



Original article

From control to cohabitation: Social-ecological insights on urban wildness narratives

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ABSTRACT

Narratives surrounding urban green space management have experienced significant shifts in recent years. While the command-and-control approach to urban green space management was once a dominant narrative, alternative understandings have emerged over time. The emerging narrative on urban wilding presents a unique opportunity to expand on our current understandings and approaches to urban green space management. This research explores how participation in experiential workshops that engage with urban wild spaces (UWS) through deliberative methods may influence our narratives of urban green spaces and their management. This is achieved by examining the human-nature dynamics of the workshops, which employ methods of wild transect walks, storytelling, and multispecies role-playing, framed by social-ecological traits to facilitate the translation of perceptions and values. The workshops gathered data on the interplay between the participating human stakeholders. Based on a narrative analysis, the findings suggest that an initial disconnect between humans and ecology appears during engagement with UWS. Throughout the sense-making and sharing process, participants begin to connect with the spaces through sensory effect traits, such as auditory elements, tactile sensations, and visual characteristics, as they recount childhood memories and stories about the ecosystem's ecology. Narratives then shift as the workshops progress; participants move from descriptions of practical management and control toward a more ethical understanding of cohabitation. The article concludes by suggesting directions for future research to further understand the driving factors behind these shifting narratives.

Plain language summary: This research examines how people's ideas about managing urban green spaces are evolving. In the past, management often focused on control, maintaining order and tidiness in nature. Recently, new approaches have emerged, such as urban wilding, which promotes allowing nature to grow and evolve more freely. This study tested whether workshops could alter people's perceptions of urban green spaces. During the workshops, participants explored urban wild areas through activities like wild walks, storytelling, and role-playing as different species. These activities encouraged individuals to notice sensory details (such as sounds, textures, sights), and to share personal memories and stories. At first, many participants felt disconnected from the wild areas. But as the workshops progressed, they began to connect more deeply, moving away from seeing nature as something to control towards seeing it as something to live alongside and share. The study concludes that these kinds of participatory workshops can help people develop more ethical and coexisting relationships with urban nature. It also suggests more research is needed to understand what drives these shifts in perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Narratives on urban green spaces and their management have evolved (Bush and Hes, 2018), reflecting broader societal, cultural, and ecological changes. In this context, narratives are understood as shared, socially constructed stories that shape how people interpret, value, and act upon the world around them (Somers, 1994). These narratives are not merely descriptive but constitutive, influencing perceptions and meanings toward places, species, and practices (Moezzi et al., 2017). They provide frames through which people make sense of their environment, and thus have implications for policy, governance, and design (Jones and Mcbeth, 2010). Natural resource governance has typically been dominated by efforts to control nature for harvesting products and providing ecosystem services (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Crona and Hubacek, 2010). Within urban landscapes, similar 'command-and-control' narratives have been common, with urban green space management agencies attempting to regulate every aspect of natural systems. Recently, this narrative has evolved, partly in recognition that maintaining a static state through strict control can inadvertently reduce the system's resilience (Holling and Meffe, 1996). A greater understanding of temporal variation in species composition and ecological functioning is essential in ensuring the health of ecosystems (ibid.). Thus, narratives have shifted to recognise and encourage self-sustaining ecological processes that operate independently of past land-use patterns, with limited reliance on human intervention, such as active planting or ongoing maintenance (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024). These rewilding or urban wilding approaches manifest as dynamics that can be seen in traits often associated with urban wild spaces (UWS) (Mckinney et al., 2018).

UWS are areas within a city where vegetation and wildlife grow with minimal human management (Threlfall and Kendal, 2018). They are increasingly acknowledged for their social contributions and potential benefits in fostering human-nature interactions (Hwang and Jain, 2021; Maller et al., 2019), McLain et al., 2014; Pineda-Pinto et al., 2023; Rupprecht, 2017). Allowing natural processes to 'take over' and for species to shape their own space, as in the case of urban wilding, provides opportunities for developing alternative narratives that depict more-than-human entanglements and ethical orientations that differ from traditional, human-centred management models. While research to understand how these areas are socially valued and perceived has been conducted (Kim et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020; Rupprecht, 2017), issues remain unaddressed, particularly concerning when and how values, meanings, and affects translate into shared or contested narratives that influence management practices.

Rather than being fully formed or explicitly held, many environmental values are latent, emerging over time through engagement, reflection, and shared experience (Chan et al., 2016). This research explores the temporal evolution of such values, highlighting how engagement with UWS through experiential processes may reveal previously hidden priorities related to urban nature. Emerging green space management narratives, such as urban wilding, present unique opportunities to expand our current understandings and approaches to urban green space management while simultaneously shifting the narrative further. Research demonstrates that engagement, i.e. an experiential and affective connection, with nature has impacts on pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes (Dresner et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2022; Whitburn et al., 2019). However, a gap persists around the potential impact that engagement with UWS may have on urban green space management narratives. Given the already shifting narratives of urban green space management (Dempsey et al., 2014; Deparis et al., 2023) and the significant social and cultural impacts of UWS, this study asks: *How does participating in experiential processes engaging with urban wild spaces impact narratives on urban green space management?*

Given the complexity of these systems, the following research adopts a systems-thinking approach to explore human-nature interactions. The social-ecological traits framework (Andersson et al., 2021) is employed

in the design of experiential workshops to facilitate the translation of taxonomic and ecological information into terms and attributes that are more intuitively relevant to people. The framework enables the exploration of linkages between life history attributes and perceived ecosystem services and values, ultimately identifying relevant guidance for biodiversity management. The framework acknowledges the human element in managing ecosystems and natural spaces. People's decisions, values, and actions have a significant impact on the outcomes of conservation and environmental management (Bennett, 2016; Ives and Kendal, 2014). Value orientation may positively or negatively impact conservation efforts, depending on people's perceptions, goals and motivations (Ihemezie et al., 2021). This underscores that environmental sustainability depends on understanding ecosystems and recognising and addressing the human factors that drive ecological changes. While the connection between traits and broader urban wilding narratives is not direct, traits serve as boundary objects that help mediate between ecological materialities and social meanings, facilitating dialogue through perception, affective response, and situated knowledge that collectively shape how participants construct and share narratives around urban ecosystems (Andersson et al., 2021). For example, the framework may be applied to traits such as the auditory qualities of bird song or the dispersal of dandelion seeds. The traits serve as both ecological indicators and points of human recognition, offering accessible entry points for dialogue about environmental values. The workshops explore how management narratives may shift as people engage with UWS and articulate and share their perceptions towards the spaces and related management practices. Through this research, we aim to identify future research directions for a deeper understanding of participatory methodologies that can unlock the latent values of UWS.

1.1. Narratives on urban green space management

Urban green space management, a term encompassing the social, ecological, and technical processes that govern the planning, maintenance, and use of green areas within cities (Dempsey et al., 2014; Fongar et al., 2019; Jansson and Lindgren, 2012; Randrup et al., 2021), has evolved in tandem with broader societal and ecological shifts. Natural resource governance has been dominated by efforts to control nature to harvest products, provide recreational, health and well-being values, and more generally, provide ecosystem services (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Aysan et al., 2023; Crona and Hubacek, 2010). Like many contemporary production systems, cities are settings in which these management narratives and their associated practices are implemented. It is common to see efforts to impose control, often disregarding the complex dynamics and resilience of ecosystems, for example, through invasive species removal and native planting ideals and practices (Gillespie et al., 2025). The command-and-control approach, historically dominant in urban park management (Taylor, 1999), has been linked to declines in biological diversity and increased ecological vulnerability (Levin, 1999). Scientific consensus now favours flexible, adaptive management systems that recognise the role of individual decision-making and social-ecological complexity (Carpenter et al., 1999; Holling and Meffe, 1996). Despite this shift, command-and-control remains embedded in the governance of formal urban green spaces, reflecting their legacy as instruments of social order. More recent research has demonstrated that narratives around urban green spaces tend to be understood as 'nice to have' or 'universally good' (Rigolon et al., 2022). However, this type of thinking may hinder policy advocacy efforts, leading to the suggestion of counter-narratives such as necessity, resilience, and intersectionality for framing urban green space and its management (ibid.).

