

Factors Influencing Perceptions of Natural Beauty

This FIDO Backgrounder No 83 (November 2018) by John Sinclair AO examines factors influencing individual perceptions of beauty and appearance. Although K'gari is inscribed on the World Heritage List for its natural beauty, some people want to modify some parts to make them prettier, often conflicting adversely with the island's natural integrity. Some decades ago QPWS acting at the behest of a tour operators regularly removed fallen palm fronds from Wangoolba Creek in the Central Station area to make it look "nicer". Another was the attempt of a tour operator to beautify the Lake McKenzie (Boorangoora) tour operators area by planting and nurturing a Poinciana tree there. Even the QPWS attempted to landscape Boorangoora's perfectly natural beach. The litany of attempts to modify K'gari to enhance its beauty to match our individual perceptions needs more than a backgrounder to catalogue. This backgrounder simply attempts to explain some of the drivers of these urges. This is necessary to ensure that Nature is not needlessly destroyed.

Resorts: The dichotomy of how notions of beauty are perceived on K'gari is best epitomized by the contrast in the presentation of the two largest resorts on the island, Eurong and Kingfisher. Whereas Eurong has historically focused on expansive lawns stripped of natural vegetation, Kingfisher was deliberately designed to blend in with the pre-existing natural landscape as far as possible. Even then Kingfisher has been modified sometime at whim such as by a short-term manager who ordered the feature at the entrance to the resort the endemic Fraser Island species *Tecomanthe hillii* to be removed because it didn't fit his concept of beauty when it wasn't flowering.

Influences in perceptions of beauty

Understanding the influences that touch our sense of beauty is a challenge. Why are we attracted to lakes and waterfalls more than other forms of water? Why revile muddy water? Why do large old trees hold us in awe more than the standard size smaller trees? Where are we drawn to admire rainforest more than savannah, or heath? The questions are endless.

Four Spectrums: This backgrounder attempts to explain how **Culture, Colour, Comfort and Chaos** shape our perceptions of what represents "beauty". Opinions of beauty for each of those factors may fall within a spectrum ranging from purely natural at one extreme to a modified artificially constructed view at the other. Individuals may tend to Nature on cultural spectrum yet prefer to introduced colours in the landscape. They may opt for every creature comfort yet have a passion for seeing chaos.



This garden at Maydena Road, National Park, Tasmania epitomizes contrast in personal perceptions of beauty in nature. It embodies Culture, Colour, Comfort and Chaos influences discussed in this backgrounder.

Culture

Cultural concepts influence most aspects of our various value judgements from our taste in music, to our career choices and our aesthetic values. Choices in marriage partners are culturally based with most people preferring a partner from the same race that they grew up with. Our taste in food is influenced on the cuisine we ate as we grew up. Most of our assessments of what constitutes beauty similarly is culturally based.

Gardens: There are vast differences in the assessment in what constitutes beautiful gardens. This ranges along a spectrum from the most formal Japanese and English gardens to informal Australian native plants gardens with more sombre tones and less symmetrical shape. Similar spectrums apply to so many aspects of aesthetic judgement. Young girls in western culture are drawn to pink preferences whereas western males shun pink as being sissy.

Nature: Culture also plays a large part in how we view natural landscapes. Indigenous cultures are comfortable in a completely natural landscape such as the Australian bush. They may modify the environment for personal safety to protect themselves from wild-fires and wild animal attacks. As civilizations evolve the natural environments become progressively more modified to make way for agriculture, roads, substantial buildings, community facilities and ever-increasing infrastructure. Australians are near the top end of the scale in modifying our environment. So much natural environment has been lost to accommodate different developments. Instead of finding beauty in Nature where we may be surrounded by the sounds and songs of birds, we find ourselves applauding man-made monuments such as the Sydney Opera House where bird songs are replaced by cultural performances surrounded by the noise of traffic.

Other modifications: Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, one of Australia's greatest explorers and botanists, deliberately planted blackberries as he travelled through the bush in an attempt to produce more edible wild food.

The spectrum of cultural influences in our judgement of beauty in Nature ranges from the most formal ordered gardens at one extreme where everything grown is planned and no plant out of place is allowed to survive, to the chaotic bush where there is no order. Even in the bush though our sense of cultural purity demands that the bush be kept weed-free.

