetArk.org/MissingTrees).

## Losing our religion: Typical Aussie outdoor lifestyle no longer the reality

As Planet Ark's research shows, Australians still see themselves as an outdoor nation, but the reality for many of us is that the outdoors is no longer a significant part of our daily lives. We pride ourselves on being an outdoor culture but we're increasingly moving indoors, and findings from the survey show that people's ideas of what it means to be Australian do not necessarily align with the way many of us now live our lives.

Shrinking backyards, long full-time working hours, and the allure of technology are just some of the factors contributing to this. From the survey, the top three most important aspects of the Australian identity were seen as:

- Having relaxed leisure time;
- Having a home with a backyard; and
- Having barbecues with friends and family.



Parents with young children view having a house with a backyard as the most important characteristic in defining the Australian identity.



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So, is the typical Great Australian Dream – the freestanding house on a quarter-acre block, with space for family barbecues and backyard cricket – still current today?

## A home among the gum trees: more dream than reality

The Planet Ark Survey reveals that a home with a backyard is still held up as the ideal home by many Australians, but for many of us, a house in the suburbs remains just a dream.

- 72% of respondents would prefer to live in either a separate house with a large backyard or on a farm or rural property with an extensive outdoor area, but only just over half (53%) of Australians currently do.
- When asked their opinion on the best type of home for children to grow up in, 83% of people selected either a separate house with a large backyard or a farm or rural property, however, only just over one in two (54%) Australians with children under 16 live in these types of homes.

## Watching the clock: overworked and time-poor

Australians have some of the longest full-time working hours among developed countries.

- Around 1 in 4 Australians report that work often or almost always interferes with activities outside work, while over 68% of working women and 53% of working men often or almost always feel rushed or pressed for time.
- In 2006, Australia ranked fifth lowest out of 18 OECD countries in the proportion of the average day devoted to leisure time. Only 19.6% of an average day (approximately 4.7 hours) was devoted to leisure in Australia compared to 26.5% in Norway and 25% in Finland and Germany.

## Fewer prawns on the barbie

Having a barbecue with family and friends is seen as one of the most quintessential Australian pastimes, by both Australians and people living overseas, but it may not be the iconic Australian pastime it once was.

- 69% of respondents in the Planet Ark Survey view this activity an important part of the Australian

identity, however, only **43% of respondents, or 2 in 5 people, had a barbecue with family and friends in the month prior the survey.**

The fact that this time period was late summer makes this figure even more surprising.

## It's just not cricket: outdoor sport in decline

The Planet Ark Survey shows that backyards and urban parks are the most common places for both adults and children to engage in outdoor recreational activities. However, for a country that has traditionally prided itself on producing great sporting champions, many of whom grew up playing cricket, football and other sports in their backyard, street or local park, a surprisingly low number of Australians now regularly engage in this activity.

- **Only 37% of respondents played casual sports or games in a backyard or park in the month prior to the survey.** Similarly, only 39% of respondents visited a park or reserve in the month before the survey.

## We can't see the forest for the screens

Despite the significant place the bush has traditionally held in the Australian psyche, Australians today do not spend much time in it.

In the 12 months prior to the survey:

- Nearly 2 in 5 respondents (39%) had not visited a national park;
- Nearly 1 in 2 (46%) had not been bushwalking;
- 2 in 3 (66%) had not been camping;
- A staggering 1 in 3 parents with children under 16 (32%) said their children have never been camping and nearly 1 in 3 parents (29%) said their children have never been bushwalking;
- **Just over 1 in 4 children (27%) have never climbed a tree, 28% have never planted or cared for a vegetable garden, and nearly 1 in 3 (31%) have never planted or cared for trees or shrubs.**

In contrast, our love affair with television and the internet shows no sign of abating:

- **For every hour we spend on outdoor recreation, we spend just over seven hours in front of screens watching television or accessing the Internet.**







**1 in 3 respondents spend less than 18 minutes per day doing outdoor recreational activities - about the amount of time it takes to hang out a load of washing.**

## A snapshot of the shrinking Aussie backyard

For most of the 20th century, the typical family home in Australia's cities and towns was a detached house with a large backyard. Since the early 1990s, backyards have been dramatically shrinking due to new houses covering a bigger proportion of the lot, a proliferation of sub-divided blocks with townhouses and apartment complexes, and a reduction in average lot sizes in metropolitan areas, mainly as a result of decreasing supply and rising land costs. Australia now boasts the largest homes in the world.