With similar underlying narratives, rewilding has traditionally been anchored in returning ecosystems to a state of 'pristine' nature. Initially, rewilding focused on protecting and reintroducing native species (Power et al., 1996). Carver et al. (2021) highlight that this focus on nativeness continues to underpin the principles of rewilding. However, applying

rewilding principles to urban environments presents significant challenges. Urban habitats are often so heavily modified by human activities that there is no longer a clear baseline or reference state for restoration (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024). Therefore, urban wilding builds on rewilding principles while adapting for heavily modified urban environments, where historical baselines are elusive (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024; Svenning, 2020). Urban wilding could be viewed as a strategy to foster more extensive and less frictious cohabitation between humans and non-human species in response to those challenges (Massenberg

et al., 2023). This shift acknowledges the unique context of urban environments, where the focus is less on returning to a historical baseline and more on integrating and enhancing the ecological functionality of existing urban spaces (Fig. 1). However, it is also essential to recognise that there are limitations to the approach, particularly with spontaneous ecological assembly, such as the risk of non-native invasive species establishing themselves. This can threaten local biodiversity or serve as a source of colonisation for surrounding non-urban habitats. Additionally, some restoration goals (for example, re-establishing specific

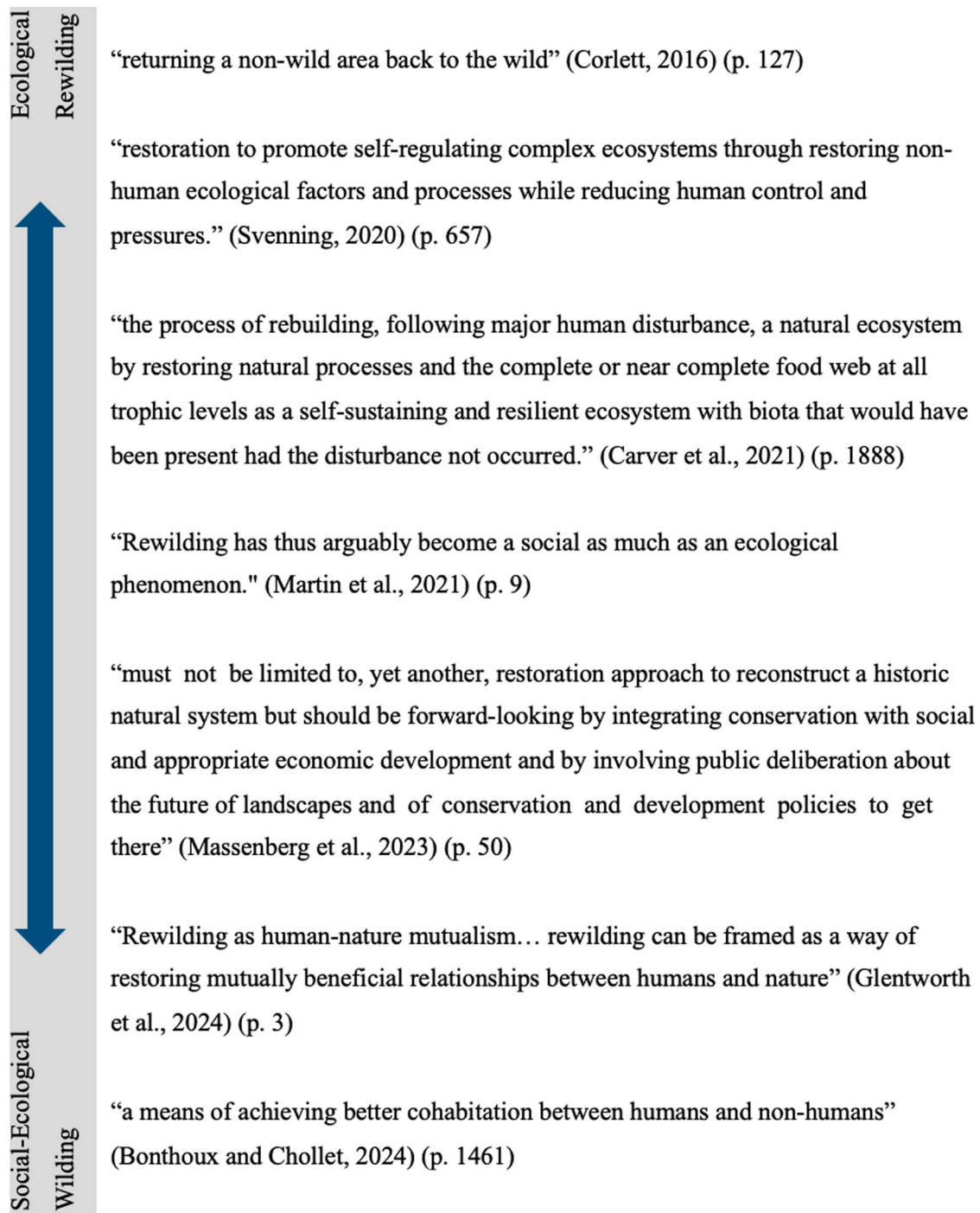


Fig. 1. The various definitions of rewilding and wilding in academic literature reflect a spectrum of approaches influenced by specific ecological and social contexts, from highly human-influenced to minimally disturbed environments. Rather than representing opposing views, these definitions share a core vision that is adapted across various settings. The continuum, from ecological rewilding to social-ecological wilding, illustrated here, recognises different priorities in aims and methods (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024; Carver et al., 2021; Corlett, 2016; Glentworth et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2021; Massenberg et al., 2023; Svenning, 2020).

reference ecosystems) may require more intensive interventions than wilding alone can offer, emphasising the need for context-sensitive, sometimes hybrid solutions (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024). Although UWS may not be the direct output of urban wilding, the process of urban wilding often seeks to enhance, expand, or formalise UWS by fostering biodiversity, ecosystem services, and human engagement with nature. This evolving understanding necessitates management frameworks that strike a balance between ecological functionality, social significance, and adaptive governance, moving beyond rigid control to accommodate the complex and dynamic nature of urban green spaces (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024; Dempsey et al., 2014).

Contemporary management approaches increasingly acknowledges the varied forms of urban green space, including urban wild spaces (UWS), which support spontaneous vegetation and ecological processes despite ongoing human disturbance (Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014). UWS are increasingly acknowledged for their social contributions and potential benefits in fostering human-nature interactions (Hwang and Jain, 2021; Maller et al., 2019; McInnis et al., 2014; Pineda-Pinto et al., 2023; Rupprecht, 2017; Threlfall and Kendal, 2018). Typically, the ecological variation discussed arises from differences in land-use management practices, socioeconomic factors, and the presence of human-introduced species, which frequently permit novel species assemblages to flourish (Pineda-Pinto et al., 2023). Equally important, however, are the socio-cultural dimensions that shape how urban green spaces are understood, valued, and managed. Factors such as cultural heritage, community identities, and public attitudes toward nature all influence the narratives and practices surrounding these spaces (Buijs et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2024). UWS are increasingly recognised to be influenced by human actions (Gandy, 2016; Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014) while also supporting diverse species (Bonthoux et al., 2014; Müller et al., 2018). However, these spaces also challenge human perceptions (Colley and Craig, 2019; De La Fuente De Val, 2023) and embody cultural and social significance, which still needs to be fully understood (Hester et al., 1999; Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014; Soulsbury and White, 2016). Historically, UWS were often seen as neglected byproducts of global urban capitalism (Marr, 2016). However, recent perspectives recognise these spaces as valuable refugia that support species movement and mixing within the urban matrix (Bonthoux et al., 2014; Gentili et al., 2024; Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014). These areas also provide opportunities for non-native species to thrive, adding another layer of complexity (Shaffer, 2018). Engagement with such spaces presents a unique opportunity to explore the emerging narrative of urban wilding and how this engagement may influence our approaches to managing urban green spaces.

