

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS DISCUSSION PAPER**

**21 January 2024**

### **1. PURPOSE**

This brief paper has been prepared at the request of the NMC at its meeting on 4 December 2023 following a presentation by Peter Watts. It is intended to be discussed at the next NMC in February 2024 and any further action determined at that meeting.

The paper discusses the changes in the environment within which the AGHS operates since the it was formed in 1980. It acknowledges how the Society has reflected these changes and contemplates whether this should be more formally recognised.

The paper may, in its present form, or after amendment by the NMC, form the basis for a broad discussion within the Society should the NMC decide this would be appropriate.

### **2. AUTHORS**

The paper has been prepared by Peter Watts and Colleen Morris, both former Chairs of the NMC.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

The AGHS was formed in March 1980. The primary impetus was to establish a way to continue and enhance the work done in each state by studies that had identified gardens of historic significance during the late 1970s.

In establishing the AGHS there were several driving ambitions:

- To expose and share the richness of historic gardens that had been identified across the country and draw attention to, and advocate for, their needs;
- To foster an interest in gardens from a broad literary, scientific, artistic and historic perspective;
- To manage the AGHS through a devolved State Chapter structure that encouraged local participation and the different values and circumstances in each state.

The primary focus in the early years was on 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century gardens. Since those times there has, inevitably, been a change in the environment within which the AGHS operates. Some of the major changes might be summarised as:

- the development of statutory listing and planning control of some gardens and landscapes;
- a vast amount of knowledge about historic gardens in Australia has become available through many publications (including those of the AGHS), exhibitions, research projects, Trove, development of specialist libraries and databases, Open Gardens Schemes and

- other means of accessing gardens. This is reflected in a much greater maturity and sophistication of knowledge of the subject;
- an increasing interest in First Nations' approaches to landscape management and in a Country-centred approach where we value people and nature equally, For new design this is exemplified by the NSW Government Architect's document Connecting with Country Framework ( <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/government-architect-nsw/policies-and-frameworks/connecting-with-country>);
  - the Australian Landscape Conference has brought a new sophistication and international perspective to landscape and garden design in Australia;
  - growing concerns about the impact of climate change on gardens and landscapes;
  - the development of sustainable and regenerative agriculture together with the accompanying knowledge, skills and experience in their implementation and the better management of agricultural landscapes;
  - concerns about the degradation of agricultural and mined landscapes and their rehabilitation;
  - the growth of the environmental movement;
  - a more sophisticated approach to contemporary garden and park design;
  - the development, growth and complementary interest of other organisations (AILA, ICOMOS, Australian Forest History Society) in some of these issues;

The AGHS has increasingly reflected these matters in various ways – through its updated constitution, journal, activities, funding and advocacy programs. It is perhaps most palpable at its annual conference which now invariably includes First Nations participation and acknowledgment, and in positioning the conference venue in its broad historical, geological and landscape setting. This all seems to be enjoyed and accepted by the membership. Indeed, the Hobart conference in 2023 was even titled Landscape on the Edge: Challenge and Opportunity and the issue of a change of focus was raised at that conference by the Patron, Tim Entwisle, in his closing remarks. This was followed up by the Conference Chair, Prue Slatyer in the Editorial in the January 2023 issue of Australian Garden History. Also, in Max Bourke's recent obituary for John Gray he quotes John as saying: We can't afford to ignore the way in which the planet works. We cannot afford to ignore its natural ecosystems and the resources we're benefiting from.'<sup>1</sup>

Since much of this change relates to landscape, as opposed to gardens, it comes as something of a surprise to recognise how profound this shift has become within the AGHS. That is not to say that the interest of members in historic gardens is any less intense, nor the need for vigilance and advocacy less required. But perhaps it has become more of a pleasure than previously when it was more a revelation?

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/2023/11/dr-john-gray-oam-a-remarkable-man-of-the-trees>)

Whilst preparing this Discussion Paper we became aware Tim Entwisle had prepared his own paper as a consequence of his comments at the Hobart conference and this is attached. Whilst this has a particular focus on nomenclature it grapples with similar issues about the changing nature of the society's interests and how to reflect this.

Informal discussions with members of the Society also indicate that there is a mood, at least amongst some, for some form of change or recognition that reflects and consolidates this new reality.

#### **4. THE FUTURE**

The foregoing begs the question: Should the AGHS reflect these changes in a more formal or structured way?