Furthermore, changes in the working hours of parents, the use of childcare, time pressures on families, and increased uptake of electronic entertainment have all contributed to many Australians placing less value on having a backyard, despite the fact that they still see it as an important part of the Australian identity.

- Between 1984 and 2009, the average floor area of new houses increased from 162.4 square metres to 248.0 square metres, a rise of nearly 53%, despite the average household size in Australia now standing at just 2.6 people.
- Site coverage by houses in new outer suburb developments is usually at least 40% and often in the 50-70% range.

- Government policies, population pressures and high land and housing costs mean the number of houses with large backyards is only going to decrease.

While Australians aged over 30 years are likely to have fond childhood memories of playing in their backyard, climbing trees, swinging on the Hills Hoist, family meals cooked on barbecues, and backyard games like cricket, footy or soccer, for the first time in a number of generations, children today are likely to have a very different set of memories.

## The link between backyard access and outdoor activity

A key aim of the Planet Ark Outdoor Lifestyle Survey was to find out how much time Australians spend doing outdoor recreational activity in a typical week and explore if the time they spend outdoors and range of outdoor activities they do varies depending on whether they have access to a backyard.

- **About 1 in 3 (31%) respondents aged 14-64 years spend on average less than 2 hours per week, the equivalent of 18 minutes per day, doing outdoor recreational activities** like playing sport, exercising, playing with children or a pet,



gardening or just relaxing. This is about the same amount of time it would take many of us to prepare and eat breakfast or hang out a load of washing.

- Focusing on children only, parents reported that 1 in 4 children under 16 years spend on average less than 2 hours per week in their spare time playing in a natural outdoor environment.

The survey results show a clear correlation between backyard size and time spent outdoors. For both adults and children, the larger their backyard, the more time they spend doing outdoor activities.

- Respondents aged 14-64 years spend on average 4.7 hours per week outdoors, regardless of house type.
- **Those living in units or flats spend the least amount of time per week doing outdoor activities – 3.5 hours on average** or just over 10% of leisure time – while those living on farms or rural properties spend the most time outdoors – an average of 6.1 hours per week or 18% of their weekly leisure time. **People living in separate houses with large backyards spend on average 5.1 hrs** or just over 15% of their leisure time doing outdoor recreational activities per week.
- People living in separate homes with large backyards or on farms or rural properties do a wider range of outdoor activities more frequently, including playing sports or games in the backyard, planting and caring for a vegetable garden, and planting and caring for trees, shrubs or bushland.
- Regional Australians spend an average of 5.5 hours per week doing outdoor recreational activities, while Australians living in metropolitan areas spend on average 4.4 hours per week outdoors.
- Focusing on children's outdoor time, the results show that children under 16 years spend on average 5.1 hours per week playing outdoors in natural environments in their spare time (as reported by parents), regardless of the type of home they live in.
- Children living in units and flats spend on average 4.1 hours per week after school and on weekends playing outdoors in nature, while children living on farms or rural properties spend on average 5.7 hours per week playing outdoors.
- Children living in separate homes with large backyards spend on average 5.4 hours per week outdoors in nature in their spare time.

## Shrinking backyards: The concerns and implications

The shift to smaller backyards in suburban Australia has been swift, and in many areas, quite dramatic. The survey found that most Australians are concerned about this issue.