1.2. Engagement with urban wild spaces

One of the core elements of this research is engagement with UWS. Here, engagement is viewed as comprising a range of affective, cognitive, and physical interactions with urban nature (Lumber et al., 2017). This includes not only direct contact, such as sensory immersion, exploration, or stewardship, but also emotional and reflective connections that influence perceptions and values towards urban ecosystems. Within this study, engagement is distinguished from participation, which may refer to involvement in structured processes such as planning, decision-making, or design (Cornwall, 2008). Here, participation is understood as externally initiated and outcome-oriented, whereas engagement may be more self-directed, experiential, and process-oriented, emerging from how individuals relate to and make meaning with UWS in their everyday life. In this study, engagement serves as both an aim and a method: the workshops are designed to foster embodied and emotional connections with UWS, under the hypothesis that such connections support a deeper, longer-term interest in ecological care and collaborative stewardship (Krasny et al., 2014).

There is growing evidence that engagement with nature, particularly when it is meaningful and place-based, can promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Dresner et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2022; Whitburn

et al., 2019). Scholarship emphasises that these effects are deeply intertwined with situated knowledge and affective experiences; how individuals personally relate to and emotionally connect with specific environments shapes their environmental attitudes and actions (Krasny et al., 2014; Ramkissoon et al., 2012). Place-based experiences and local ecological understandings mediate the development of pro-environmental values by fostering affective bonds and a sense of responsibility toward the environment (Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2013; Raymond et al., 2009). For instance, a participatory project engaging participants with spontaneous urban vegetation demonstrated that such engagement strengthened both ecological and social connectivity, which in turn promoted interest and stewardship toward UWS (Vega et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of integrating emotional and place-based knowledge within participatory processes to support sustainable urban environmental behaviours. In this light, engagement is not reducible to participation but is entangled with it; by cultivating emotional resonance and experiential knowledge, engagement can deepen the quality and inclusivity of participatory processes (Raymond et al., 2017). As demonstrated, there has been an increase in research on UWS; however, a gap persists around the potential impact that engagement with UWS may have on our narratives of urban green space management.

2. Methodology and methods

Eight participatory workshops were conducted across three countries (Australia, Ireland and the USA) to explore how co-design methods shape narratives of urban wild spaces (UWS). Participatory workshops are structured group activities that combine collective discussion and creative exercises to elicit diverse perspectives on a shared issue. In this study, workshops were designed to investigate participants' perceptions (interpretations shaped by knowledge, culture and meaning-making) and experiences (direct, sensory, and emotional encounters) of UWS. O'Donnell (2025) provides further in-depth descriptions of how the workshops were planned, conducted, and reflections on their effectiveness, as well as adaptations for alternative settings. The workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Each workshop followed the same three-step format: (1) Wild walk incorporating the practice of 'noticing' (Biggs et al., 2021b) – a self-guided solo walk through the site, where sensorial immersion (Lim et al., 2020) and place-based observation were encouraged. For this study, participants walked through the UWS while observing ecological interactions, posing questions, and engaging in active listening (Biggs et al., 2021a). Participants were asked to record observations using specific parameters: environmental characteristics and changes, species identification and assemblages, species traits and capabilities/needs, and ecological roles. They also reflected on past land use, potential future impacts, and their vision for the site's long-term evolution. Following the walk, participants were invited to share immediate reflections during a group discussion, which facilitators documented through notes and photos; (2) Storytelling exercise (Gonsalves et al., 2023) – Participants worked as a group to create a short story inspired by their observations during the transect walk. Working collaboratively, participants developed key story elements, including characters (who), setting (where), events (what happens), temporality (movement through time), and plot (overall direction and theme). Participants collaboratively reflected on the site's history and present condition, then imagined future scenarios where as many species as possible were flourishing. The activity was intended to highlight the cohabitation of human and non-human species; (3) Multispecies roleplaying (Taboada et al., 2024) – participants adopted the perspectives of human and non-human actors (e.g. plants, planners, mammals, insects, residents) and participated in a round-table discussion to identify the needs, wants and ecological connections of each participant. Through these roles, participants collaborated as one large group to develop actions that could help bring their vision of urban wilding to life. During the activity,

participants negotiated, defended their positions from within their roles, and charted three potential pathways to achieve the future scenarios developed in the second activity.

The workshops lasted approximately 2–2.5 h, with about 20–30 min allocated to each of the three activities, along with approximately 10 min each for introductions, reflective discussions between activities, and a final overall reflection of the workshop. By encouraging participants to engage critically with different viewpoints, deliberative methods helped uncover the complex and often contested relationships people have with UWS. These deliberative methods were identified through a systematic literature review on co-design (O'Donnell et al., 2025). Together, they created opportunities for reflection, dialogue and the negotiation of multiple viewpoints. Each workshop was facilitated by at least two members of the research team, sharing the roles of (1) guiding activities and discussions, with (2) focusing on inclusive participation and systemic documentation through audio recordings, field notes and photography.

Each workshop aimed to include 8–12 participants from a diverse range of local stakeholder communities, comprising communities of practice (e.g., urban planners, municipal officers), epistemic communities (e.g., academics from a range of disciplines such as ecology, urban planning, architecture, and sustainability science), and interest groups (e.g., residents, grassroots organisations) (Table 1). These groups were targeted to contribute practical, applied knowledge, evidence-based insights that influence policy and decision-making, and represent the values, needs, and preferences of specific segments of society (Wagner et al., 2019). Participants were primarily recruited through institutional partners located at each workshop site. These gatekeeper organisations helped identify potential participants who had existing interests in the ecological characteristics of the site, possible future development, or who expressed a general curiosity about their local environment and community. The involvement of local gatekeeper institutions in each location supported culturally grounded approaches and ensured the relevance of the context. The participant cohort was intentionally diverse, encompassing individuals with varying backgrounds, knowledge bases, and motivations. For instance, some participants were

affiliated with local municipalities and had training in urban planning, attending the workshops to gain a better understanding of community perspectives on development proposals. Others were driven by an interest in urban ecology, either through formal training or a desire to learn more about local biodiversity. Attendance varied by location depending on local support and logistical constraints.

Workshops were distributed across a range of urban contexts in Australia, Ireland, and the USA (Fig. 2). These countries were chosen not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to gain insights from cities with varying urban ecologies, planning legacies, and cultural relationships with nature. This diversity helps identify both common and unique narratives about UWS. However, this choice also limits generalisability, as it introduces a Global North bias and does not incorporate viewpoints from the Global South or cities with different governance structures or environmental justice issues. The sites varied not only in vegetation and historical land use (Fig. 3), but also in the meanings and relationships that communities ascribed to them. In Ireland, workshops were held in locations ranging from a disused car park in the small heritage town of Cahir to a grassroots-stewarded site in inner-city Dublin, as well as suburban and institutional landscapes in Sallins and South Dublin. In New York City, the workshop took place in a vacant industrial site poised for major redevelopment. In Melbourne, workshops engaged with underutilised spaces, i.e. railway corridors, riparian verges, and creek systems, which were not only ecologically significant but also sites of cultural memory, activism, and community identity. The diversity of sites highlights how physical site conditions, governance structures, and cultural meanings combine to influence perceptions, values, and imaginaries around UWS.

Several challenges emerged during the implementation of the workshops. Recruitment in some locations was limited by time and resources, resulting in smaller groups than expected. Balancing discussions between technical experts and other participants required active facilitation to ensure all voices were heard. Logistical factors such as weather during the outdoor site walk and access to suitable indoor spaces for the second and third activities (Fig. 4) occasionally disrupted plans but were managed through adaptive strategies. These challenges highlight the importance of flexibility and reflexivity in participatory research.

2.1. Data extraction and analytical strategy

The study was framed within an inquiry-focused approach, utilising open-ended questions to encourage participants to express their thoughts freely and spontaneously. Examples of such open-ended questions include 'How do you think the species within this space relate to one another?' and 'How do you imagine this space in the future?'. This methodological approach fosters reflection, mutual learning, and inclusive dialogue (Bäckstrand, 2003), creating a space where diverse perspectives can be shared and negotiated. Incorporating the social-ecological traits framework (Andersson et al., 2021) into the design of the workshops emphasises the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between ecological systems and human societies.

