



## Review

# How different ethno-cultural groups value urban forests and its implications for managing urban nature in a multicultural landscape: A systematic review of the literature



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## ABSTRACT

Understanding how different ethno-cultural groups value urban nature is important to understand the role of ethno-cultural diversity in urban ecosystem management. Based on a systematic literature review, this paper summarizes the empirical evidence on how different ethno-cultural groups use, perceive, prefer, and assign meaning to urban nature. I use the urban forest, defined here as all the trees in a city, as a proxy to understand this process. The 31 studies reviewed here differ widely in their lines of inquiry, research methods, urban natural setting, and conceptualizations of ethno-cultural identity. Most studies take place in the US and Europe, where the most common definition of an ethno-culturally diverse group is a person of non-European/non-White background. Most studies focus on what these groups like about a particular urban natural setting, such as an urban park; and whether they like more or less trees in a specific context (e.g. urban park). These groups usually prefer passive and social uses of urban natural areas, and more manicured/functional natural landscapes with less trees. The most common meanings associated with urban natural settings dominated by trees are social interaction and integration. The most common explanations on why these differences occur involve theories on socio-economic marginality, collectivist vs. individualist cultures, urban vs. rural lifestyles, and landscapes of origin. Future research on the topic will benefit by differentiating race from ethnicity, capturing intra-ethnic variation, capturing immigrant identities, exploring the different social, cultural, and economic factors that influence values and/or preferences, and focusing on concrete aspects of urban nature, such as urban forests.

## 1. Introduction

Many cities across the world are investing in urban green infrastructure and setting long-term goals aimed at increasing greenspace, such as planting more urban trees (e.g. [City of Vancouver, 2014](#); [City of Melbourne, 2012](#)). It has been suggested that the success of these initiatives depends on the people who implement, monitor, support, and benefit from them ([Lawrence et al., 2013](#)). These people represent different management actors such as public officials, landowners, advocacy groups, and citizens. While all management actors are important, citizens are the ones who benefit the most from such initiatives, but also the ones who have the least control on their management. However, citizens can influence the success of such initiatives, for example, by joining tree-advocacy groups ([Conway et al., 2011](#)) or watering newly planted trees ([Vogt et al., 2015](#)). In recognition of this, cities are aligning municipal priorities for urban forest management with those of citizens ([Molin and Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2014](#)) and engaging them in management ([Jack-Scott et al., 2013](#)). However, these processes usually assume that citizens are

homogenous in their perception of and responses to urban nature.

An important characteristic of many urban areas is their ethno-cultural diversity and multicultural character. By culture I mean the common system of symbols (e.g. language), and values of a group of people ([Taylor, 1994](#)), and by ethnicity I refer to the social boundary that defines who is inside and outside a group of people based on a shared culture and race/physical characteristics ([Amin, 2002](#)). Multiculturalism is a socio-political condition or principle that recognizes ethno-cultural identities, accommodates differences, and seeks integration through a common ground (e.g. language and civil values) ([Kymlicka, 2007](#)). Today, many cities are multicultural ([Qadeer, 2016](#)), particularly those in countries with high immigration rates (e.g. Canada, [Statistics Canada, 2011](#); Australia, [ABS, 2017](#)), since immigrants are the primary bearers of this diversity today. Multiculturalism is embedded in some national agendas (e.g. Canada; [Government of Canada, 1988](#); Australia, [Australian Government, 2014](#)) and finds its biggest expression in the urban realm, as most immigrants tend to settle in cities (e.g. Canada; [Statistics Canada, 2011](#)).

It is important to understand what ethno-cultural diversity means

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for the management of urban nature. Lack of participation by ethnic minorities in nature-based recreation (Johnson et al., 2007), and the different meanings (Kaplan and Herbert, 1987) and uses (Stamps and Stamps, 1985; Floyd et al., 2008) people from different ethno-cultural backgrounds assign to natural environments, have led to the recognition of the influence that ethno-cultural diversity has on individual and collective associations with nature (Washburne, 1978). The global urban population is growing, and this is accompanied by increased ethno-cultural diversity in urban areas, such as in Canada, where the foreign-born and visible minority populations in cities are projected to increase to a fourth and a third of the total, respectively, in the next 15 years (Statistics Canada, 2010). This means that in many places across the world urban nature is managed in an ethnically diverse context and for an ethnically diverse clientele. A changing urban population means changing priorities and values in relation to urban nature and its management (Jay and Schraml, 2014); therefore, embracing this multiplicity of values instead of ignoring them can strengthen urban planning (Buriayidi, 2000; Buriayidi, 2015).

The process of adopting a multicultural perspective in urban nature management must start with an understanding of how people of a different ethno-cultural background assign importance and meaning to urban nature. To contribute to this understanding, this article reviews and critically discusses the empirical evidence on how ethno-culturally diverse people value and/or assign meaning to urban nature, with a focus on urban forests. Outlined below are the theoretical and practical considerations of this research, with specific attention to the intersection of urban forests, values, and ethnicity.