In contemplating this question the following issues might be considered:

- By reflecting these current community and member interests and concerns would the Society attract new and possibly younger members? Conversely would a change of emphasis cause current members to leave? And would it, as Tim Entwisle discusses, become a society for everything? We are the only society that is a knowledge leader in Australian garden and gardening history.
- How would a changed AGHS deal with its traditional interests?
- How should the membership be included in any discussion about future directions?
- Does the Society have the capacity to add to its existing program?
- What would any change look like? Options might be:
  - No change – continue as at present continuing to reflect and embrace new thinking but without any more formal/structural change;
  - Moderate change – actively encourage, in all possible ways, the inclusion of a landscape focus, possibly at the expense of the major focus on historic gardens issues;
  - Name change – a change of name reflecting a new focus on landscape issues whilst retaining an interest in historic gardens. During the course of discussing this with a small number of people during the preparation of this paper the following names have been suggested:
    - Australian Garden+Landscape History Society
    - Australian Landscape Heritage
    - Australian Cultural Landscape Heritage
    - Heritage Landscapes Australia
    - Cultural Landscapes Australia

Amalgamation and/or closer collaboration – possibly with the Forest History Society (its website says it has 90 members), AILA, Australian Landscape Conference, National Trust etc.

#### **5. SUBMITTED TO THE NMC FOR DISCUSSION FEB 2024**

**Colleen & Peter**

## ***For pleasure and ornament***

Tim Entwisle

Updated May 2024

*Gardens are places where plants are cultivated primarily for pleasure or ornament*

In my closing remarks at the 2022 National Conference of the Australian Garden History Society, I observed that this was a 'knowledge society', one that generates, shares and applies knowledge to foster human development. At least that's how I was quoted in an Editorial in the society's magazine, *Australian Garden History*, soon after<sup>i</sup>.

Convenor of the Hobart conference, Prue Slatyer, asked in her editorial how the society might strengthen its role in support of this intent. The answer emerging from the conference, wrote Prue, was to broaden its scope beyond gardens to landscapes more generally. As a provocation in my remarks, I asked when I might be able to introduce the society 'the Cultural Landscape Society of Australia'. Was this a better name for a society with a mission to 'promote awareness and conservation of significant gardens and cultural landscapes'?

Prue Slatyer mused a little further on what that change might mean, including a broader cultural as well as spatial perspective. She suggested better integration of knowledge from First Nations people, a continued focus on climate change (at that same meeting I launched the society's Climate Change Position Statement) and more advocacy on behalf of significant gardens and cultural landscapes.

With time to cogitate further, my thinking has changed on both the name of the society and its scope. Not that I was advocating for CLSA to replace AGHS! However, I do think it is time to reexamine the society's nomenclature.

I'm not interested here in the etymology of the word 'garden', although I note, as does horticultural taxonomist and historian, Roger Spencer, in his essay *What is a garden?*<sup>ii</sup>, that most derivations include an enclosure or as Roger puts it, a 'bounded space'. Roger skirts around our need and indeed our ability to define 'garden' more precisely, but considers in addition to a bounded space, the need for cultivated plants to be present and managed, and for the garden to be usually associated with some dwelling such as a house.

This is close to where most dictionaries land. Common to most on the internet (Cambridge, Oxford and Collins) and my own printed copy of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, is a piece of land near a house where flowers and various other plant-life are grown. It may also be a public park with similar ornaments, such as a botanic garden.

Dr Samuel Johnson<sup>iii</sup> favoured 'a piece of ground enclosed, and cultivated with extraordinary care, planted with herbs or fruits for food, or laid out for pleasure'. I like his typical flourish about extraordinary care but more so his desire to define a purpose to the garden, and particularly the final option, 'laid out for pleasure' (noting that a commercial orchard today would fall within Johnson's other purpose). As with my attempts to diagnose a 'botanic garden' over the years, I prefer definitions based on intent or purpose, rather than traits.

Accordingly, my submission is: *gardens are places where plants are cultivated primarily for pleasure or ornament*. This intent would exclude things that most people would not consider gardens, such as landscapes managed primarily for pasture or agricultural crops;

ecosystems restored or regenerated, and large tracts of land where human impacts are few. Although excluded from the definition, these may be topics to explore to better understand gardens themselves.