An iterative narrative analysis was employed to explore the vocabulary used by participants for terms and attributes related to the ecological traits of the site and the social connections with this ecology. The analysis was conducted in the English language. The initial analysis was performed by the authors, who extracted the data and then collaboratively reviewed and reflected on the coding and terminology, confirming the findings. The data was entered manually into Excel, without the use of additional software. Iterative narrative analysis is a qualitative research technique that involves repeatedly reviewing and refining narratives to identify emerging themes, patterns, and meanings within participants' stories (Riessman, 2008). This cyclical process enables a deeper understanding of how individuals construct meaning and express their experiences over time, thereby enhancing the reliability and richness of the analysis. Narrative, both as a research subject and an

Table 1

The locations, number of participants and their respective stakeholder groups (COP = Community of Practice, EC = Epistemic Community, IG = Interest Group), site typologies and the gatekeeper organisation assisting with the planning of the workshops.

Workshop	Location	Participants	Site Typology	Gatekeeper Organisation
W01	Tipperary, Ireland	3 x COP, 1 x EC, 3 x IG	Vacant lot adjacent to carpark	Cahir Tidy Towns
W02	New York City, USA	3 x COP, 3 x EC, 2 x IG	Vacant lot next to skyscraper buildings	Solar 1
W03	Dublin, Ireland	15 x EC	Guerilla composted urban commons	National College of Art and Design
W04	Kildare, Ireland	3 x COP, 5 x IG	Urban meadow along river corridor	Sallins Biodiversity Group
W05	Dublin, Ireland	4 x COP, 5 x EC, 3 x IG	Verge on university campus	University College Dublin
W06	Melbourne, Australia	3 x COP, 7 x EC	Verge along railway line	Swinburne University of Technology
W07	Melbourne, Australia	2 x COP, 3 x EC, 2 x IG	Verge along river corridor	Yarra Riverkeeper Association
W08	Melbourne, Australia	3 x COP, 4 x IG	Verge along river corridor	Friends of Kororoit Creek

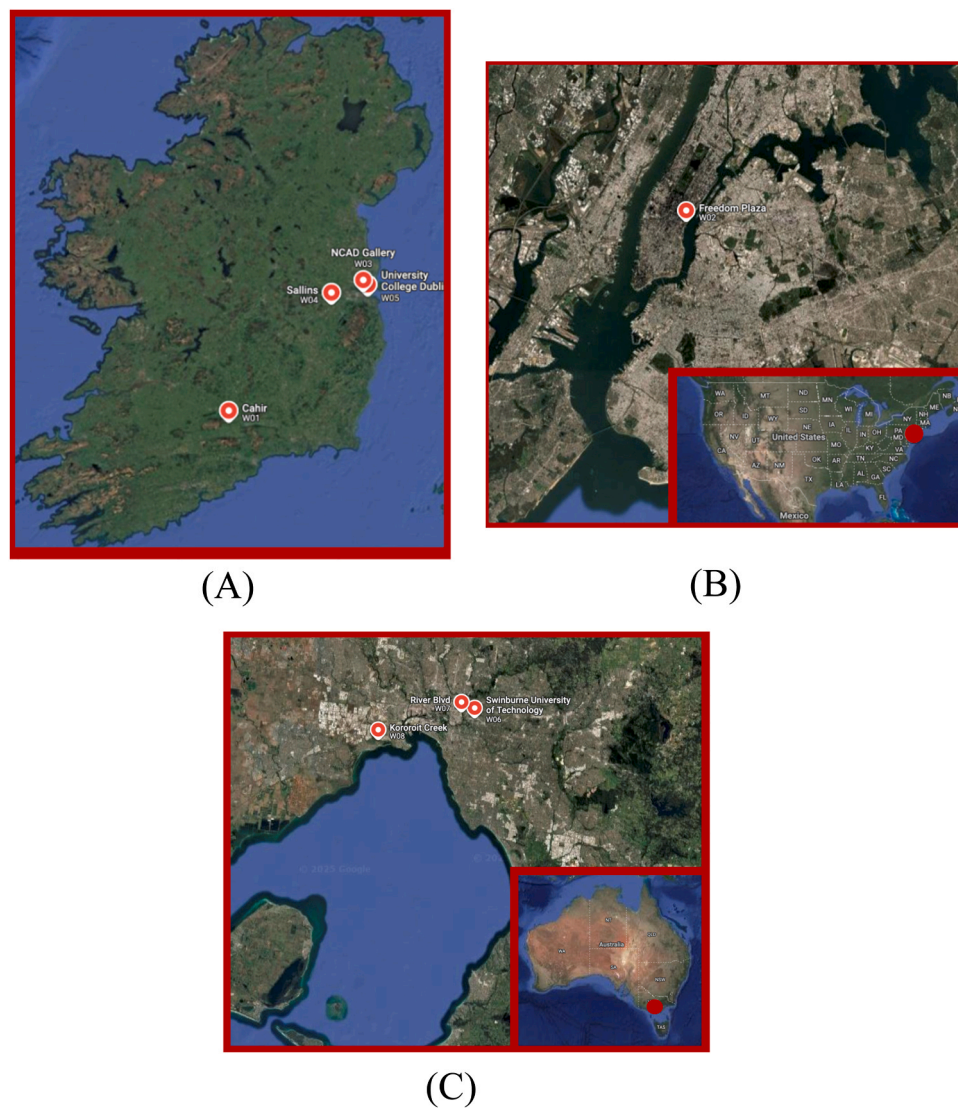


Fig. 2. Maps of the locations of the eight workshops across three countries: Ireland (A), the United States (B) and Australia (C).

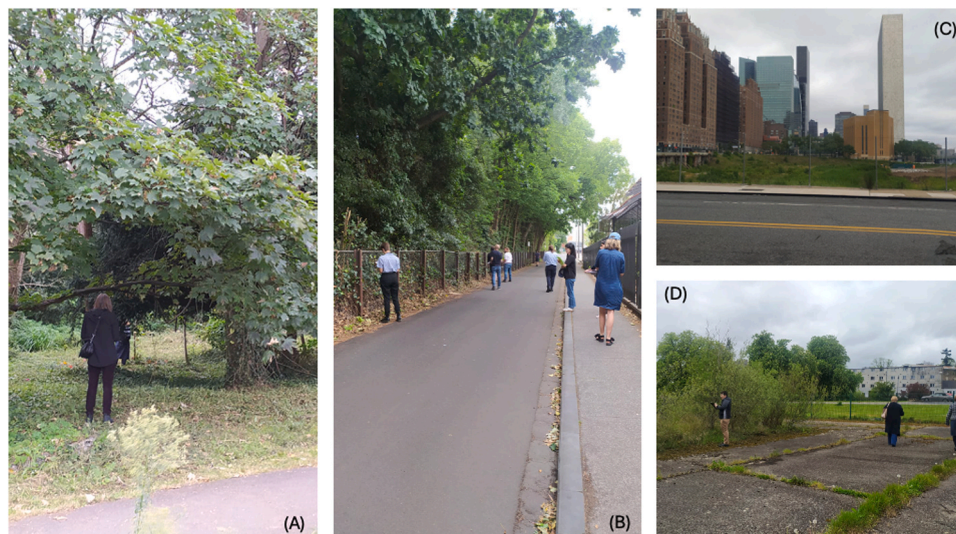
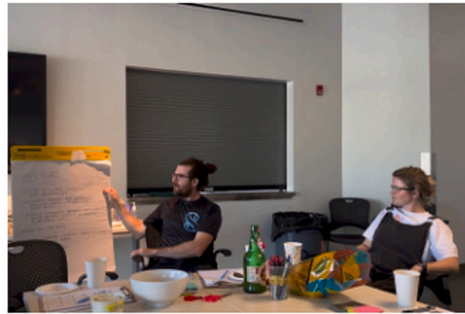


Fig. 3. Four examples of sites where workshops were conducted: Naturalised verge on a university campus in Dublin, Ireland (A); Naturalised verge along railway line in Melbourne, Australia (B); Vacant lot next to high-rise buildings in New York City, USA (C); Vacant lot adjacent to a car park in Cahir, Ireland (D). Photos by M. O'Donnell.

Wild Transect Walk

Transect walks are observational methods to examine vegetation, interactions, challenges, and potential solutions within a site (Dhaundiyala & Pant, 2020). This method provided insights into the site's complex systems, revealing nuances that traditional research approaches might overlook (Narayanasamy, 2009).



