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## Connecting people and place through art and photography: Community values for the Cockburn coastal region

Presenting an overview and initial findings from the project:

**“A new vision for coastal resilience: Engaging communities through art to design a transformative future”**

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*Important note: This report was created as a reference for students and instructors in the 'Rising Tides Studio' landscape architecture units at UWA, Semester 2, 2024. Rising Tides Studio was led by Daniel Jan Martin and Rosie Halsmith at the UWA School of Design. For further information on this research project contact Natasha Pauli, [natasha.pauli@uwa.edu.au](mailto:natasha.pauli@uwa.edu.au)*

*UWA Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number ROAP 2024/ET000268)*



# Contents of Report

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Introduction.....	1
Background .....	1
Location.....	1
Methodology.....	2
The approach .....	2
Recruitment of participants .....	2
Workshops and interviews .....	3
Analysis .....	4
A ‘pilot project’ to trial a new approach .....	4
Key information .....	5
Participant demographic summary .....	5
Artworks, photographs and ‘artist statements’ .....	5
Community values for a resilient future coast .....	6
Connection to nature .....	6
Connection to family and social networks.....	8
Accessibility, wellbeing and activities.....	9
Culture, heritage and history .....	11
Governance, planning and infrastructure.....	12
Vision for the future .....	13
Further Reading .....	14
Acknowledgements .....	14



# Introduction

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## Background

Coastal communities are at the forefront of the impacts of climate change. In recent years, erosion, flooding, cyclones and severe storms have devastated coastal communities around Australia with loss of lives and homes. Building coastal resilience is championed in policy and practice, with government investment towards developing response strategies<sup>1</sup>.

However, complex barriers hinder investment in innovative, long-term approaches to build social and ecological resilience. Consequently, short-term fixes that predominantly address risk to infrastructure dominate (e.g., ad-hoc protective structures including 'temporary' seawalls). Repeated investment in short-term fixes makes it more difficult to envision and implement long-term strategies aimed at improving economic, social, and environmental sustainability for coastal communities and ecosystems.

Our research project "A new vision for coastal resilience: Engaging communities through art to design a transformative future" sets out to empower coastal communities to showcase an innovative, resilient future for their local coastline, through a critical interdisciplinary partnership across social science, landscape architecture, coastal engineering and visual arts.

A key approach was to undertake community engagement using arts-based methods. These methods have been employed elsewhere in vision-setting research<sup>2</sup>, but they haven't yet been used to understand community goals for coastal resilience in Western Australia. We wanted to understand whether using visual methods of communication between community members, researchers and landscape architects could help address a major barrier in achieving coastal resilience: setting a collective vision for change.

This report presents an overview of the main findings of our community engagement activities in the City of Cockburn, focusing on the values held by workshop participants for the coastal region.

## Location

Within the metropolitan region of Perth and Peel, the area between Fremantle and Kwinana in the City of Cockburn presents a complex coastline with multiple land uses, development pressures and population growth, with some areas subject to erosion and inundation risk. Our research team met with City of Cockburn representatives at the outset of the project to seek their views, discuss ideas and ensure alignment with current initiatives and strategies. Dissemination of information about the project was supported by the City of Cockburn.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nema.gov.au/programs/emergency-response-fund/coastal-estuarine-risk-mitigation-program>

<sup>2</sup> See for example <https://fidiseaportclimate.nyc/>

## Methodology

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### The approach

The overall approach to the research project is illustrated in Figure 1. Briefly, arts-based methods were chosen that were suitable for complete beginners, and would be interesting and appealing to a wide range of community members. For the Cockburn coast, we selected photography, textiles and paper collage as the art methods. We ran a series of **community engagement workshops** with participants, with the broad aim of understanding the values held by people towards the Cockburn coast. This report provides an overview of those findings.

The next phases of the project bring in the skills, creativity and design approach from the students of the 'Rising Tides Studio' units in landscape architecture at UWA in Semester 2, 2024 – that's you! We hope that you will find these results interesting, easy to read, and allow for a range of creative interpretation.

Your designs will be exhibited at the end of 2024 (at UWA and we plan a short local exhibition in Cockburn), and we'll be inviting community members and decision makers (including our partners at City of Cockburn, Western Australian Local Government Association, coastal advocacy groups, and more) to view your designs and provide feedback on this novel approach.

### Recruitment of participants

We sought members of the general public who lived in the City of Cockburn, or were frequent visitors to the area. We sent information about the workshops in newsletters from the City of Cockburn and The Wetlands Centre, by emailing local community groups, and by advertising on social media (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn). Our methods were approved by UWA's Human Research Ethics Office (HREO) (see <https://linktr.ee/UWAbetteroceans> for examples of the documents that our research participants had to view and sign).