I now want to avoid the term 'cultural landscape' because on further reflection I think all landscapes are cultural in some way, and even more narrowly, all landscapes are manipulated deliberately or indirectly by human culture. That may be weed control and cultural or prescribed burning at one extreme, to inadvertent bushfires and weed introductions at the other. It also includes human impacts on the climate.

I've used the word 'cultivated' as a softer (and therefore more acceptable?) term than 'managed' or 'manipulated', but they are much the same thing. Other words such as 'weed' and 'prescribed' are with used trepidation but for convenience. The terms 'pleasure' and 'ornament' are equally fraught, but I have in mind something similar to what British garden writer Edward Hyams observed (as quoted by Roger in his essay), that gardens are 'surplus to necessity'. Not that they don't enrich and save lives, but they are by and large something we pursue beyond mere survival.

If a garden is a place where plants are cultivated primarily for pleasure or ornament, does that work for the Australian Garden History Society? My understanding is that it was established in 1980 to bring attention to the planted landscapes of larger properties and estates, to appreciate, promote and care for these significant creations. My definition includes them. It also includes smaller home gardens, a herb garden created for effect as well as produce, a balcony ensemble of pot plants, and a raked sand garden as long as there is a pine tree at one end.

While an orchard, canola crop or river red gum spotted grazing land may be intensely pleasurable, I would say my definition excludes them. Similarly left out are forests, grasslands and heath that may look like they do thanks to management by humans over centuries or millennia – again acknowledging they can bring great pleasure and ornament.

None of this is to exclude such topics for the purview of the society, just to not have them as its primary purpose. Otherwise, it becomes a society for everything, which would result (I think) in a society for no one. I no longer call for us to become a society for 'cultural landscapes' but I do rather like the conceit of a knowledge society for gardens.

We should make at least a few tweaks to nomenclature. I was *going* to suggest that we simplify the society's mission by removing the arguably superfluous term 'cultural landscapes', given all I've written above. However, these words were added quite recently with careful and worthy intent, and the word 'landscapes' warrants a place somewhere in our societal descriptors. It is worth thinking about whether 'cultural' is the right adjective (or indeed if any adjective is needed) preceding 'landscapes', but for now let's leave the mission intact.

More importantly, I think the word 'history' is too restrictive for all that we do. I'm keen on history myself but I don't think it needs to be in the name of the society. The important ingredients for me are 'Australia' and 'Garden'. Which led to my first attempt at a new name, 'Australian Garden Society'. I shared this with the National Management Committee and others prior to their meeting in Melbourne, on 4 February 2024.

Between sharing and the meeting, I was discussing the matter with my close confident, and also deputy-chair of the Victorian Branch and AGHS (Vic) newsletter editor, Lynda Entwisle. She suggested adding the word 'heritage', which includes concepts of conservation, preservation and caring for places. All very apt. That led us to 'Garden Heritage Australia', ridding our name of the word 'society' and 'history', adding in the well understood term 'heritage', and giving the whole thing a bit of pizzazz by reordering the words to make it more contemporary.

With either Australian Garden Society or Garden Heritage Australia – and I'm now favouring the latter – our current mission statement works well (with some tweaking if we want) and the journal could keep its name *Australian Garden History* (to create a point of difference with the society name and to make it easier for librarians!).

Elsewhere, we might strengthen any statements about the society to make it clear we are interested in gardens big and small, and that our definition of garden is broad and inclusive. A pithier statement (a byline or slogan) could be drawn from the mission, to make it abundantly clear that we include gardens and other 'constructed living landscapes' (and these are *not* the right words). We remain a society but don't need to go on about it in our name.

I'm comfortable that in both titles, the word 'garden' refers to places rather than 'gardening' as a practice. How we garden will inevitably form part of the society's consideration, but it is not its primary purpose. Similarly, our inevitable interest in individual plants should accompany rather than dominate our intellectual interest in the history, management and care of places where plants are cultivated primarily for pleasure and ornament. Let me leave it here, ripe and ready for debate, and before I change my mind.

Let me leave it here, ripe and ready for debate, and before I change my mind again.

Regards  
Tim

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<sup>i</sup> Slatyer, P. 2023. Editorial from Hobart conference convener. *Australian Garden History* 34: 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Spencer, R. 2019. What is a Garden? *Plants, People, Planet: An Australian Perspective* [website], 1 March 2019. <https://plantspeopleplanet.au/what-is-a-garden/>

<sup>iii</sup> Johnson, S. 1785. *Dictionary of the English Language*. 6<sup>th</sup> edn.