Storytelling

Storytelling, as a method, facilitates an understanding of history, values, knowledge, and culture, encouraging participants to reflect on these aspects while envisioning future possibilities (Waller, 2003).

Multispecies Roleplaying

Games are widely regarded as valuable social learning tools, enabling individuals to adopt alternate personas and explore new knowledge and perspectives (Craven et al., 2017).



Fig. 4. The workshops combined three different activities: a wild transect walk, storytelling, and multispecies role-playing across the eight sites (Craven et al., 2017; Dhaundiyala and Pant, 2020; Narayanasamy, 2009; Waller, 2003). Photos by M. O'Donnell, C. Pierson, and C. Cooper, respectively.

analytical approach, is considered to provide qualitative researchers with an epistemological toolkit that more effectively captures how individuals communicate, experience, and interpret their social worlds (McAllum et al., 2019).

The dataset consisted of verbatim transcripts from all workshops, including activities two and three, as well as the round-table reflection discussions that followed each activity. Analysis began with immersion in the data and associated notes, setting the stage for initial thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To start, the coding was guided by the social-ecological traits framework, focusing on the ecological traits identified by participants and the discussions surrounding their values

and preferences. To capture and prioritise the collective narratives while remaining sensitive to individual variations, the analysis emphasised themes that were repeated or returned by multiple participants during key moments of the workshops. The round-table discussions provided opportunities to identify shared discursive patterns around which narratives coalesced. Building upon this, researchers iteratively examined the codes to identify potential themes that encapsulate significant patterns relevant to the research questions. Consistent with Clarke et al. (2015), themes were understood not as uniform truths but as broader patterns that represent key aspects of the data. This phase involved integrating the initial codes and exploring their interconnections while

also attending to their latent meanings expressed through metaphors, tone, or recurring symbols. Participants often employed ecological metaphors, for example, describing the edges of urban spaces as sites where life can flourish, framing species in rewilded areas as occupants on borrowed time facing displacement or invoking autumn melancholy to capture the seasonal atmosphere of a place. Such metaphors reveal how participants can draw on ecological imaginary to articulate deeper values, relationships and concerns for non-human life. In line with [Rocks et al. \(2007\)](#), observations made throughout the workshops were systematically documented to support the subsequent analysis, ensuring the narrative analysis provided a nuanced, human-centred understanding of complex social and ecological dynamics.

3. Research findings

The participants were prompted to reflect on what aspects they felt most drawn to, fostering a deeper personal connection with the environment. As participants reflected on their experiences, the effect traits were found to serve as entry points for forming initial connections with the ecosystem. However, narratives of ecological disconnection emerged as participants shared these experiences. Participants actively exchanged knowledge through storytelling and personal memories, bridging this gap and enriching their collective understanding. This collaborative process sparked a shift in how participants perceived the ecology of the sites, opening up rich discussions about how to care for

the sites to enhance multispecies cohabitation (see [Fig. 5](#)). The following sections will discuss the key themes and narratives which emerged when examining the workshop data.

3.1. Social-ecological traits

While stakeholders could often identify particular species within the ecosystems, participants did not specify ecological response traits of those species when questioned (e.g., physiological or phenological). Instead, participants developed plurivocal narratives on the classification of species occupying each site. Despite being conducted across three continents, specific ecological patterns consistently emerged throughout the workshops. Participants frequently encountered 'pioneer', 'invasive', and a mix of 'native' and 'non-native' species across the UWS, often identified through these environmental characteristics. Using common names, participants could identify *Betula* sp. and *Taraxacum officinale* in Ireland, *Eucalyptus* sp. in Australia, and *Populus* sp. in North America. The ecology of the UWS visited, described by participants as 'resilient', 'transitional', or 'ruderal', was predominantly colonised by pioneer species, indicating the early stages of ecological succession. Invasive non-native species were also a recurring topic of discussion. Using their common names, participants identified species such as *Buddleja davidii* in Ireland, *Artemisia vulgaris* in North America, and *Acridotheres tristis* in Australia. Participants often noted that many of the sites were characterised by poor soil quality, contamination, and

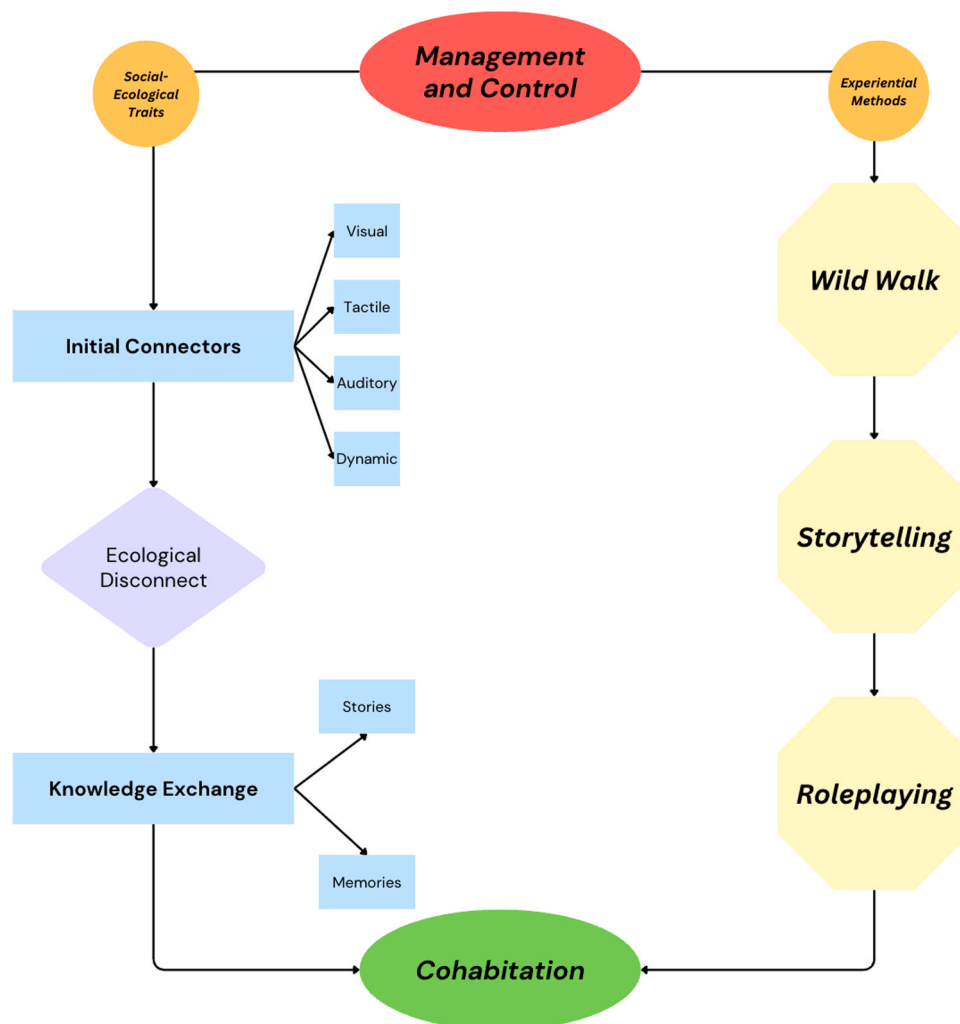


Fig. 5. Participants in the workshops shift from narratives of management and control to those of cohabitation. This process involves connecting to the space through effect traits and exchanging ecological knowledge through stories and memories to overcome ecological disconnect.

pollution from past and nearby land use. Through discussions, it became apparent that the ecology of the ecosystems visited, regardless of their origin, contributed to soil rehabilitation and formation, thereby assisting in ameliorating toxic conditions and facilitating subsequent successional stages, which urban development pressures can often hinder.

