

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting on the grass in a field of cosmos flowers. The man, wearing a dark beanie and a black t-shirt, is leaning over the woman, who is wearing glasses and a dark shirt. They are both smiling and looking at a small white notebook held by the woman. The background is a lush green field with many pink and white cosmos flowers, and trees are visible in the distance.

# YOUNG AUSTRALIAN MIGRANTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

How and why do certain migrants  
practice care?

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## How and why do certain migrants practice care?

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**“When we migrated here, my mother could only find work in a mushroom farm, despite having 3 degrees in Vietnam. We didn’t have a lot of money, and everything in our house was carefully planned. All of our clothes and homewares came from second hand stores, we didn’t travel by car unless absolutely necessary, and single use plastics were only allowed to be use when no other options was available (and even then we reused them). When she was able to buy a house in 2010, she planted as many vegetables as she could in her backyard”.**

## INTRODUCTION

Seventeen first and second-generation migrants residents in Sydney, aged 18-40 years, were interviewed about their environmental care practices. The interview comprised eight first-generation migrants and nine second-generation migrants. It included seven women and ten men. Roughly half of the cohort were parents (8/17). Their countries of origin spanned across ten countries. Participants lived within nine different council areas – these included City of Canterbury Council, Inner West Council, Burwood City Council, The Hills Shire Council, Kuring-gai Council, Parramatta City Council, Blacktown City Council, City of Sydney Council, and Hawkesbury City Council. Eight of the interviewees were identified as ‘influencers’ in terms of trying to spread the word regarding their environmental practices, and they participated in a subsequent online workshop on strategy-sharing.

## MIGRANTS AND ASPIRATION

According to the 2016 census, Australia now has a greater proportion of migrants hailing from Asia than Europe (Liddy, 2018). While the research on multiculturalism at the policy and everyday levels encompasses many waves of post-war migration, as well as several cohorts of international students, those who came to Australia and became Australian since the early 2000s constitute a new and less understood group.

Preliminary research and media commentary indicate that the defining feature of new migrants who were born in Asia and became Australian permanent residents or citizens in the past two decades is their material and social aspiration. Can this be leveraged to seek their contributions to civil society through activities such as volunteering for environmental causes?

This project was designed to provide an in-depth picture of first and second-generation Australian migrants who are young and who care about the environment, how they came to do so, and what these practices of care constitute in terms of a) everyday practices; b) activities during environmental catastrophes such as bushfires; c) online engagement.

First, it is clear that ethnically diverse Australians constitute a rich source of knowledge and practice. Second, a focus on the quotidian sustainabilities of ethnic minority groups may act as a circuit-breaker in existing debates that simplistically blame migrants for environmental harm, and struggle to envision these diverse individuals and groups as more than numbers (2013: 55).

The research questions underpinning the study were as follows:

1. How do recent Australian migrants care about the environment (esp. everyday practice)?
2. What is the role of environmental catastrophes, online groups, news media, school programs and other factors in shaping this group's environmental values?
3. Who are the influencers in these communities with regards to environmental issues, and how can they be leveraged for facilitating broader initiatives?

## METHODS

Recruitment of the interview sample group took place through:

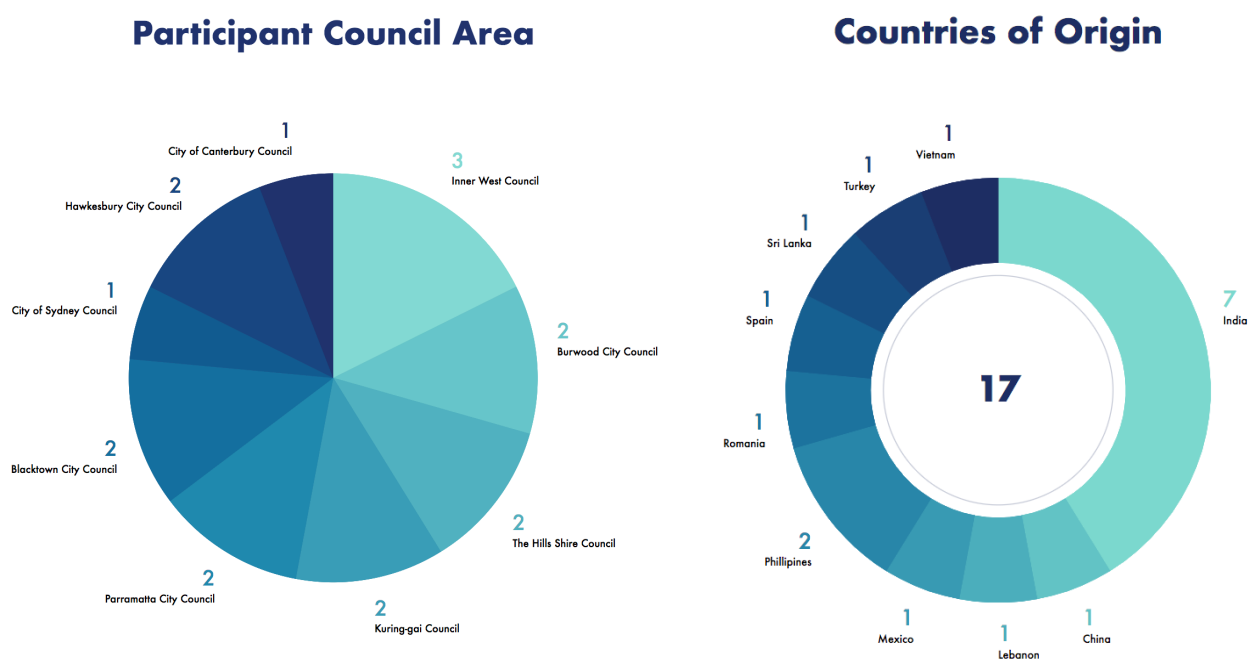
- o Posts on relevant Facebook groups for recent migrants
- o Posts on online pages of relevant university student societies
- o Posts on Facebook pages of environmental organisations
- o Snowballing sampling techniques