Figure 1: Visual summary of research project process

## Workshops and interviews

We ran workshops between 14-21 July 2024. The goal of the workshops was to understand what our participants, as a small subset of the local community, value about the coastal region of Cockburn. A total of 30 participants shared an original artwork or photo with the research team, with an accompanying story detailing the meaning of the artwork. The artworks, photos and statements can be found at the end of this report as a companion document.

We endeavoured to create a relaxing, welcoming environment with all materials, catering and professional guidance supplied (at no cost to participants). We wanted people to be able to focus on creativity, reflection, and conversation with other participants.

We ran one three-hour workshop on 'storytelling through textiles' and one three-hour workshop on 'storytelling through paper collage'. These workshops were guided by artist Annick Akanni, and hosted at The Wetlands Centre in Bibra Lake.

Participants were asked to create an artwork that represented a place that is special to them anywhere along the Cockburn coast and coastal hinterland. A wide range of materials were supplied, including some images that were specific to Cockburn and were taken from local brochures, maps and newspapers.

Starting from around two hours into the textile and collage workshops, we interviewed each participant, and audio-recorded the conversation. The interviews were short (mostly 10-15 minutes).

In the interviews, we asked people these questions:

- Where is the place (or places) that you have represented?
- What is special to you about this place?
- Can you describe your artwork – what does it represent to you?
- Thinking about the place or places in your representation of the coast, what would you like these place(s) to be like in the future?
- What words would you use to describe how you are feeling during this workshop?
- Do you have anything else you would like to share with the research team about your experience today or your thoughts on the Cockburn coastal region?

The interviews had a very conversational tone, and sometimes people shared more details beyond the simple questions above. All our participants signed consent forms to be interviewed and recorded (see: <https://linktr.ee/UWAbetteroceans>).

Two two-hour workshops were run on 'storytelling through photography', guided by photographer Janine Sheen. Janine created a booklet of storytelling techniques for participants to take home.

These workshops were intended to use the 'photovoice' method of connecting an original photographic image with specific personal meaning. The workshops were run at Beach Point Café, adjacent to Coogee Beach, allowing participants to experiment with taking photos during the workshop.

Participants were asked to upload photographs to an online survey portal after the workshop. We interviewed participants during the second workshop, but not at the first workshop. We decided to interview the second group of participants to make sure we could document their values, because only a small number of participants at our first workshop uploaded photos and stories afterwards.

## Analysis

We transcribed the recordings of the interviews to create a transcript for each participant. These transcripts form the main element of qualitative data or information for the research project. The transcripts contain a wealth of information about each participant's values and ideas, as well as a description of their artwork.

For the collage and textile artworks, the participants' words were lightly edited to create an 'artist statement' (could also be called a 'narrative') to accompany their artwork. The way people speak is often very different to the way people communicate with the written word, and so we slightly edited the transcripts so that the artist statements reflected the artwork accurately. We checked each artist statement individually with the participants and gave them an opportunity to edit the words. Each artist provided their preferred name to be associated with reproduction of the work.

For photos submitted online, the 'artist statements' are a combination of each photographer's words during interviews, combined with what they had written in the online form. Again, the statements were checked individually with each participant to ensure accuracy.

We analysed the entirety of the transcripts to extract recurring themes from the participants. These are broad themes that were mentioned by several participants. We did not predefine the themes, and used an approach called 'grounded theory' where participants tell us what it is important to them, and we reviewed the transcripts to see what patterns emerged.

It's important to recognise that all the people we spoke to are individual and have diverse viewpoints and ideas – it's not possible to state definitively that *"everyone thought 'X' was important"*. Not all people will agree on every aspect of what is important about the Cockburn region. In our results section we present the diversity of views by arranging them under some common 'umbrellas' or themes.

## A 'pilot project' to trial a new approach

The research project aims to trial approaches to community engagement using arts-based methods. We were not attempting to conduct a representative sample of people (see further reading for examples of projects focussing on the Cockburn region that did undertake a representative sample).



## Key information

### Participant demographic summary

We asked each attendee to fill out a short questionnaire about themselves. Demographic information about our workshop participants is provided in Figure 2. More than 80% of our workshop attendees were women, including all of the attendees at the collage and textile workshops.

### Artworks, photographs and ‘artist statements’

Images of each participant’s photographs or artworks, alongside the accompanying artist statements are provided as an attachment to this report (example below). Higher resolution images of the artworks can be provided if needed, and the original artworks can also be viewed on request for the textiles and collages.