- More than 3 in 4 respondents (77%) have some level of concern about Australia's shrinking backyards and over 40% are very or extremely concerned about the issue.
- Parents with young children are particularly concerned about the loss of the backyard, with 83% indicating they have some level of concern, and around 1 in every 2 parents saying they are very or extremely concerned about the issue.
- The top two concerns about the loss of backyards are the loss of safe, outdoor play spaces for children (56% of respondents chose this as one of their top three concerns) and the loss of Australia's outdoor lifestyle and culture (41% chose this in their top three). Loss of privacy and reduced opportunities for children to learn about nature and the environment also ranked highly (29% of respondents respectively chose these in their top three concerns).

A survey commissioned by Planet Ark in 2011 found that the backyard is still the most common setting for children's outdoor play today, as it was a generation ago. As such, backyards often provide an opportunity to interact with nature, an activity that has many benefits, particularly for the health, wellbeing and development of children.

Backyards play an important role in Australian cities and towns, for the health and wellbeing of adults as well as children, and for the environment, especially given the well-documented shift from outdoor to indoor activities, such as television and electronic games, over recent decades.

With the population of many Australian cities expected to increase significantly over the next four decades, there has been much discussion about the best ways to achieve sustainable urban growth.

Most state governments have sought to limit urban sprawl in recent years and have adopted planning policies that encourage increased urban consolidation and higher density residential development in established suburbs.



This means that more people living in our major cities are likely to have only a small backyard or no backyard at all.

As Planet Ark's research shows, people who have no backyard or only a small outdoor area such as a courtyard spend less time doing outdoor recreational activity than people who have a large backyard. If fewer people in metropolitan areas have access to a backyard in the future, this could impact on Australia's already significant health problems, such as rising rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes and mental health issues. On the environmental front, while proponents of urban consolidation argue that they are more sustainable and have less environmental impact, opponents of high-density living often cite the loss of both private and public green space, and the environmental issues associated with this, as one of the major problems associated with urban consolidation. They argue that fewer backyards could lead to a worsening of issues like the 'heat island' effect, stormwater runoff and the loss of urban biodiversity.

In light of all this, it will become increasingly important for all levels of government, health and environment professionals, and other organisations and individuals with an interest in public health and the environment, to develop strategies to ensure that Australians can continue to reap the benefits of time spent outdoors in



**Contact with nature provides a range of health and wellbeing benefits for both children and adults.**

nature and that the environmental health of our urban areas is maintained. Ensuring the provision of sufficient and accessible public green space in our suburbs is just one such strategy, and nature care events like National Tree Day play an important role in this.

We need to reconnect Australians with the great outdoors and soon – our health and the health of our environment depends on it.

## **Get Outside and Grow: Reconnecting with the great outdoors**

Planet Ark's *Missing Trees* report is essentially a call to action for individuals, families, and schools to reconnect with nature through the backyard, playground and parks of all sizes. One of the easiest ways to do this is through simple actions such as participating in National Tree Day.

National Tree Day is Australia's largest tree planting and nature care event, where kids and their families can get out into nature and have fun in their local environment.

This year, the theme for National Tree Day is "Get Outside and Grow". The focus is on encouraging people to make nature a part of their everyday lives, at home, work, school and in their communities, especially given Planet Ark's research findings.

In addition to thousands of sites at schools, parks, gardens and other locations across the country, individuals and families can also organise personal planting sites at their home with their family, friends and neighbours, in backyards, apartment blocks, nature strips or along their streets (with council approval).

For the past two years, Planet Ark's focus has been to encourage people to participate in National Tree Day as a way to reconnect children and their parents with nature. The research that Planet Ark commissioned Pollinate to undertake for the campaign over the past two years reflects this, focusing in 2011 on the changing nature of childhood outdoor play in recent decades, and in 2012, on the current level of awareness among Australians about the health, wellbeing and development benefits for children of spending time in nature. For further information on all reports in the series, please visit:

[treeday.planetark.org/about/health-benefits.cfm](http://treeday.planetark.org/about/health-benefits.cfm)