**Stage 1 (15 June and 30 July 2020):** 17 participants who meet the inclusion criteria were recruited and semi-structured interviews scheduled with each one of them via phone or the audio-only function on Zoom. These interviews lasted no longer than 45 minutes each. Qualitative interviews were chosen for this stage of the research project as this methodology is the most likely to provide narrative-based, in-depth insights into the participants' interest in, and care for the environment, what form it takes in the everyday, how this interest originated and what it continues to be shaped by, and whether they try to engage others in similar practices.

**Stage 2 (August 2020):** Of the 17 participants recruited for the first stage, 8 were elected for the second stage. This selection was based on their availability and interest in contributing to a broader discussion on strategy-sharing. About 5 working days before the scheduled online workshop, the participants received a brief article via email. This took no longer than 15 minutes to read, and was about citizen contributions to environmental care. The workshop itself was one-hour long, and commenced with introductions, followed by a specific discussion of the prescribed article, and an open discussion on Australia's environmental problems. Following this, all participants shared ideas and strategies to come up with a 3-point action plan (from the perspectives of local government, environmental organisations, and new citizens).

The study utilised 'community-based participatory research,' a methodology that actively builds community capacities and empowerment by bringing together academic and community knowledge (Israel et al, 2010). This was undertaken through an action research approach that seeds and facilitates new Australian citizens' approaches to environmental care.

Data was coded on NVivo, and analysed using thematic analysis.



## FINDINGS

### Environmental practices

With respect to everyday care practices, an NVIVO word frequency query revealed the participants' ten most frequent words to be recycle (22), plastics (21), bin (12), water (11), compost (10), food (9), conversation (9), buy (8), meat (7), and solar (7). These results are consistent with the migrants' interview testimonies, which highlight that they both actively and consciously carry out various environmental care practices – but mostly within the domestic sphere. Recycling, repurposing, austerity with water and electricity, home vegetable gardens and compost, installation of solar panels, and ethical purchase and consumption were at the forefront of migrant environmental practice.

A word frequency query was also conducted across gender. The women's top ten words included people (41), recycling (36), plastics (35), friends (27), environmental (25), council (24), environment (24), bin (23), water (22), group (20), and school (20). The men's top ten words included recycling (44), people (42), environmental (41), environment (37), plastic (31), conversation (30), water (29), family (28), food (25), and council (21). The query indicates that gender differences across everyday care practices are superficial. Interestingly, however, although the query suggests that women may be concerned with council and council activities more than men (24 vs 21 mentions), a thorough examination of the transcript data does not support this conclusion since only three participants are actively engaged with council – two of which are men.

A query was also run for potential generational differences in everyday care practices; these results also indicated a superficial difference in care practices. Notably, however, second-generation migrants were much more likely to make the environmentally-motivated choice to become vegan and/or vegetarian. Of the seventeen participants, 5 were vegan and/or vegetarian, only one of which was a first-generation migrant. NVIVO also revealed a small margin of difference with respect to public activism, with only two mentions of protests across first generation migrants – march (1), and protest (1). In contrast, six mentions occurred across second-generation migrants – protests (3), marches (1), protesting (1), rally (1) – suggesting that second-generation migrants have slightly, but not significantly, more engagement with outward forms of environmental activism. This is consistent with the interview data from second-generation migrants, which expressed an ambivalent level of engagement with organised political movements. Second-generation migrants often expressed that first-generation migrants were more likely to be alienated and disenfranchised from public activism due to language barriers, alternative priorities that come with navigating a foreign country, a general evasion of politics, and fears of racism. Second-generation migrants born in Australia were better equipped to overcome these barriers and felt somewhat more comfortable and 'entitled' to participate in the political sphere.

### Influences – university, friends, parents

The majority of the participants cited their parents, general upbringing, and cultural context as the biggest source of inspiration for their environmental practice/consciousness. Both first and second-generation participants expressed that from a young age they continued the austerity practices and waste-consciousness that they inherited from their parents – these primarily included recycling, repurposing, austerity measures, and gardening/agriculture. However, second-generation migrants often expressed that their parents were 'accidentally' environmentally friendly due to their general material and economic frugality and connection to land – that is to say, although first-generation migrants did not employ the mainstream environmental vocabulary to frame their practices, their practices nonetheless were very much in alignment with green goals. Second-generation migrants were more likely to frame their care practices with an intentional and conscious environmental language.