**Coogee Beach. Artist: Felicity Monck**  
*I love the constancy of the elements at the beach, and yet it's always changing. The tides perform the same action, but it's always different. I'm trying to capture that balance of constancy and change in this piece. The lines are uniform and repetitive, a bit like the tide. The organic shape represents growth.*  
*I love that my two boys have been able to grow in this place. Like the tide, we've been coming back every summer for swimming lessons. The kids are the same humans, but they've grown and changed so much.*

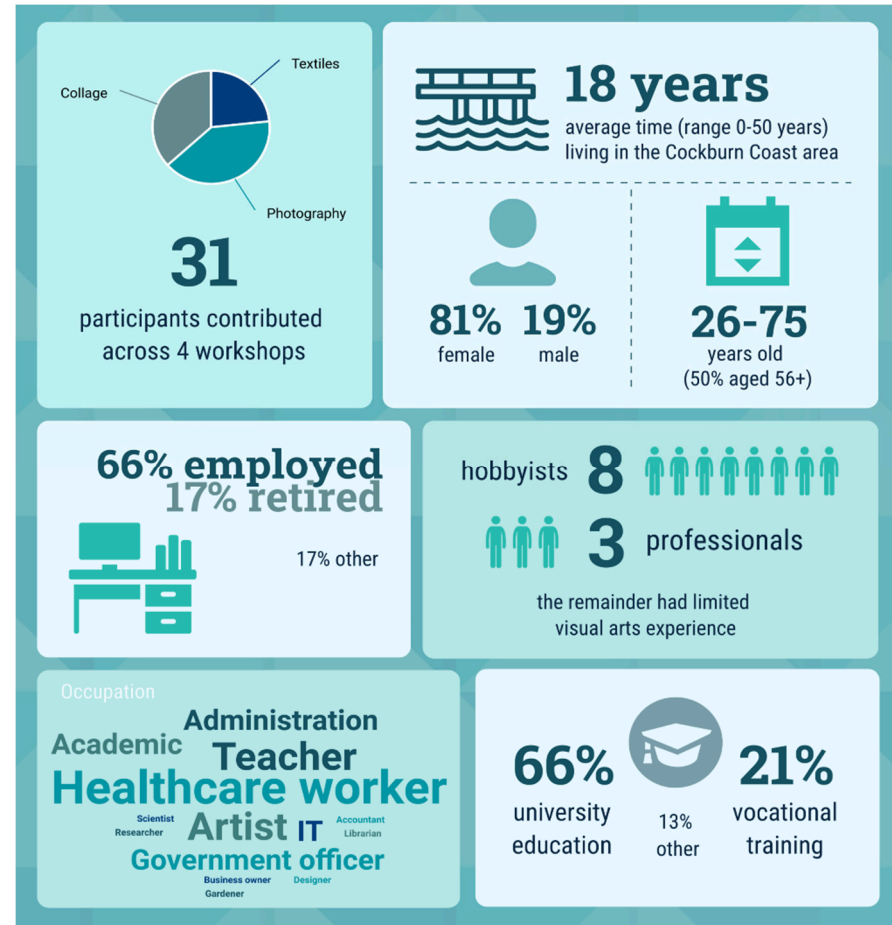
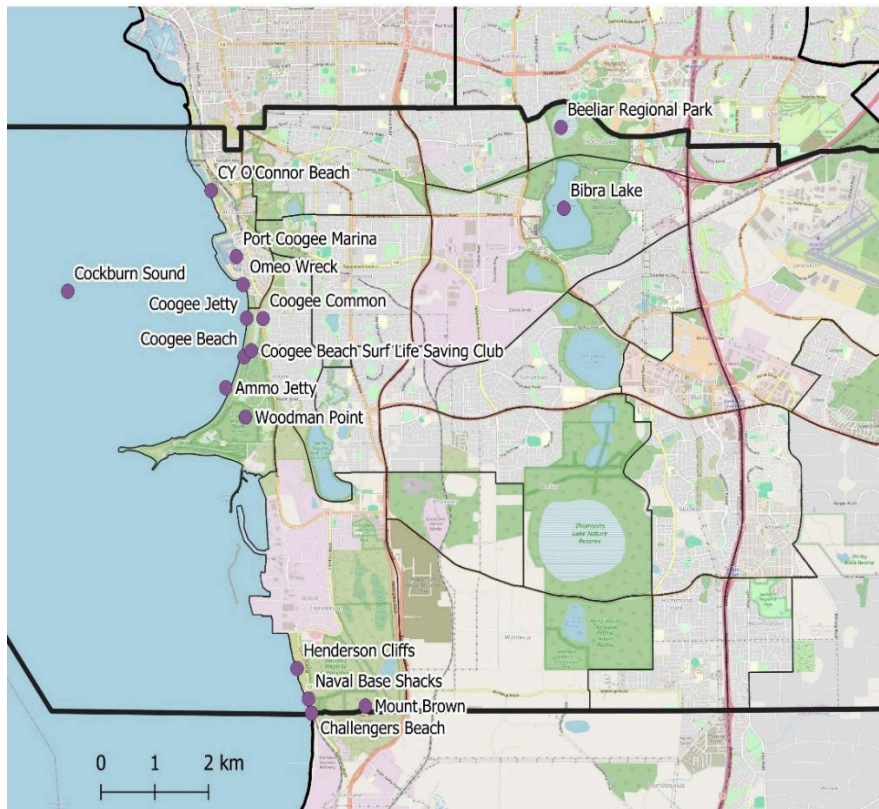


