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Lena Dominelli, Bala Raju Nikku, Hok Bun Ku

Greening Australian social work practice and education

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Sharlene Nipperess, Jennifer Boddy
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Greening Australian social work practice and education

Sharlene Nipperess and Jennifer Boddy

Introduction

Australia’s environment is unique and diverse. It is renowned for its extraordinary wildlife and spectacular landscapes. But Australia’s environment is also at great risk. Mining, logging, land clearing and the impacts of climate change threaten habitats and all that live within these environments. Australian social workers have long considered environmental issues in their practice and within social work education. However, it is only relatively recently that a commitment to environmental justice has begun to influence mainstream social work.

This chapter will provide an overview of Australian social work’s responses to environmental issues in social work education and practice. It begins with an analysis of the environmental context in which social work is practised in Australia. It then explores the key themes that Australian social work practitioners and academics have focused on including practice in relation to climate change-induced disasters, place-based green social work, the relationship between gender and environmental issues, the role of eco-social transitions, eco-spiritual perspectives, ecological living in social work practice and education, and social work education and the environment. The chapter concludes with a number of recommendations for Australian social work to further embrace green social work practice and education.

Background

Australia, the sixth largest country in the world measured by total area, is diverse in climate, geology, flora and fauna. Its habitats include the tropics of northern Australia, alpine heaths of central Victoria and New South Wales, semi-arid and desert habitats of central Australia and rich marine environments around its coastline. It is one of the oldest, driest, flattest continents in the world and because of its relative geographic isolation, a high proportion of Australia’s flora and fauna is unique. Consequently, there are numerous and well-known United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage listed sites including the Great Barrier Reef, the Tasmanian Wilderness and Kakadu National Park (UNESCO, 2016). Despite the incredible biodiversity of Australia, many of these World Heritage Sites and other significant areas of Australia are at risk. Mining, land clearing for large-scale agricultural
development and logging are destroying many of these natural habitats (The Wilderness Society, 2016) and climate change continues to have a significant and deleterious effect on the environment and all that live within it.

Climate change is the most serious environmental threat to Australia. Indeed the most significant environmental event of 2016 was caused by climate change. After two of the hottest years on record in 2015 and 2016, the Great Barrier Reef experienced its worst bleaching event with researchers finding that two-thirds of the northern corals have died (Hughes et al., 2016). This bleaching could not have occurred without climate change and increases in water temperature caused by global warming (King et al., 2016). Extreme weather has always occurred in Australia – cyclones, droughts, bushfires, floods, but climate change has been shown to make these extreme weather events more frequent and more severe (Hope et al., 2016). In the last 10 years, Australia has experienced a number of sudden and catastrophic weather events that have destroyed lives, homes, crops and habitats including: the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires that killed 173 people and damaged over 2000 homes; numerous Category 5 tropical cyclones; widespread damaging floods; and heat waves. Drought, which is less sudden, but no less catastrophic, continues to have a significant impact on the Australian environment, and the wildlife and people living within affected areas.

Social workers in Australia have long been interested in the relationship between the natural environment and social work (e.g. Bull, 1976; Penton, 1993; Ife, 1995; Lane, 1997; McKinnon, 2001; Alston and Kent, 2004), though arguably it has been marginal in social work practice and education until relatively recently. The Australian literature on environmental social work has increased exponentially in the last 10 years, and especially since 2012, with the development of a significant body of literature that explores environmental social work generally (e.g. McKinnon, 2001, 2008, 2012, 2013; Molyneux, 2010; Boetto, 2016a, 2016b; Bowles, Boetto et al., 2016; Alston, 2017; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017a). There is also a large body of Australian literature focused on specific themes including practice in relation to climate change-induced disasters, place-based green social work, the relationship between gender and environmental issues, the importance of eco-social transitions, eco-spirituality, ecological living, and social work education and the environment. We will discuss each of these themes in detail, although this body of Australian literature has not developed in isolation. It has developed alongside and in collaboration with the significant scholarship on social work and the environment in the international context (e.g. Dominelli, 2011, 2012, 2013; Alston and Besthorn, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012, 2016).