Education and schooling was the second most popular category of influence. The participants who did not cite their parents as their primary environmental influence instead cited schooling or an organic 'awareness' that could not be located in any particular sphere of influence.

The recent bushfires over the summer of 2020 were not particularly responsible for the inception of environmental awareness among the participants. However, this event was cited as a traumatic reminder of climate change which motivated the participants to practice environmental care. The bushfires were particularly pertinent to parents, who were forced to confront the kind of world their children will inherit. Among the participants, a more intentional interest in water conservation was the most popular response to the bushfires.

The vast majority of participants were not involved in any online or offline environmental groups. Only 2 participants actively engaged in online and/or offline environmental groups, and both these participants were women (one first-generation, the other second-generation). Participants often cited a preference to donate money to environmental causes or sign petitions, usually due to time deficits. Other participants located their environmental activism outside of organised groups and in more individualised, quotidian domains such as influencing family/peers through conversation, their work initiatives, or voting green with their money.

Upon reviewing the interview data, only three participants<sup>1</sup> were actively engaged with their local council. The bulk of participants claimed to be somewhat disengaged from their council and only marginally aware of their environmental initiatives. Despite this limited level of engagement, roughly half of the participants believed that their councils were doing well with respect to environmental initiatives. Further, many participants also expressed that their councils could be doing more for the environment and expressed a desire to be more involved with council initiatives. A lack of time for extra-curricular activities was the most commonly cited reason for non-involvement.





## Outreach

Contrary to a public discourse which suggests that migrants are indifferent to the environment, this study finds that first and second-generation migrants are already performing everyday modes of environmental care within their homes. First and second-generation migrants are holistically conscious about reducing waste, prioritising recycling, repurposing, minimalism, and home-grown initiatives such as composting and vegetable gardens. Whilst migrants are underrepresented in public movements such as protests and rallies, or community initiatives such as council meetings and environmental groups, the interviews suggest that the root cause for disengagement is not indifference but rather language barriers, a different set of priorities, and a general hesitation to be hypervisible and vulnerable in political spaces.

Second-generation migrants are more likely to adopt a mainstream environmental vocabulary to frame their care acts, whilst first-generation migrants are less likely to do so. This is not to suggest, however, that all second-generation migrants perform care acts with the intention of being environmentally friendly – it is only to state that second-generation migrants are more likely to be intentional about the environment. The interview data nonetheless finds that, generally speaking, most migrants are highly likely to be environmentally friendly whether they intend to be or not.

### As one participant explains:

“Migrants are often the most environmentally conscious people I know. They’re not purposefully being conscious, but they know about the scarcity of resources and its engrained into them so it’s part of their lifestyle. I know a lot of peers who talk about the environment every day, who are technically

environmentally conscious, but their daily habits are nowhere near as environmentally conscious as migrant – especially people who come from a lot poorer country. They don’t think about the environment so much, they just think about saving resources, but they have a much bigger impact.”

Given that neither indifference nor misplaced values are the primary motives for disengagement with outward forms of environmental activism, and given that migrant communities are already observing high levels of environmentally friendly behaviour, this study suggests that migrant communities have huge potentiality for bolstering environmental care acts. The interview data suggests that migrants are not disinterested in expanding their environmental ethic to greater modes of practice. The question of outreach, however, is raised. The participants cited social safety and accessibility as two key factors that could aid in reaching out to migrant communities. This means that language barriers need to be overcome, diverse spaces need to be outlined within the green movement, and environmental initiatives from councils and groups need to be more clearly and effectively communicated to migrant communities.

Given that many participants cited personal success stories with respect to influencing their peers' environmental philosophies, community champions and influencers can perhaps be an effective way to reach migrant communities. Many migrant communities have local figures of influence who could be targeted to communicate and translate environmental initiatives to their communities. What also becomes clear is that second-generation migrants are hugely influential within their own family and peer groups. Second-generation migrants are well-positioned to perform outreach within their own family groups, and testimonies from the interview data attest to the success of everyday conversation. Younger migrant generations may hold the most potential for outreach.

**“In my council meetings, I’m one of the few migrants...They’re not confident yet about how much information they know and how much they’re missing out on. Even if they want to raise their voice they’re hesitant and worried that they’re saying something wrong.”**

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

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**First-generation migrants need further training so they feel confident in being involved with local councils' sustainability measures.**

2

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**Second-generation migrants can be leveraged as a vital source for passing on and changing their parents' practices.**

3

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**Most migrants, especially those who are new to their areas after building or purchasing a house there need more awareness of their local council's environmental care programs, and opportunities to be involved through volunteering.**

4

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**A dedicated page within a social media platform would assist with understanding daily environmental practices of various kinds for this cohort. These could be council-specific, or run by another kind of organisation invested in grassroots change.**

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