Figure 2: Infographic visualising demographic characteristics of all workshop participants

## Community values for a resilient future coast

Multiple locations and landmarks were referred to by workshop participants within the Cockburn coastal region and hinterland (Figure 3).



**Figure 3 Common locations mentioned by participants.** The dark line indicates the City of Cockburn extent.

Through analysis of the transcripts, a number of high-level, key values emerged from the community members who attended our workshops and provided artworks and photographs. The most consistent connections with the coastal regions were related to ‘Connection to Nature’ and ‘Connection to Family’. We present these two key values first, followed by a range of other values that were nominated by many of our participants.

Values are illustrated by quotes, which have been taken directly from interview transcripts. Quotes help to provide specific context and meaning, and have been chosen to reflect widely held sentiments.

### Connection to nature

There was a strong attachment to the ‘wild’ and ‘rugged’ quality of the coastline and coastal hinterland, as a place of habitat for flora and fauna. Regardless of past changes to the area’s ecosystem, participants placed high value on the natural qualities of the location:

*“It’s still fairly natural out there and we love the ocean.”*

This applied equally to both underwater habitats:

*“There are schools of fish, little ones, big ones, all sorts of sizes and they just swim around you and there’s just this beautiful big waver that moves in the ocean, and it’s so sparkly... there’s so much life on that jetty.”*

and to terrestrial habitats:

*“The ruggedness and the bush to me is really important. It’s wild, it’s not a manicured garden... we need to have that connection with the wild.”*

The wild, rugged and open nature of the coastline was an important feature for many participants, for instance:

*“It’s the ultimate wilderness playground.”*

*“It’s not crowded at all. You can just keep walking and walking and walking.”*

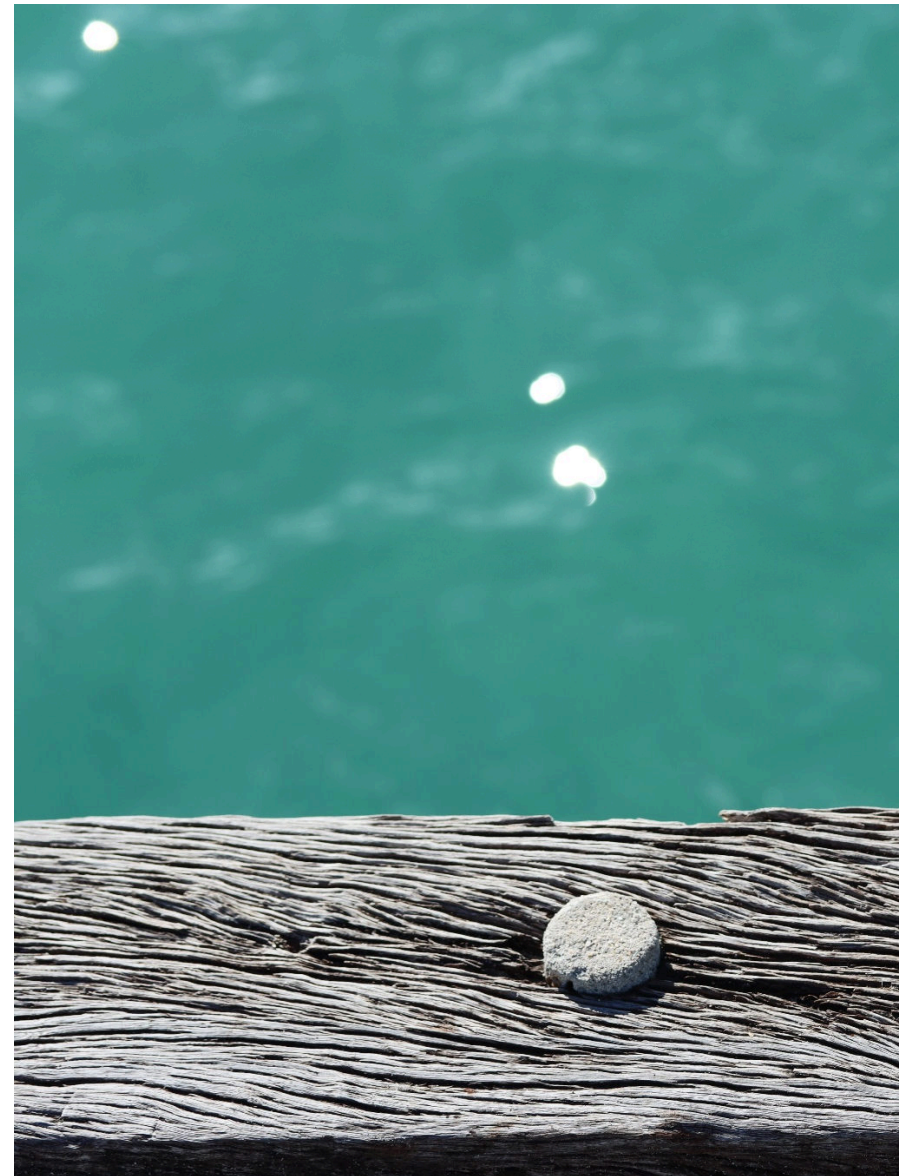
For many participants, connection to nature had a spiritual element:

*“I think it’s so good for the spirit and the soul to be able to look out and just see the beautiful horizon.”*

Some participants found a sense of connection with other people and places around the world through being immersed in the natural environment at the Cockburn coast:

*“... this water is either coming or going from where I have roots and that’s quite special.”*

*“... that wind comes all the way from the Antarctic... so across the sea. It’s special.”*



The natural environment of the coastal region made it notable as a place of refuge and rejuvenation for many participants:

*“The noise of the shells tinkling, it’s just magical.”*

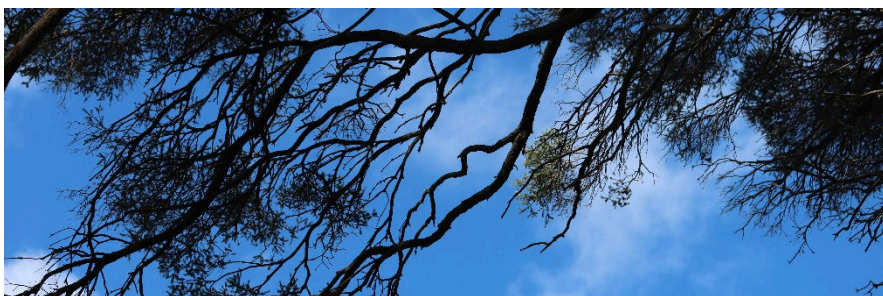
*“It feels like a safe place. It’s refreshing, restorative, and I can’t think of a better word for reset.”*

*“It’s a cosy and comfortable place for families to chill and wander... that makes me feel peaceful and calm.”*

Many of our participants visited the coast, and even swam, all year round. There was a focus on summer activities and watersports, but nature-focussed recreational activities such as running, walking along the beach and watching the sunset occurred all year.

Several participants emphasised that the natural values of the coast should be protected and conserved for the benefit of all:

*“We should be preserving this and looking after it, really making sure that it’s available to everybody, let’s all enjoy it. So a lot of the environment needs to be protected and monitored.”*



## Connection to family and social networks

Many of our participants had strong family and social ties to the Cockburn coast. In some cases this spanned multiple generations, and had ties to employment and recreation:

*“That place has got multi-generational connections close to my family. I haven’t quite put it on there yet, but I wanted to try and do a little building structure somewhere around here because my granddad used to work at Robb’s Jetty.”*

*[referring to the area around CY O’Connor Beach]*

Another participant spoke fondly of time spent at the former Naval Base settlement, which no longer exists:

*“I spent nearly every summer of my childhood there, and my aunt was the swimming teacher. people came from all around to learn to swim on this beach Naval Base, it’s called Challenger Beach now.”*

Some of our participants talked about the importance of the coastal region for passing on intergenerational knowledge and skills such as fishing between grandparents, parents and grandchildren.

Many participants spoke of spending quality time walking and swimming with loved ones along the coast, some of whom have now passed on. The area is imbued with a multitude of personal stories of connection, joy, love and grief.