**Practice in relation to climate change-induced disasters**

Australian social workers have considered the practice implications of climate change-induced disasters for a number of years. Margaret Alston has been a pioneer in this work and has drawn particular attention to the impacts of slow-onset climate changes on rural communities (Alston and Kent, 2004, 2008; Alston, 2006; 2007; 2010a; 2010b; 2012; 2013). Slow-onset disasters include droughts and climate change, which can last for several years.

Australia is particularly vulnerable to droughts. Historical climate records show that Australia has experienced droughts regularly but the worst recorded drought was the recent Millennium Drought, where well below normal rainfall was recorded for several years from 2001 to 2009 (Trewin, 2013). The Millennium Drought affected all Australians as water storages were reduced and there were severe water restrictions experienced across Australia. Cities and towns responded by introducing new and innovative measures to save water. However, it was the rural areas, and particularly the Murray-Darling River Catchment Area that were particularly badly affected because significantly reduced or even no rainfall over subsequent years had a severe...
impact on crops, livestock and peoples’ livelihoods. Entire families and communities found themselves in perilous financial situations with crop after crop failing due to lack of rain.

After such a dry period it is unsurprising that the countryside is particularly vulnerable to bushfires. In the last year of the Millennium Drought, the state of Victoria experienced the Black Saturday bushfires, which killed 173 people, destroyed over 2000 homes and hectares of forests and untold wildlife. Although bushfires have always been part of the Australian landscape, with some species of plants requiring fire for their seeds to germinate, research has shown that bushfires have increased in frequency by 40 per cent in the last five years (Dutta, 2016). Droughts are often broken by flooding rains and over the past 10 years, Australia has experienced a number of damaging floods including the Queensland floods in 2011 which killed 37 people and destroyed vast swathes of the environment causing millions of dollars in property damage. In the last 10 years, five Category 5 cyclones have lashed Australia’s coast, again causing millions of dollars of property damage and significantly impacting on the natural environment.

Much of the Australian literature on environmental social work has explored the impacts of these disasters on people and communities affected, and the implications of this for social work practice and social work education. Australian researchers have explored the impact of drought on rural communities (Alston and Kent, 2004; Alston, 2006; Alston, 2007; Stehlik, 2013), bushfires (Alston et al., 2016; Hickson and Lehmann, 2014), floods (Shevaller and Westoby, 2014), and climate change and disaster social work generally (Alston, 2010a, 2013, 2017; Appleby et al., 2017; Hetherington and Boddy, 2013). The literature identifies three phases following a catastrophic disaster: the immediate crisis period, the medium-term recovery stage and long-term social work responses (Dominelli, 2012; Alston, 2013; Alston, Hazeleger and Hargreaves, 2016). However, social work practice in climate disasters of slow onset such as drought looks somewhat different to social work practice following catastrophic events. Stehlik (2013: 138) argues that ‘what is unique and unusual about drought in Australia, and the social work response, is that it is not a named “disaster” and is, therefore, not dealt with under emergency management framework’ (emphasis in original). This is in stark contrast with the way catastrophic events are managed. In an emergency, Australian governments are very quick to respond and this includes ensuring that social workers are available to work with people affected by the disaster in the immediate crisis period, through to long-term recovery. The nature of the crisis is, therefore, somewhat different.

Climate change–induced disasters are not the same as other environmental disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis, which have been experienced in the Pacific region and have caused such devastation. However, in relation to climate change, Alston argues:

> that social workers have the capacity, experience and skills to build new knowledge of people and place and to bring to global forums their understanding of the social consequences of climate and environmental challenges in different locations and circumstances.

(2017: 102)

It is clear that as climate change makes the likelihood of such disasters occurring more frequent, social work is in a good place to act both locally and globally to work towards a more socially and environmentally just future.

**Place-based green social work**

The concept of place is increasingly being understood as a key concept for social work and is particularly relevant for environmental social work. While social work has arguably always
understood the importance of the connection between people and communities, it has been slow to understand the connection between people and their physical environment, although highlighted in earlier literature unlinked to environmental social work, such as Dominelli (2002). Alston et al. (2016: 159) note the ‘importance of the physical environment in which people live, as being equally significant to a person’s understanding of self’. When the physical environment is lost, such as in bushfires and floods, there are significant implications for a person’s sense of self and well-being.

