



# What is Land?



Talk of land is everywhere, so commonplace that the term is often used without much thought. The availability of land, its use, and conflict about who has rights to it are present in everything from housing to agriculture, from infrastructure to geopolitical conflict.

But what is land, really, and how does the way we think about it shape our lives? We all live on land – our towns and cities, basic services and the food we eat are all dependent on it.

**Major urban challenges like housing stress, declining biodiversity, pollution, income inequality, racism and rising global conflict all revolve around land. How we use, distribute, exchange, extract from or protect land says a lot about our collective values.**

## **What we prioritise about land ripples through all aspects of our lives.**

First Peoples in Australia teach us that the relationship to land is an interconnected lifeworld from soil to sky, encompassing water, creatures, materials, energy, and spirit. This is why the term 'Country', used and shared by First Peoples, is so important because it shows that everything is connected and always dynamic.

*'Land is life, land gives life, and land sustains life. Land is us and we are land. Land is central to what we call Country... Country is a living entity with memory and consciousness. Our connection to Country flows from the past and influences the future. Our connection to Country gives us our identity, the Country is us, and we are Country.'*

*Paul Paton (Gunnai, Monaro, Gunditjmara)  
CEO of the Federation of Victorian  
Traditional Owner Corporations (FTVOC),  
Yoorrook Justice Commission.*

Colonisation has tried to break and obscure this relationship to Country. Instead, land has come to be seen as simply a resource, something we extract from or use. When land is not regarded as useful it is often classified as vacant or empty – either for some other use, or a ‘wasteland’ that is already used up. Property and resource extraction have flattened and reframed our understanding of land, and this powerful reconceptualising of land as a resource now shapes our laws and social norms, and our interactions and relationships with land.

### What are the implications of treating land as a resource?

Turning land into a resource is a deliberate process – as a society, we choose to adopt this narrow view of land and uphold it through law, policy and social norms. The most powerful tool for turning land into a resource commodity is private property. Fences and property titles create enforceable (visible and invisible) boundaries. Private property titles mean that an owner can sell, rent or exchange land to extract profit. Whether we are owners or tenants, this relationship to land impacts us directly.

### Land treated as a resource has generated prosperity for some, but always at the expense of and burden to others.

Most importantly, this view of land limits our relationship to place and to each other.

Land understood only as a resource limits the way we think about land. Instead of a dynamic and interconnected basis of life, land becomes bound parcels, individual pieces of the landscape divided by those boundaries and fragmenting our social relationships. But that happens on one parcel of land impacts other people and creatures on

other parcels of land. None of us are islands, but the compartmentalisation of land often makes us behave as if that is the case. This can prevent us from seeing our responsibilities to place beyond the boundaries we have produced, limiting our ability to act holistically and as social collectives whose flourishing is interconnected.

### Land is more than a resource

Somewhere deep inside we all know that land is not only a resource.

### We grow to love and cherish places that are part of our everyday lives, and there are times when we see places as more than land.

During times of crisis like bushfire or flood, the dominant relationship to land is disrupted by forces bigger than ourselves. Property rights and boundaries become secondary, at least for a moment, to helping each other.

Noticing that the dominant way of relating to land is causing us harm by narrowing our social and ecological relationships should give us pause. First Peoples teach that to be cared for by Country means caring for Country and each other – we have a responsibility to place, beyond taking from land, generating wealth or other benefits from use. To be invited to engage with the notion of Country is to reconsider our relationship to land, and work toward a transformative relationship that is grounded in respect and reciprocity.

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Cooke, B., Porter, L. (2025). “What is Land?” *Thought Leadership Series Compendium*, Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, 2025.