The low-energy beaches of the Cockburn coast were strongly seen as a place for young children to play and make important connections with the ocean and marine life:

*“I do also enjoy that it’s a pretty gentle beach. It’s not too hectic... it’s reliable there.”*

*“Coogee Beach is a place where I go with my family and share a love of the ocean. The love of being in the water, the feeling of immersion, seeing my two daughters’ excitement and loving that they’re becoming water babies. It’s one of the first places where my younger daughter put her goggles on and could actually see the little schools of silvery fish flying around.”*



Childhood memories of encounters at the beach remained strong:

*“For us kids ... [with] the freedom to run around on the beach every day... it was just an incredible adventure.”*

There was a strong thread throughout many conversations of a perceived lack of opportunities for children to connect with nature in the modern era, with concerns around safety, traffic, screen-time, less wild spaces, and reduced access, and less time to play. For instance, when one participant was asked about what they would like to see their grandchildren experience at the coast, they replied:

*“More like what I had when I was a child. Freedom.”*

## Accessibility, wellbeing and activities

The importance of the Cockburn coastal region as an accessible and inclusive place, particularly for local people, was raised by a large number of participants. For many people, the coast is seen as a low-cost destination for recreation:

*“You don’t have to pay anything. You can just go.”*

*“I feel like it’s more about the simple things. I’m not really into having fancy restaurants along there.”*

However, some community members wanted to see *more* facilities such as additional dining options, cafés, local events and markets. This juxtaposition of views highlights that there is no one singular community vision of how a public space should function.



The physical accessibility of the coastal zone is varied, with ramped access to some locations (e.g. Coogee Jetty, Ammo Jetty). Maintaining physical accessibility was raised as important by some participants, particularly those with family members or friends with restricted physical mobility. The coastline in many places is separated from access points by a sandy path over a dune. For some, the journey across the dunes with piles of stuff was daunting, while for others, the dunes represented a transition from human-made to nature-immersion:

*“I like that you have to walk through the dunes to actually get to the beach. The car park isn’t on the beach.”*

Personal safety was a key element of wellbeing for many participants. Safety was often discussed in relation to calm waters and protection from sharks (the latter via the eco-net at Coogee beach), for example:

*“It would be great to see the purity and spaciousness of the area preserved, while at the same time continuing to make it safe and accessible for people, with the facilities such as the shark barrier being maintained, and additional shade and shelters being provided, particularly for sunny days.”*

Personal safety was also related to a feeling of familiarity:

*“Coogee Jetty holds a sense of community. There’s always a familiar face.”*

A number of participants raised the importance of the coastal zone for mental and physical health:

*“It definitely helps with recalibration, the mental health aspect. For me, the sensory aspects of the water washing up on the shore and the wind is just really useful, personally.”*

The region is used for a range of activities by the research participants, including walking, running, dog walking, playing on the beach, snorkelling, scuba diving, fishing, swimming, boating, surf life-saving, using paddlecraft, photography, painting, cycling, eating out and relaxing. A long-term recreational scuba diver had noted profound changes to the area over time, such as the concerning recent absence of a particular species of nudibranch following a marine heatwave event.



## Culture, heritage and history

Aside from immediate family connections, many participants highly valued the unique heritage, history and culture of the area. Several community members emphasised the importance of recognising Noongar values and history, and of acknowledging Beeliar Noongar Boodja (noting that none of our participants identified as Indigenous). Participants discussed market gardening heritage from immigrants from southern Europe, and more recent immigration from India, China and other regions. However, historical and cultural values were mostly perceived as inadequately represented in some of the public spaces around the coast. For instance:

*“When I tell people that I grew up walking down that path and saying hello to Aboriginal people living on Country, no one can believe it. I mean I'm older, so this is 1970s. But people say ‘wow, people were living on Country in the seventies just down the road from Fremantle?’ I go, ‘Yeah, they were.’ So the fact that nobody even knows that, that's a really significant piece of Aboriginal history.”*