In relation to the particular places where social work is practised, social work in Australia has long grappled with the particular challenges faced by people living in rural, regional and remote parts of Australia (see Maidment and Bay, 2012). Australia has a relatively small population of 24 million and although it has one of the lowest population densities in the world, given that most of the population lives around the coast predominantly in the southeast corner, it is also one of the most urbanised (see Australian Government, 2015). Nevertheless, there is a substantial population that live in rural, regional and remote areas of the country and these areas are particularly vulnerable to disasters. Perhaps due to this, much of the environmental social work literature originated from social workers practicing and researching in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia. This has focused largely on the impact of drought (Alston and Kent, 2004; Alston, 2006; Alston, 2007; Stehlik, 2013) as discussed in the section on practice in relation to climate change-induced disasters. Also, the Australian literature explores how rural communities respond to broader issues of climate change and sustainability, advocating that these issues should be incorporated into social work practice (Alston, 2012; Alston et al., 2016; Mason, 2011; see also Dominelli, 2012, 2013 from the United Kingdom) and social work education (Dominelli, 2012; Crawford et al., 2015).

**The relationship between gender and environmental issues**

Like others (Dominelli, 2012), Australian authors have highlighted how climate change and environmental degradation affects those most marginalised (Hetherington and Boddy, 2013), and they have focused extensively on the gendered impacts of climate change. Alston (2000) for example has consistently argued that because women in Australia and globally are less likely than men to own land and other resources, it is more difficult for them to recover from environmental disasters. Further, they are less able to be involved in decision-making and thus have greater difficulty expressing their needs (Alston, 2000, 2013). Women working on family farms are particularly disadvantaged. They often work on the farm as well as away from the farm to generate income for the family. They engage extensively in household and non-paid caring work, they often manage the household finances, and will undertake volunteer work within the community to support others (Alston, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2010b; Alston and Kent, 2004). The strain placed on families as a result of climate change has resulted in increased incidences of domestic violence, business decline, increases in the costs of living and increased workloads (Boetto and McKinnon, 2013). It is also compounded by cultural norms that encourage women to prioritise the emotional and physical health and well-being of family members and the community at their own expense, and has led many women to become the ‘guardian of men’s health’ (Alston, 2010b: 66).

Such issues not only adversely affect women, but also men. Alston (2012; Alston and Kent, 2008) and Pease (2014) argue that dominant hegemonic masculinity prevents positive adaptation to climate change and disasters. It damages men’s sense of self-worth when they are no longer the primary income earner; invites men to remain stoic and prevents them from seeking help; and focuses on individualism resulting in many men blaming themselves for their struggles
rather than seeing them in the wider context of climate change (Alston, 2012). While men’s privileged positioning has traditionally allowed them to preserve their power and influence, in times of stress resulting from climate change, it is grossly unhealthy and leaves many men isolated (Alston, 2012; Pease, 2014) with poor physical and mental health and much higher rates of suicide than those living in urban areas (Alston, 2012).

Australian social workers, among others (e.g. Dominelli, 2012; 2013), have proposed a number of approaches to address gender inequalities and unhelpful gender role norms. These approaches have tended to be grounded in a commitment to gender equality, social justice, human rights, democracy and empowerment of oppressed peoples. For instance, Alston argues for an ecological and ecofeminist approach so that social workers can build knowledge of environmental and climate crisis work (Alston, 2013; see also Lane, 1997). She also advocates a rights-based framework that is sensitive to gender (Alston, 2010b; see also Ife, 2012). Pease (2014) stipulates that knowledge of feminist theory and critical masculinity studies is essential for disaster management and prevention, while Boetto and McKinnon (2013) suggest that collective action within a community-based approach would be useful. Irrespective of the theoretical framework, there is consensus in Australian literature (Alston, 2013; Pease, 2014) and beyond (Dominelli, 2012) that gender analysis must be central to social work practice and policy development.

Eco-social transition, ecological living and eco-spiritual perspectives

Traditionally Australian social workers have been influenced by eco-social approaches such as Besthorn (2000, 2002) and more recently by green social work and its commitment to environmental justice (see Dominelli, 2012). Australian social workers have sought to promote eco-social transition and sustainability through community development initiatives and advocacy. Lane (1997) points out that social workers have been involved in local area planning and community action over pollution and development. This is more likely to be successful when social workers understand that community development is a long-term process and not an emergency response to disasters (Shevallar and Westoby, 2014). Further, it must be supported by colleagues and managers (McKinnon, 2013), where practitioners have good supervision and peer support networks, undertake comprehensive training, recognise the power of discourses, and challenge therapeutic language (Shevallar and Westoby, 2014).