3.2. Effect traits as initial connection points

Participants across all workshops consistently formed connections to these spaces through the sensory and aesthetic characteristics of the ecosystems, commonly referred to as 'effect traits' (Fisher et al., 2023). The effect traits consistently identified were auditory elements (e.g., birdsong), tactile sensations (e.g., sharp textures), visual characteristics (e.g., colour), and dynamic behaviours (e.g., movement). These traits often served as initial points of ecological connection for participants. Auditory cues, in particular, elicited strong reactions, with participants expressing varying degrees of attraction or aversion to the stimuli. One participant, for instance, noted: "Some sounds repelled me, and some I liked; the dogs barking interfered... but the birds, I was attracted to them" [W08]. For others, the absence/presence of specific sounds played a crucial role in fostering a sense of place: "Connections to the space, the quietness, the smell of vegetation, and the sound of the breeze in the branches above make it very peaceful" [W05]. The traits functioned as bridges between ecological and social dimensions, often drawing participants to specific locations where they could deepen their reflections and strengthen their connection to the environment, enriching the space's social value. One participant highlighted the diversity of effect traits held by UWS, remarking on the variety found within a small patch: "There's so many smells and textures as well as origin... where else would you get this crazy mixture of things, I didn't even move" [W03].

3.3. Knowledge exchange through stories and memories

Throughout the workshops, participants consistently shared their ecological knowledge and memories of childhood experiences in similar ecological settings. Lamenting the loss of access to these environments today, one participant said, "I can imagine kids who don't have access to naturally-seeded wild spaces, they wouldn't have the opportunity" [W04]. The childhood memories often revolved around interactions with specific species, such as 'blowing dandelions' or 'picking blackberries,' evoking imagery of spaces reminiscent of 'The Secret Garden' (an English children's novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett symbolising discovery, imagination, and connection with nature). Participants shared stories of learning about plant species and their uses from older family members. For instance, one participant recalled, "We used to make soup out of that" [W04] about *Plantago major*, a species now considered a common garden weed. In another workshop, a participant recounted how, in America, the same species was known as 'the white man's foot' due to its association with the trail of settlers, underscoring certain plants' cultural and historical significance. These stories and memories often carry latent ecological information such as soil type, pollination, reproduction and flowering traits. For example, the seed dispersal mechanism of species such as dandelions and common plantain has been previously mentioned indirectly. Furthermore, these stories played a crucial role in fostering social connections between participants throughout the process; as one participant highlighted, "... stories are a great way to connect people" [W01].

3.4. Narratives on urban wildness

A shift in participants' perceptions of species was observed throughout the workshops. During discussions within the workshops, participants expressed strong preferences for native species. They voiced distrust toward what they often described as 'invasive' non-native species, with references to certain vegetation 'strangling' other plants

[W08]. While participants tended to conflate non-native with invasive, discussions evolved to consider the ecological roles that such 'unwanted' species might play, exploring cohabitation not just in terms of the services they provide to humans, but also as contributors to ecological processes that support the well-being of multiple species and the wider environment. One participant suggested that "perhaps some of what we call invasive species might offer some services" [W05]. At the same time, another remarked, "There's definitely room on that site for both" [W04], referring to the potential coexistence of native and non-native species. This shift aligns with a growing public acceptance and recognition of the complex, interconnected roles that various species play in urban ecosystems, particularly in the context of climate change adaptation (Hoyle et al., 2017). Within these complexities, various descriptors were used to describe the ecology of the sites and the overall ecosystems, which were common across the sites regardless of location. Descriptions of the ecology included vocabulary such as 'hardy', 'aggressive', 'resilient', 'protection', 'adaptable', 'dense', 'healing', 'invasive', 'exotic', 'tenacious', 'spontaneous', 'in-between', 'temporary', and 'contaminated' when participants discussed the types of ecologies occupying the sites and their roles.

The narratives that emerged during the workshops were not uniform or consistent across all participants, groups, or settings. While this study primarily focused on identifying the dominant or recurring themes within each workshop, it is essential to acknowledge the diversity and, at times, contradictions within individual contributions. For instance, some participants immediately highlighted the beneficial and restorative properties of the urban wild ecologies, emphasising healing properties [W04], peacefulness [W06], stormwater retention capabilities [W03], and general adaptability [W07]. In contrast, others were quicker to articulate concerns related to abandonment [W05], degradation [W07], aggressiveness [W01] and disorder [W06]. Contrasting responses were most likely shaped by participants' personal experiences, socio-cultural contexts, and their prior familiarity with the specific sites. Narrative variability also manifested across the different workshop groups, cities, and types of UWS. In workshops conducted in Melbourne, for example, participants often framed the wild spaces as neglected areas of the city that required management or control to protect native species. In contrast, in Dublin, these spaces were more often described as urban jungles or vital commons. Similarly, the character of the site, whether it was a derelict lot or a riverbank, may have influenced the narratives that developed during each session.

The reflection sessions between each activity became critical temporal markers within the workshops, offering insight into how participants' perspectives had evolved, or in some cases, remained unchanged, after each activity. The narrative evolution often became most visible during these transitions. These shifts were not universal, but they occurred with enough frequency to suggest a general pattern across workshops. Several participants explicitly referenced changes in their perception, such as stating that "It feels really lonely and alone. So, it's the first time that I actually gave it a second. And then as soon as I went in, it's actually really nice... I should do this way more often" [W05] or that "it was surprising how nice and refreshing it was" [W06]. Although the present study does not map narrative change on an individual level due to its methodological scope, it draws on these critical reflection points to illustrate how dominant narratives developed over time. It is within these evolving patterns, which emerge during and after each workshop phase, that we observe a temporal unfolding of ecological meaning-making. However, to more precisely identify the exact moments or triggers of narrative shifts, further research using more temporally attuned methods would be necessary, such as before-and-after surveys or participant interviews.

3.5. Multispecies cohabitation as a narrative for urban wilding

Toward the end of the workshops, participants identified actions for human and non-human cohabitation. Suggestions for management

practices, such as 'mindful management', emerged from the discussions, with participants advocating for approaches that allow spontaneous vegetation to thrive. One participant described this approach as "allowing species to be, giving them space, some sort of in-between management" [W05]. However, the practical challenges of managing "pollution, waste, and toxic dumps" were also raised, with one participant noting the importance of these issues when considering future management approaches [W07]. UWS were recognised for their ecological potential and role as community engagement hubs. Critical urban green space management actions were identified, including 'connecting with the wider community', 'providing space for flooding', 'creating connections for wildlife', and fostering 'community agreements' to sustain these connections. The transitional and dynamic nature of UWS was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. With their ever-changing ecologies, these spaces reflect shifts in natural processes and the evolving perceptions of those who engage with them. Participants identified features not traditionally associated with UWS, reflecting on how these spaces support methods such as ecological learning, not only for humans, but as part of broader interactions that enable ecosystems and multispecies communities to thrive. One participant declared, "It's about education, ultimately" [W08].

Other ecological functions discussed included food production and flood mitigation, highlighting how these processes facilitate the autonomous functioning and agency of ecosystems and multiple species, thereby nurturing diverse ecological communities and enhancing resilience. Participants imagined these as spaces where people could forage and adapt to environmental changes. For instance, one participant suggested leaving a site to flood in the future, transforming it into 'a constantly shifting wetland' [W02], with access facilitated by structures like 'floating piers'. These spaces were also envisioned as educational sites demonstrating future environmental scenarios: "Having that as a demo site to educate people on what the future world might look like" [W02]. Participants further discussed the opportunities these spaces present for ecological education, with one suggesting how: "... the flowers and the plants [can] teach people how they attract insects" [W03]. Others explored methods such as 'walking pedagogy', which could immerse students in the lived experience of these environments. Participants envisioned these spaces as communal areas of cohabitation that could foster social interaction and creativity. As one participant suggested, "In the future, I see it as more of a creative opportunity and a way to get people engaged" [W04]. When envisioning a future of shared cohabitation, another participant referred to UWS as a 'commons', saying, "When something's owned by nobody, it means it's owned by everybody. That's what the future is" [W03]. Discussions during the workshops on the role of Traditional Owners in caring for Country over millennia stressed that humans are an integral part of nature, constantly interacting with and shaping ecosystems. The workshops demonstrated that the goal in an urban context should not be to isolate humans from nature, but rather to foster cohabitation where both can thrive [W07].

4. Discussion

In the following section, we discuss the role of the social-ecological traits framework and shifting narratives regarding the stewardship of urban green spaces. We also explore potential opportunities for further unlocking latent values in urban green space management.