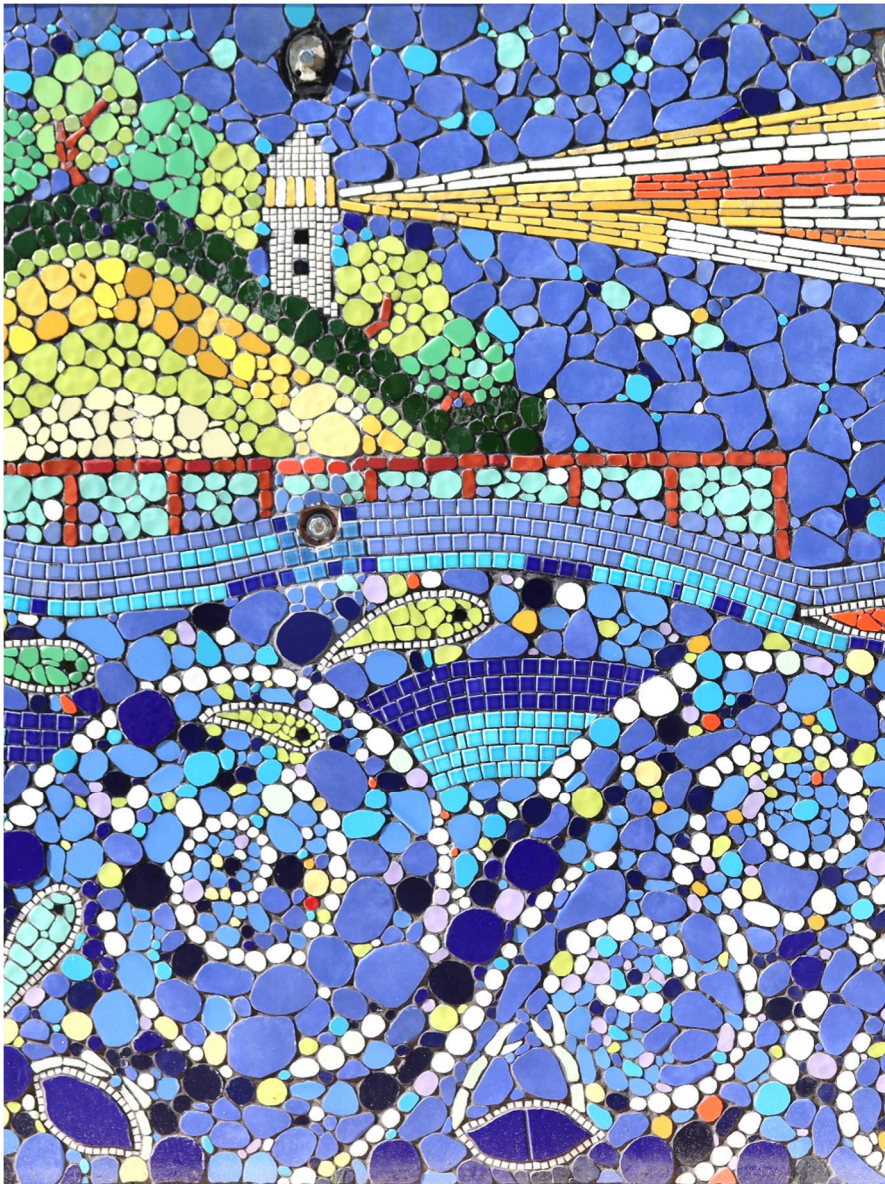
*“... where's the visible... Noongar-led cultural land management and revegetation and support for those sorts of developments?”*

Many of the participants recognised and embraced the industrial heritage of the coastline, of which the disused South Fremantle Power Station behind CY O'Connor Beach is the most obvious symbol.

*“I love industrial architecture...it's not just this brutal concrete building, it's got detail in it. The design for it was pretty incredible.”*

*“I love rusty things... without all of that industry, I wouldn't even be in this country.”*





## Governance, planning and infrastructure

Some participants expressed a desire for great consideration of community values and potential environmental impacts in the planning process for new developments. A number of participants expressed positive sentiments about the City of Cockburn and new initiatives that had been put forward.

With regard to infrastructure, multiple aspects were raised in relation to quality provisioning of beach, sport, hospitality, retail, recreation, and community amenities. The very busy road adjacent to the beach was seen as a particular concern:

*“In terms of accessing the beach, that road is quite scary to cross with young children and it's very busy. It's just awful.”*

Several respondents expressed a desire for more protection from the sun, particularly in exposed areas. The increased ambient heat from paved surfaces and housing developments was also seen as a challenge.

There are several structures along the coast to which people had long-standing connections and relationships. These included the shark net, Coogee Jetty, Ammo Jetty, the Omeo shipwreck and dive trail, and groynes. These places and offshore structure attracted marine creatures and allowed for a variety of underwater and onwater experiences (e.g. snorkelling, fishing). Over years of long interactions with nature and with human companions, many of our participants have come to see these artificial structures as an integral part of the overall natural environment of the Cockburn coastal region.

## Vision for the future

Many of our participants wanted the coastline to retain its current state or set of values into the future. It was challenging for many participants to envisage a future that might be quite different to today:

*“I don't want too much human input because it's nature, so keeping in natural, but also protecting the coastline against climate change and sea level rise.”*

The importance of working with, and not against, nature and natural processes was emphasised by several participants, including a desire to see natural materials, curved lines and materials that reflected the sense of place of the area (including the industrial heritage).