Recently, the focus of Australian social work academics has been on the importance of holistic practice and the benefits of connecting with nature (Boetto, 2016a; Heinsch, 2012; Ryan, 2013). Heinsch (2012) encourages social workers to engage in a nature-based approach to practice. She suggests that social workers should include connection with the natural environment and with pets in their assessments, adopt nature-based activities in practice, introduce nature in everyday surroundings, provide opportunities for clients to view and interact with nature while visiting services, and promote environmental awareness, among other things. Boetto (2016a) extends the work in this field by encouraging social workers to adopt a distinct philosophical base that includes a holistic worldview, recognises the interdependence of all life, seeks global citizenship within the profession, values cultural diversity, and adopts values related to sustainability and degrowth. She also suggests that as a profession social work must reconceptualise what well-being means so that it includes sustainable and relational attributes (Boetto and Bowles, 2017). Finally Ryan (2013) has written extensively about social work, animals and the natural world.

Australian social workers, among others such as Coates (Coates et al., 2006), Hart (2002), Bruyere (2001), and Dominelli (2010) have also begun to explore how Indigenous perspectives can be embedded in environmental social work, particularly in relation to eco-spiritual
perspectives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived in Australia for many thousands of years. During this time, Australia’s First Nation peoples have cared for this land using ecological knowledge passed on from generation to generation. Gray and Coates (2013) argue that Indigenous eco-spiritual approaches can provide useful insights, as well as innovations, that can be used to address climate change and other global challenges (see also Coates et al., 2006). They also note that ‘the eco-spiritual perspective recognises human interests are inextricably bound with planetary well-being’ (Gray and Coates, 2013: 356).

In recognition of the importance of promoting sustainability, eco-social transition, and connection with the natural environment, there has been a very recent focus in Australian social work literature on drawing from and collaborating with diverse knowledge bases and initiatives (Bay, 2013; Boddy and Ramsay, 2017; Green and McDermott, 2010; Boetto, 2016a). Bay (2013), for instance, examined a transition town movement within a rural Australian town, while Boddy and Ramsay (2017) explored the practice of permaculture in a metropolitan region of Australia. Both found that the skills and values adopted in these initiatives aligned well with social work. For example, skills and knowledge in community work, group work, leadership and relationship building were important in both studies. Participants from both studies valued social justice and living sustainably. As part of adopting diverse approaches to eco-social transition and sustainability it is important for social workers to draw knowledge from both the natural and social sciences (Green and McDermott, 2010) and, as advocated in a green social work approach (Dominelli, 2012), incorporate art, music, poetry, videos, animations and other means to communicate and create knowledge.

Social work education and the environment

Twenty-nine Australian universities offer qualifying social work degrees. There has traditionally been limited engagement with environmental content in these degrees (Jones, 2010; Boetto and Bell, 2015; Harris and Boddy, 2017). However, Australian authors have long argued for the incorporation of ecological literacy (Jones, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013; McKinnon, 2013; Gray and Coates, 2015). Fortunately, positive change is occurring. Crawford et al. (2015: 586) have noted, ‘this topic is making a transition from being on the margins of social work to becoming mainstream’ with just over half of all Australian schools of social work appearing to offer units that include some – albeit sometimes cursory, information on the natural environment and sustainability (Harris and Boddy, 2017).