4.1. Social-ecological traits framing for participation

The social-ecological traits framework facilitated an exploration of the participants' connections to these spaces through effect traits—for example, one story which emerged from a workshop concerned *Cardamine pratensis* (cuckoo flower). A participant recalled childhood experiences on a wet, boggy farm landscape where the flowers grew, describing how, each May, they asked their teacher to let them collect the blooms for the May altar. Such narratives not only highlight the

ecological traits such as phenology and habitat type, but also reveal the historical and cultural meanings attached to the species, as well as its ecological associations with related species, such as *Anthocharis cardamines* (orange-tip butterfly), which was also discussed [W01]. The social-ecological traits framework also enabled the creation of a dataset that captured specific aspects of human-ecosystem interactions, such as how members value self-seeded plants for their 'resilience' or 'hardiness'. These attributes, like perceived resilience or aesthetic value, can be linked to more conventional ecological traits, including growth form or dispersal strategy. By connecting social descriptors with ecological traits, the framework may inform the planning, design, and management of urban green spaces, ensuring that both ecological and social dimensions are considered.

Furthermore, within the workshops, these social descriptors served as boundary objects, providing shared points of reference (such as the plant's resilience or flood-tolerant vegetation) to facilitate dialogue across diverse communities with varying perspectives and expertise (Clark et al., 2016; Star and Griesemer, 1989). Through this process, participants explored and sometimes contested values such as aesthetics and ecological function, a crucial step in sense-making and informed decision-making (Pascual et al., 2023). This illustrates how effect traits may also be viewed as affordances (Chemero, 2013; Van Dijk and Rietveld, 2017), opportunities for meaning and action shaped by both the ecosystem's properties and by participants' embodied and socio-cultural dispositions. These discussions led to specific management proposals, including reducing mowing and weeding, accommodating natural flood processes, and community-led maintenance, as well as broader design strategies such as multispecies-sensitive spatial planning and prioritising ecological functions in urban design.

While many participants recognised the ecological importance of UWS, the underlying ecological dynamics were not fully understood. This highlights the need to restore ecological literacy and foster deeper connections with these spaces. Situated knowledge, rooted in direct, place-based experience, emerged as particularly powerful during workshops, where participants engaged their senses and recalled memories, often expressing a growing sense of care and responsibility. These affective experiences may have played a key role in shifting narratives, as emotional and sensory engagement helped participants reframe UWS from being perceived as neglected to being valued as vibrant ecosystems (Brown and Westaway, 2011; Manzo, 2005; Raymond et al., 2010). Although ecological traits in urban environments can often be assessed through meta-analyses (Duncan et al., 2011), this research suggests that experiential approaches to identifying trait profiles may complement scientific data. Involving the public may enhance decision-making (Reed, 2008), foster social learning (Pahl-Wostl, 2009), and support adaptive governance (Folke et al., 2005) within social-ecological systems. Moreover, when people emotionally connect to place and feel that their knowledge is valued, they are more likely to develop pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Berenguer, 2007; Krasny et al., 2010). Participation, however, may be limited in its ability to identify specific response traits. Incorporating citizen science tools, such as iNaturalist or SPOTTERON, may strengthen knowledge-sharing, reinforce situated understanding, and cultivate ongoing stewardship, thereby linking emotion, learning, and action (Bonney et al., 2016; Toomey and Domroese, 2013).

That being said, the application of the traits framework proved instrumental in constructing a meaningful trait profile of UWS based on the attributes highlighted by participants during site descriptions. Key descriptors identified during the workshops, such as *resilience*, *ruderal*, *transitional*, *hardy*, *adaptable*, *dense*, *contaminated*, and *healing*, emerged as central to understanding the site's ecological dynamics and contextual character. These descriptors encapsulate the ecological attributes and play a pivotal role in fostering meaningful engagement with participants, offering a shared language to interpret and interact with UWS. The traits framework served as a bridge, linking participants' social descriptors with ecological traits and facilitating discussions of

ecological processes through terms and values that were meaningful to them, while connecting back to ecological concepts familiar to practitioners and scientists. Embedding the framework in practice may involve using it as a structured tool in participatory workshops, where participants categorise green spaces in terms of both social and ecological traits. This approach would make explicit the connections between local knowledge and ecological dynamics, support co-produced datasets, and generate profiles of green spaces that reflect both ecological functions and community values. Such profiles could then directly inform management plans, for example, by highlighting which plant species or maintenance strategies align with residents' priorities while also supporting biodiversity.

4.2. Overcoming ecological disconnect

The data from the workshops revealed that many participants held nostalgic memories of UWS, often contrasting these fond recollections with concerns over their children's current lack of access to similar spaces. These recollections reflected generational ecological knowledge, frequently tied to species now regarded as unwanted 'weeds', plants removed from the urban landscape through governance practices and chemical processes (Argüelles and March, 2022; Blanchoud et al., 2004; Gutleben, 2020). While such memories highlighted some participants' own deep-rooted connections to nature, they also underscored the disconnect for others, including younger generations and urban residents whose opportunities for everyday ecological interactions have been diminished. As Kellert (2012) notes, childhood is considered a crucial time for experiencing nature, and participants' reflections reinforced the risks posed by this loss. The deliberative methods employed in the workshops played a central role in bridging these gaps, notably through storytelling and memory sharing. Participants described sensory experiences such as smelling plants, tasting wild fruits or recalling the cultural significance of species, highlighting everyday practices that once embedded ecological knowledge within daily life. These narratives illustrate how workshops can serve as a space reclaiming lost knowledge and promoting 'place-based' ecological learning that is meaningful to urban residents (Duhn et al., 2017; Soga et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2021). In this way, storytelling acts as a bridge between emotional connection and ecological understanding, reasserting the role of UWS in overcoming ecological disconnection (Beery et al., 2023; Hofman-Bergholm, 2022).

4.3. From control to cohabitation

The workshops facilitated immersion in UWS, involving the stimulation of five sensory systems, which increases activity in the parasympathetic nervous system (Lim et al., 2020). The evolving reflections on this immersion align with broader debates within wilding narratives, which often surround the extent of human intervention and the need to balance human and ecological agendas (Wynne-Jones et al., 2020). The workshops underscored that urban wilding is highly context-specific and influenced by cultural, geographical, and environmental factors (Bayulken et al., 2021; Wiersum, 2017). As Heneghan et al. (2013) highlight, the role of human agency in shaping ecosystems existed both before and after the emergence of urban centres. In the present society, we may not recover from the loss of species and ecological processes that have been exterminated. However, we may develop new social-ecological systems, such as UWS, that are resilient to future anthropogenic disturbances.

That being said, research has also shown the importance of incorporating human perceptions and preferences into processes such as urban wilding as a balanced approach to assist in reconciling potential biodiversity and aesthetic goals (Hu et al., 2025; Vogt, 2025). Participants consistently articulated a reciprocal relationship with UWS, evoking parallels with Indigenous relational approaches to land (Kimmerer, 2013). This interdependence was expressed through a sense

of care and sensitivity to the nurturing, restorative, and connective roles these spaces play. Many participants advocated for 'mindful management' strategies that balance ecological integrity with human connection, reimagining urban wilding as a framework for shared, evolving relationships between cities and nature. Deliberative engagement revealed evolving narratives around the value of UWS and their multi-species inhabitants. These shifts reflect the strengths of collaborative approaches, such as co-design, which promote mutual learning and the exchange of diverse forms of knowledge (Zafra-Calvo et al., 2020). These shifts align with findings that non-native vegetation is gaining acceptance in urban contexts (Shaffer, 2018), although the influence of specific stakeholder groups remains unclear.