### 1.1. Urban forests: their values and management

Urban forests, defined here as all the trees in a city (Nowak, 1994), are one of the dominant elements of urban green infrastructure and can be useful in helping us understand the meanings people assign to urban nature. Urban trees are valued greatly by urban dwellers (Elmendorf, 2008), primarily for their aesthetics (Schroeder et al., 2006), provision of shade (Lohr et al., 2004), provision of positive psychological states (Carrus et al., 2015), and their cultural and historical meaning (Pearce et al., 2015). Although urban nature and urban greenspace are more than just urban trees, trees are tangible, accessible, ubiquitous aspects of urban nature, and an urban-forest perspective provides a more concrete way of looking at urban nature than a generic conceptualization of greenspace, which may or may not contain natural elements. Therefore, this urban-forest perspective, although biased in its tree-centred view, provides a more concrete angle to understand how people of a particular ethno-cultural background value urban nature.

The concepts of urban forest values and participatory governance provide the theoretical basis of this review. Values are useful to help us understand how people relate and assign importance and meaning to nature (Dietz et al., 2005; Ives and Kendal, 2014). People can express their values as symbolic or emotional constructs (Ulrich et al., 1991), such as when people say that they value forests because it makes them feel connected to nature (Dutcher et al., 2007). They can also express their values as cognitive constructs that convey our need to benefit from nature (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), such as when people say they value forests because of their role in cleaning the air (Sinclair et al., 2014). Since people perceive nature as concrete objects or spaces (Ryan, 2005; Bratman et al., 2012), values are better explored by focusing on the connection/interaction of individuals and groups with concrete objects and spaces (e.g. urban forests).

The concept of urban forest values, defined here broadly as whatever we consider important in relation to urban forests (Peckham et al., 2013), can guide our explorations of how people assign importance and meaning to urban nature. Research on the attitudes or preferences people hold in relation with urban forests usually focuses on whether people like trees or not in particular contexts, such as an urban park

(Jones et al., 2013), and is limited in helping us understand why and how people like them. In contrast, urban-forest values research focuses on expressions of importance and meaningfulness associated with trees and forests in the urban realm, such as when people say that they value the urban forest because it connects them with their history (Ordóñez and Duinker, 2014).

Understanding urban forest values is important to advance participatory governance in urban ecosystem management. Participatory governance is the mechanism that distributes responsibility, facilitates decision-making, and shares knowledge across management actors (Delmas and Young, 2009), thus making the management process more democratic (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). Participatory governance welcomes participation and not just input from diverse people in the design and planning of urban natural spaces (Li, 2014). In urban forest management, this means engaging a broad group of management actors (Lawrence et al., 2013), dealing with conflicting ecological and social objectives (Fors et al., 2015), and, more recently, embracing different ethno-cultural perspectives and the priorities of ethno-culturally diverse people (Dai, 2011). Understanding the meaning and importance that ethno-culturally diverse people attach to urban forests can clarify these perspectives and priorities, and make it easier to direct urban forest management through the principles of ethno-culturally diversity and participatory governance.

### 1.2. Ethno-cultural diversity and urban forests

The ethno-cultural diversity of many urban areas means that urban forests are sometimes managed in ethno-cultural diverse contexts. What defines the borders of an ethno-cultural diverse group usually depends on a particular political and social context (Qadeer, 2016), and because of this some authors argue that ethnicity is socially-constructed (Nagel, 1994). For instance, in the US, a racial interpretation of ethnicity dominates, such as the differentiation between Hispanic, Black, and Asian groups (Colby and Ortman, 2015). In many European countries, a non-European, foreign-born interpretation is more common (Shiney et al., 2006; Gentin, 2011). In Canada, many interpretations of ethnicity are combined, resulting in a variety of terms and definitions, including visible minorities, based on visible differences; European vs. non-European origins; and foreign-born origin (Statistics Canada, 2011). To account for the multiple interpretations of ethnicity in North-American and European contexts some authors use the term “ethno-cultural” (Rishbeth, 2004). For a thorough review of the epistemological and methodological considerations behind ethnicity, see Gentin (2011).

Our understanding of how ethno-cultural diverse people value urban forests is still limited; therefore, this research aims to address this gap. Such a gap exists mostly because studies on this topic focus on either the patterns of resource allocation in the social space of cities, or on whether people like urban trees or not. Many studies have demonstrated the uneven socio-spatial distributions of urban parks (Bruton and Floyd, 2014), urban trees (Heynen and Lindsey, 2003), or urban vegetation (Pham et al., 2013), and their consequence for service provision, such as low health outcomes in particular ethnic or racial minority groups (Roe et al., 2016). Although these studies have important implications for managing the distributional aspects of urban nature, they do not give people of different ethnicities a voice to inform us how they see their relationship with urban nature. Other studies show how recent immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds associate quality of life with urban green spaces (Eby et al., 2012), but these studies do not elaborate on how these people value more tangible features of urban nature (e.g. trees).

Studies that explore people’s attitudes related to urban forests are more informative, but even these have some limitations. Studies in North America show how white residents of European decent, mostly Anglo-Saxons, have a more favorable view of urban trees (Lohr et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2013) and a higher level of support for urban forest programs (Wall et al., 2006) than other ethnic

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