There are an increasing number of examples in Australian literature on units and activities that incorporate principles and practices of green social work (Jones, 2010; Pack, 2014; Boetto and Bell, 2015; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017b), a trend evident internationally (Besthorn, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Melekis and Woodhouse, 2015). Although diverse in delivery, these focused on transformative learning, using critical reflection and experiential learning processes. Ramsay and Boddy (2017b), for example, describe an experiential learning approach to assist students to understand their relationship with the non-human world and the natural environment through exercises that inform students about the natural environment, responsibilities to protect it, and the impacts on people and others if we fail to do so. Jones (2008, 2010) describes a compulsory on-campus unit that brings together social and environmental concerns within a framework of community development. Such an approach is consistent with green social work that advocates for working at both a community and individual level (Dominelli, 2012). As part of this, Jones describes two trigger activities where students assess their carbon footprint and are invited to walk around their community to reflect on their understanding of the interconnectedness of humans with their environments. Boetto and Bell (2015) describe a six-week voluntary online
course for social work students, which is focused on promoting global citizenship, covering content related to: global warming, global citizenship; gender, social justice and human rights; carbon footprints; glocalisation; and ecological social work. Consistent with an embedded and transformative approach, Pack (2014) describes an intensive course that uses an extended simulation of a disaster to prepare students for practice in emergency and disaster situations. Other Australian authors, similar to Dominelli (2012), have identified the importance of greening not only social work education within the university setting, but also within field education (Crawford et al., 2015; Boetto et al., 2015) through the development of new learning goals related to the environment and sustainability (Crawford et al., 2015) and practice settings focused on food relief (Boetto et al., 2015).

Some authors have commented on particular theories and content areas that could be covered in social work education (Jones, 2013; Pease, 2014; Gray and Coates, 2015). Green social work advocates for the integration of scientific expertise with local, Indigenous knowledges. In Australia, Gray and Coates (2015) argue that greater links could be made with macro-practice and the role of social workers in conducting community assessments which draw on local and ‘traditional knowledge’ of the environment, a practice advocated by green community workers. Units which focus on social policy, human rights, social justice, community development and practice, and global and international social work could all be easily adapted to include environmental content in Australian universities (Gray and Coates, 2015; Nipperess, 2016; Harris and Boddy, 2017). As part of this, it is important that students develop eco-literacy, informed by spirituality, Indigenous perspectives, and critical theory (Jones, 2013; Pease, 2014).

Futures

Australian literature related to the environment has typically focused on disaster relief (Alston, 2013; Shevaller and Westoby, 2014; Alston et al., 2016; Appleby et al., 2017), rural and drought affected regions of Australia (Alston and Kent, 2004; Alston, 2006; Alston, 2007; Stehlik, 2013), and social work education to promote eco-literacy (Jones, 2010; Pack, 2014; Boetto and Bell, 2015). More recently there has been a focus on eco-social transitions and ecological living (Boetto, 2016a; Boetto, 2016b; Boddy and Ramsay, 2017). This literature has made an important contribution to greening social work practice and education.

In order to advance green social work further, we would argue that Australian social workers must:

1. Use an intersectional approach to examine the effects of climate change not only on women, but also on diverse and marginalised populations experiencing multi-faceted disadvantage.
2. Transform the social work curriculum, with both embedded content and discrete courses on ecology, environmental justice, and the natural environment, to ensure that green social work is central to all Australian social work degrees.
3. Adopt a structural analysis of social and economic systems that are adversely affecting people and their environments.
4. Advocate to policymakers and politicians calling for urgent action to mitigate further climate changes.
5. Learn from Indigenous eco-spiritual perspectives and recognise the interdependence of human health and well-being and that of the natural environment.
6. Undertake research to evaluate green social work practice initiatives.
7. Examine how green social work can be adopted within metropolitan contexts where much of the Australian population is located.
We endorse the argument that it is imperative that green social work becomes mainstream social work practice, where social and environmental justice are valued and ecosystems are at the centre of practice (Dominelli, 2012).

Conclusion

Australia has seen an increasing number of extreme and ongoing weather events particularly since the start of the millennium, including bushfires, flooding, and seemingly unending extreme drought. Many Australian social workers have drawn attention to the impacts of these events on marginalised and disadvantaged people, with a particular focus on women and people living in rural and remote areas. As part of this, Australian social workers have highlighted the interdependence of human health and the natural environment. Numerous initiatives and articles have emerged in the last five to 10 years that have described social work practice in Australian rural areas in response to disasters. This literature has also highlighted the importance of eco-social transition and ecological living. Further, a number of examples have emerged of social work education that promotes global citizenship, environmental justice and knowledge of ecosystems. Given the extent of mining, logging and land clearing in Australia, coupled with more numerous and frequent extreme weather events, Australian social workers must do more to advocate for the protection of ecosystems not only through direct practice, but also through activism, research and education. Green social work offers a model and a practice for doing this.

References


Greening Australian social work