Colour

Colour preferences are also largely influenced by culture. Most cultures seem to prefer for stronger colours for their dress and flowers — crimson, gold, strong greens and blues. The sombre Western business suits contrast with the flashy colours of traditional African and Indian attire. Compare the strength of the more measured colours in Japanese Ikebana against the gaudier colours of European floral arrangements. Some colour preferences are based on nationalism. Dutch people have a predisposition to orange, the Irish to green, Americans and English to the red, white and blue and Australians to green and gold.

Flowers: In the outdoors pastel colours are used only as background as people's eyes are attracted to brighter colours. In Australia few of the flowering plants have brightly coloured flowers. Mostly they are white and cream especially amongst the trees shrubs and larger plant species. Brighter colours are more common amongst the wildflowers. The blossoms on many of the wildflowers are small and close to the ground and aren't easily seen unless looking for them. Moreover, the showiest wildflower plants are difficult to cultivate. This adds to the preference to populate our flower gardens with exotic species. Roses and dahlias are cultivated and bred for their colour. Thus gardens trend away from nature.

Comfort-Security

Comfort and the need for security have progressively increased as civilizations advance in sophistication. People demand more secure and sophisticated dwellings and work-places. The demand for better roads and infrastructure re all examples how nature is being modified for our comfort and security.

Boundaries: Property ownership leads to a public demand for defining property. Fences, boundaries and entitlements are some of the consequence. Kerbing and channelling, garden edges all modify the natural environment as part of the incessant quest for clear definition. This in turn adds to the demand for more regular shapes, straight and symmetrical lines. The lines of boundaries shape the designs of cities and houses dominated by square layout.

Patterns: The preference for the use of straight lines is exemplified in the patterns of the layout of plantations, vineyards and cultivation



While topography provides some restrictions increasingly the landscape is being shaped to conform with demands

Chaos and Order

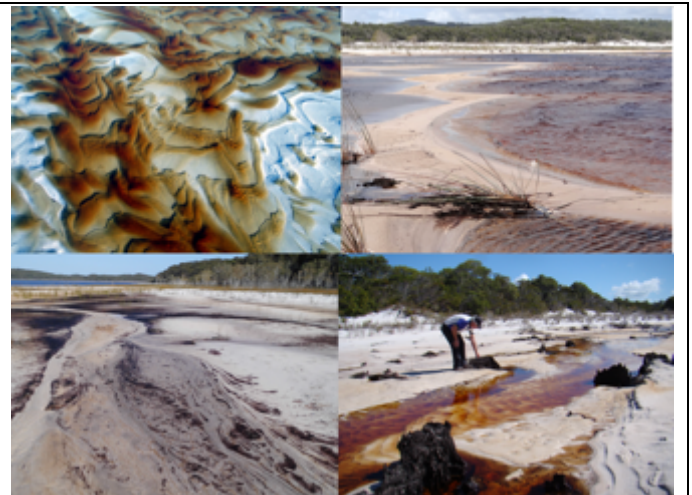
Order, tidiness and neatness are the very antithesis of chaos.

Civilized people like straight lines, symmetry and balance. The idea that a Christmas tree could be a straggly native Eucalypt instead of an exotic evenly balanced pine tree with dense dark green foliage is unthinkable for most Australians.

The natural order in the bush is pure chaos in shapes, sizes, ages and composition yet it still has intrinsic aesthetic appeal as evidenced by the numbers of landscape artists who attempt to show the very beauty of the chaotic scenes of Nature.

The public at large need to accept that some very special places such as K'gari should remain wild, natural and unmodified and that there is beauty in that.

The photo on the previous page shows the intuitive attraction of a neatly organized garden carefully fenced in with defined weedless garden paths and garden edges. It is what people find attractive and it is accelerating public attitudes to "tidy up" the natural landscape by removing palm frond from Wanggoolba Creek and fencing off parts of Lake Boorangoora's beach



Lake Boomanjin's western shore has infinite ever changing examples of chaotic arrangements shaped by Nature that excite camera enthusiasts by their variety. Yet while many people are attracted to these unusual patterns they don't fit in with conventional concepts of beauty.

If K'gari (Fraser Island) is to maintain its natural integrity the justified in its recognition as one of the great natural wonders of the world it will require a shift in public values to make them more appreciative of Nature and that Beauty can exist without bright colours, fences and straight lines. It requires a cultural shift. There is hope. Australian cuisine has moved from meat and three vegetable meals to a more eclectic diet having acquired new tastes from around the world.

Public acceptance of the natural landscape means that those who want to see what is left preserved must educate them to move their attraction for the creature comforts and never-ending modification of the natural environment

Blest is the man who has learnt to know the God of the wilds.

Virgil — a Roman Poet and Philosopher