



Changing water habits after drought: Why garden watering was easier to change than showering

Industry Note
Program A: Society
Project A2.1

Summary: Past experience has shown that communities can change habits and reduce water use during times of crisis but a critical question is whether these habits persist after the crisis and why? Social practice theory can be used to answer this question.

Introduction

The experience of the Millennium drought (1996–2010) in the eastern states, the ongoing drying climate in Perth and the consequent water restrictions changed everyday water habits in households in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. We conducted nine focus groups in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth in 2015 to ask about everyday water practices. We found post-crisis changes in garden watering lasted longer than changes in showering.

Social practices

Using a social practice lens helps us understand the intertwining of material, technical and social elements and how our daily habits, rituals, desires and comforts inform our daily water use. A social practice

lens provides insight into how we can change water practices and conserve water.

Social practices take into account the socio-technical-natural elements of everyday practices. Social practices have three main elements:

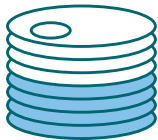
Materials – including things, technologies and material constraints

Competences – including skills and know-how

Meanings – including beliefs and aspirations

These elements combine to comprise ‘the bundle of activities’ which make up everyday social practices such as garden watering and showering.

Changing water practices from Millennium drought to 2015



Materials



Garden watering	Showers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulation-water restrictions New systems e.g. rainwater tanks, grey water systems DIY systems e.g. collecting and storing rainwater- buckets, tanks, diverting spouting, bucketing grey water onto gardens New garden styles e.g. native gardens, replacing lawns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incentives-low flow showerheads installed Timers used Technological innovation limited, connected to mains water
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: Where water restrictions and technologies have been introduced, changed habits have been maintained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: Evidence that these technologies have been discarded by many



Competences



Garden watering	Showers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New modes of gardening learned e.g. watering less, using drought-resistant plants, using woodchips/mulch, water crystals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorter showers Less frequent showers Attempts by some to limit the shower times of other householders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: Change and adaption to water saving gardening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: For most these competencies have not continued



Meanings



Garden watering	Showers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relaxation and connection to green space Leisure and entertaining Play spaces for children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorter showers Less frequent showers Attempts by some to limit the shower times of other householders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: Changed views by most; less care about lawns and lush gardens particularly in Melbourne and Brisbane. Perth maintains desire for green lawns. Some grief expressed about loss of old gardens in Melbourne 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post-crisis: No change by most. Some guilt expressed about using water for long showers. Frequent showers justified as a necessity

What do practices tell us?

Water consumption practices can and do change in response to crisis such as drought but post-crisis practices are not always continued. The interrelationship between the three elements of social practice — materials, competences, meanings — are important.

- In **gardens** there is tight alignment between the elements – new materials and technologies were introduced, such as water saving appliances; new competences were learned, such as, watering by hand; and a new water consciousness was developed, lawns were less valued, especially in Melbourne and Brisbane.


- By contrast, in the private domain of **showering**, new materials such as low-flow showerheads were discarded; drought competences such as shorter showers were abandoned; and embodied meanings and emotional commitment to frequent and long showers overruled the imperative to change practices and conserve water once the crisis was over.
- However, long term **material** changes, brought about by decade long water restrictions, have shown to drive change in practice more thoroughly and durably than water saving **competences** or **meanings** by themselves.

About the research

This research was conducted as part of *Understanding social processes to achieve water sensitive futures* (Project A2.1).


The objectives of this project are to understand and document the social and historical processes of domestic water use in Australian cities. This study maps historical and contemporary urban water use cultures and social practices in order to better understand how and why we use water the way we do, and to use this information and evidence to better inform future policy agendas.

Further information

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 <https://www.watersensitivecities.org.au/content/project-a2-1/>



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