Several people emphasised the coastline as part of a corridor along the coast, and inland to the bushland and wetlands, and wanted to see the existing connectivity maintained and improved.

Many expressed a sense of worry and concern for the future, linking ecosystem and human health. For example:

*“Clean and healthy, our seas and beaches are an important part of our wellbeing. If we pollute them, we pollute ourselves. The preservation of public open spaces is an intrinsic facet in healthy communities, both physical and mental.”*

*“Kids are going to grow up without hearing birds. I'm really worried about that.”*

By taking the key values that people wanted to see protected or enhanced, a future coastal landscape would ideally reflect the following aspirations and themes (in brackets and **bold**):

- is accessible for a wide range of people (**Accessibility, Wellbeing**)
- allows for access to, and management of, a wide range of coastal activities, both active / adventurous and passive (**Activity**)
- protects and enhances popular locations (**Geography**)
- acknowledges, protects and enhances Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage sites and histories (**Heritage**)
- celebrates cultural diversity and local community (**Heritage, Wellbeing**)
- allows for shared governance processes (**Governance**)
- responds to impacts of climate change, coastal erosion and pollution (**Impact**)
- includes strengthened and updated social infrastructure (**Infrastructure**)
- strengthens and protects biodiversity, and champions and connects the natural land- and sea-scape (**Nature**)
- is safe (**Wellbeing**)

## Further Reading

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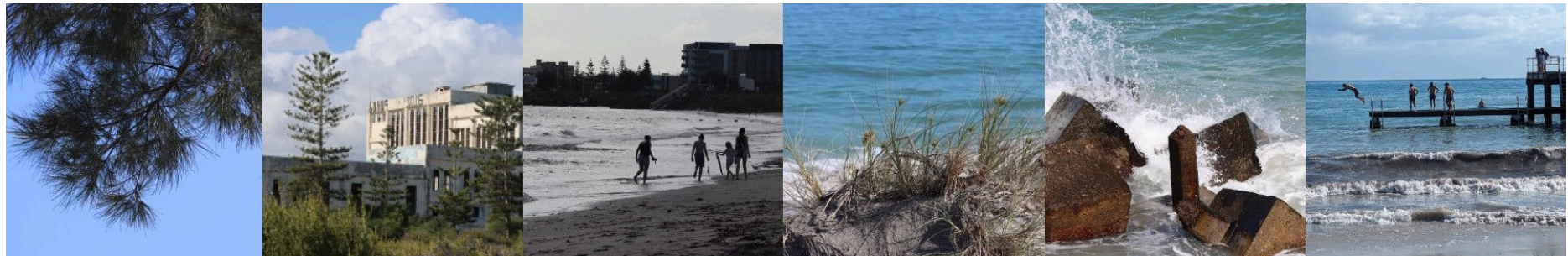
For further information on community values of the Cockburn coastal region, see the following recent reports and information:

City of Cockburn (2011). *Beeliar Boojar: An introduction to the Aboriginal History of the City of Cockburn based on existing literature*. City of Cockburn. Available at: <https://azelialemuseum.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/BeeliarBoodjar.pdf>

City of Cockburn (n.d.). *Aboriginal Language, Culture and History*. City of Cockburn. Online at: <https://www.cockburn.wa.gov.au/Community/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander/Aboriginal-Language,-Culture-and-History>

Elrick-Barr CE, & Rogers A (2023) *Community values and vision for Cockburn Sound*, Centre for Environmental Economics and Policy, UWA. Online at: [https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/292823132/Elrick-Barr\\_Rogers\\_2023\\_Community\\_values\\_and\\_vision\\_for\\_Cockburn\\_Sound.pdf](https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/292823132/Elrick-Barr_Rogers_2023_Community_values_and_vision_for_Cockburn_Sound.pdf)

Hughes, M., Kobryn, H., Henningsen, S., Burton, M., Rogers, A., Pauli, N., Clifton, J. & Kiatkoski Kim, M. (2024) *Spatial mapping of non-fishing recreational activities and associated values in Cockburn Sound, Western Australia*. Western Australian Marine Science Institution. Available at: [https://wamsi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WWMSP\\_6.3\\_Mapping\\_non\\_fishing\\_recreational\\_activities\\_FINAL.pdf](https://wamsi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WWMSP_6.3_Mapping_non_fishing_recreational_activities_FINAL.pdf)



## Acknowledgements

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This research was undertaken on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. We acknowledge we are situated on Noongar land, and that Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practise their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge. We pay our respects to the traditional owners of the lands on which we live and work across Western Australia and Australia.

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Image credits for the overview report lie with the authors.