

“THE FOUR MILLION PROVINCIAL AUSTRALIANS WHO LIVE ON THE COAST DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT THEY FORM A SEPARATE AND DISTINCT CULTURE.”

B Y B E R N A R D S A L T

I believe there are three Australian cultures and that these are underpinned by the geographic and demographic concentration of the Australian nation. At Federation there were four million Australians and 52 per cent lived in rural and regional areas. No surprise, then, that Australians were defined by a “bush” culture, with shearers and squatters, corked hats and windmills.

By the end of the 20th century our population had increased to around 20 million. The number in the bush doubled to four million but as a proportion of the national total it was less than 20 per cent.

More than 11 million Australians now live within 5km of a city centre. And this underpinned the rise of our second great Australian culture, the culture of suburbia with the quarter-acre block and the three-bedroom brick veneer.

Here is a culture

parodied by Barry Humphries as Edna Everage as early as 1956 and that continues to be parodied, ruthlessly, by Kath and Kim.

But during the last quarter of the 20th century a third concentration of Australians started to emerge, on the provincial coast. There are now four million Australians living on the coast outside a capital city in a thin ribbon of development stretching between Cairns and Merimbula, along the south coast of Victoria, around the southwest cape of Western Australia and around Broome. Four million people with allegiance to neither city nor bush is sufficient critical mass in a nation of 20 million to underpin the rise of a third Australian culture.

This shift to the beach is having a profound impact on the Australian nation. It is even shaping our consumer preferences: out with R. M. Williams as the singular example of quintessential Australian clothing; in with Quiksilver,

Rip Curl and Billabong. But the provincial Australians who live on the coast don't understand that they form a separate culture. Or at least not as yet.

For more than a century, residents of inland Australia have identified with a rich rural culture based around the likes of Clancy of the Overflow. A major political party represents the interests of country people. And the same logic applies to suburbia. In cities such as Melbourne—arguably the spiritual home of Australian suburbia—more than a million separate houses on separate blocks of land create the cultural frisson necessary to produce and nurture suburban concepts like the nature strip, the Hills hoist, the Victa mower and, my favourite, the “barbecue area”.

However, provincial coastal Australians have yet to form a single culture. Unlike the geography of other Australian tribal heartlands, the provincial coast is stretched along a 12,000km ribbon. There is no place where coastal Australians can clump together to mutate into a distinctive Australian species.

While suburbanites flourished in the fetid warmth of 19th-century industrial suburbs in Melbourne and Sydney, coast-dwellers at, say, Nambucca Heads don't bump into coast-dwellers in Hervey Bay. Hervey Bay residents do not often come across the residents of Mandurah.

The city of the Gold Coast with half a million residents is easily the largest single concentration of non-metropolitan coasters. If there is to be formal recognition of a third Australian culture based on the beach, then that culture will most likely be defined by the Gold Coast and by the successful export of its lifestyle. In this respect, the beach and all its glorious accoutrements are as relevant to Australian culture as the brick veneers of Ramsay Street and the moleskins of Clancy's beloved Overflow.

OUR
CULTURE
HAS SHIFTED

from a focus on
the bush, then
the 'burbs, to
the beach