While ecological restoration is often the primary focus of rewilding (Mutillod et al., 2024), the workshops revealed its potential to foster psychological restoration and social cohesion (Hartig et al., 2003; Jennings and Bamkole, 2019), which one participant described as a 'rewilding of ourselves'. UWS may serve as sites for both ecological and social experimentation, tackling the complex challenges of urbanisation. These spaces not only support biodiversity but also enhance well-being and foster community connections through participatory engagement. UWS were envisioned as dynamic 'taskscape' (Gruppuso and Whitehouse, 2020; Ingold, 2017), sites of experimentation that can support biodiversity while fostering community engagement and co-design. However, these spaces remain vulnerable due to a lack of protection, fragmented ownership, and low public recognition. Enhancing engagement and participation is key to securing their future. Urban wilding challenges dominant management practices and cultural norms, encouraging new values around conservation, resource use, and entanglements with changing ecosystems (Perino et al., 2019). It invites a transition from viewing nature as a resource to recognising its intrinsic value and resilience, enabling new forms of stewardship, recreation, and cultural practice, celebrating biodiversity and emphasising the need for an interdisciplinary approach to multispecies cohabitation (Kowarik, 2018). The methods used in this study demonstrate that engagement may meaningfully shift urban green space narratives, inviting greater care, fostering inclusive stewardship, and incorporating diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous ways of knowing. They may help us move away from our anthropocentric, colonial approach to designing and planning the urban landscape, and assist us in navigating and understanding the complex dynamics of UWS (Pineda-Pinto et al., 2024).

As urban wilding initiatives grow (Bonthoux and Chollet, 2024), future frameworks will be crucial for integrating diverse perspectives and promoting participatory approaches to environmental stewardship. However, power relations within such processes warrant closer scrutiny. Power dynamics within social-ecological systems and participatory processes significantly shape outcomes (Heller, 2003; Stringer et al., 2006). The (re)politicisation of cooperative approaches, as advocated by Turnhout et al. (2020), may be necessary to address and mitigate existing power imbalances. Although power imbalances were not examined within this research, participants discussed the 'transitional' and 'in-between' nature of the spaces we visited, remarking on the inevitability of losing these spaces to future urban development. They pointed toward effective collaborative governance as a solution to this issue with UWS. Power imbalances within collaborative processes may also impede communication efforts, further highlighting the role of boundary objects. Additionally, there is a growing argument against using the term 'stakeholder', as it can perpetuate systemic inequalities (Reed et al., 2024). Instead, the focus should be shifted toward alternative actors, including diverse individuals, places, and species, to foster more inclusive and equitable participatory processes.

4.4. Unlocking latent values for urban green space management

This research demonstrates the potential to unlock participants' latent values toward urban green spaces. Latent values are the underlying values, beliefs, or priorities that individuals or communities may

not immediately recognise or consciously acknowledge. However, they can significantly influence behaviours and decisions when they are surfaced (Chan et al., 2018). In the context of urban wilding, latent values may include a community's unspoken appreciation for unmanaged green spaces or a desire for biodiversity. The workshop approach brought latent values to the surface, as participants realised and expressed aspects of environmental stewardship and community identity that they hadn't previously considered. By further exploring latent values, urban green space efforts may be more effectively designed to resonate with local communities, fostering more substantial support and involvement.

Researching participatory processes further is essential for understanding what contributes to the surfacing and articulation of latent values during the planning, design, and management of urban green spaces. Participatory methods, such as those used within co-design processes, can be inherently interactive and reflective (O'Donnell et al., 2025), making them a powerful means of engaging diverse stakeholders and uncovering underlying values, beliefs, and motivations that might otherwise remain hidden. The deliberative methods implemented during the workshops in this study immersed participants in unique ways. This enabled participants to express values they may not have consciously acknowledged in other settings. This deeper engagement has the potential to build stronger connections to a project, fostering a sense of stewardship and community ownership. Latent values often play a significant role in shaping human behaviour toward the environment, and by studying how these values are expressed in participatory processes, researchers have the opportunity to refine models and frameworks that guide ecosystem management in human-dominated landscapes. Uncovering latent values helps ensure that the diverse perspectives and needs within a community are represented in the planning process. This research is particularly valuable in urban settings, where populations are often eclectic and have varying access to and relationships with nature. Understanding latent values may enable communities to address overlooked or marginalised viewpoints, leading to more inclusive and equitable outcomes (McDermott et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2020). While sociodemographic information was not foregrounded during the participant recruitment process in this study, it may be valuable in other contexts. Therefore, future research may build upon these findings by integrating sociodemographic analysis to research whether factors such as age, gender or cultural background intersect with shifting narratives.

4.5. Limitations and mitigation strategies

While this study presents an approach to understanding human-nature dynamics, several limitations must be acknowledged. One of the primary limitations is the potential exclusion of relevant stakeholders. To mitigate this, targeted outreach efforts were conducted to ensure a broader range of participants was reached. Additional mitigation approaches which may be adopted are stakeholder screening methods such as stakeholder mapping (Gray et al., 2012; Pereira et al., 2025). The findings from the workshops are also highly context-specific, which may limit applicability to other urban environments or broader settings. To address this, the research acknowledged the specific context of the study sites. The particular focus on UWS may only partially address other forms of green spaces or broader urban ecological issues, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results. To broaden the scope, the research emphasised participatory data collection methods that capture the dynamic interactions between humans and nature (Biggs et al., 2021a), an essential aspect of social-ecological research. The role of facilitators in guiding discussions and activities may also inadvertently influence the outcomes, as facilitator bias or perceived authority may shape the direction of conversations and the nature of the data collected. To address this, neutral facilitation techniques were employed to minimise facilitator influence. A reflexive approach was also incorporated throughout the research process to mitigate researcher

bias. This involved regular debriefing sessions between the researchers after each workshop, fortnightly meetings to discuss emerging findings, and bi-annual reflexive monitoring meetings involving the broader research team. Researchers also maintained personal reflexivity through journaling, ensuring ongoing critical reflection and minimising potential biases, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Holmes, 2020).

5. Conclusion and research suggestions

This study explores how narratives surrounding urban green spaces evolve when participants engage in experiential processes that involve engagement with urban wild spaces (UWS). The insights from this work deepen the understanding of human-nature relationships and explore how place-based deliberation may be an effective tool for engaging with those relationships. The narrative analysis yields several key findings, including the foundational role of effect traits in fostering ecological connections, the evolution of narratives surrounding UWS, and the identification of future opportunities to enhance urban green space management processes. These insights highlight the potential for enriching urban ecosystems through collaborative and inclusive approaches. The social-ecological traits framework applied in this research successfully facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and interactions with UWS. Through this framing, participants could meaningfully engage with these ecosystems, allowing for a nuanced examination of their connections to these spaces. While ecological aspects are central to the framework, the prominence of social dimensions reveals valuable insights into how stakeholders envision the development and management of urban green spaces. A key outcome of the workshops was a shift from narratives of control and management toward cohabitation, demonstrating that UWS may be seen as opportunities for mutual benefits between humans and ecosystems. Participants advocated for 'mindful management' strategies that balance ecological integrity with human engagement, recognising the potential of UWS to support both ecological and social systems. In this context, the process of urban wilding reimagines nature within the city and rethinks how humans and ecosystems can inhabit a shared, evolving landscape. While ecological restoration is often the focus of traditional rewilding efforts, this study reveals that UWS may also offer opportunities for fostering psychological restoration and social cohesion — a rewilding of ourselves. Further exploration in the following areas is suggested for future research:

- Embedding the social-ecological traits framework into participatory methodologies engaging with green spaces.
- The potential role of community science in bridging the scientific and local knowledge gap.
- The key learning moments within these workshops to understand which aspects of the process contribute to the exchange of knowledge.
- The dynamics of stakeholders within such participatory processes and the contributions of different stakeholder groups to knowledge sharing and shifting narratives during the process.
- The impact of power on communication and decision-making in such participatory processes.
- Strategies to expand stakeholders' diversity to encourage more equitable participation, and how this may extend to non-human species.
- The surfacing and articulation of latent values through the methods employed within this study.

Ultimately, the success of urban wilding processes and a re-valuation of UWS lies in integrating ecological restoration with cultural and societal shifts. By blending ecological stewardship and knowledge with community engagement, urban wild spaces have unique opportunities to serve as living laboratories for sustainability, resilience, and inclusion. This research points toward a future where urban wilding is not

only a restoration strategy but a pathway toward reimagining how cities entangle with the natural world, redefining urban landscapes and the role of human societies.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marcus Collier: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Erik Andersson:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision. **Melissa Pineda-Pinto:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Data curation. **Mairéad O'Donnell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.ufug.2026.129279](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2026.129279).

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