

FROM SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY TO ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: The Ecological Engagement of Sufi Orders in Australia

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Abstract: This study examines the growing significance of eco-Islamic spirituality in Australia, particularly in the post-pandemic context where environmental awareness and faith-based initiatives have gained renewed attention. The study addresses two main questions: How Sufi communities in Australia conceptualize and integrate spirituality with ecological awareness, and How they contribute to environmental protection policies and sustainability initiatives. Focusing on three Sufi orders-the Inayat Khan, the Nimatullahi, and the Ansari-this research employs qualitative field methods, including content analysis of teachings, community documents, and observations of spiritual-ecological practices, informed by Corbetta's framework of social research. The findings indicate that these communities share a common spiritual framework for responding to ecological challenges. Their environmental engagement is grounded in Islamic ethical principles articulated by their leaders, including *tauḥīd* (divine unity), *khilāfah* (stewardship), *amānah* (trustworthiness), *mīzān* (cosmic balance), *khidmah* (service), and *tazkiyah* (spiritual transformation). These principles are translated into concrete practices such as eco-retreats, permaculture projects, water-conservation initiatives, and the use of renewable energy technologies, including solar panels. By linking spiritual teachings with practical ecological initiatives, Australian Sufi communities demonstrate how grassroots religious movements can contribute to environmental sustainability and support broader environmental governance agendas.

Keywords: Islamic spirituality, green world-order, climate crisis, Australian Sufi communities.

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Introduction

In recent years, the intersection between faith and ecological consciousness has emerged as a critical area of inquiry, especially in response to the global climate crisis.¹ This growing field, often termed as eco-theology or eco-spirituality, explores how religious beliefs, values, and practices influence environmental attitudes and behaviors.² In this context, eco-Islamic spirituality has garnered increasing scholarly attention,³ particularly in Western multicultural societies such as Australia. The relevance of this topic has become more apparent in the post-pandemic era, where environmental degradation, public health crises, and existential uncertainty have driven many communities to seek spiritual meaning in ecological engagement. Within Islamic traditions, Sufism, the mystical and inner dimension of Islam, offers a particularly rich field of spiritual practices and philosophical insights that align with contemporary environmental concerns.⁴

Ninian Smart includes the Sufi outlook among other worldviews, as it becomes a dazzlingly significant facet of what he calls “the Islamic crescent”.⁵ Accordingly, the Sufi worldview is of utmost significance, particularly in revealing their outlook on ecological sustainability. The importance of the Sufi worldview becomes more obvious when the contemporary modern situation is in concern, wherein some environmental systems are in danger under the dictum of “development” or “progress”,⁶ at the expense of environmental sustainability. In this regard, since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sufi outlook has a chance to gain ascendancy over the “conquest of nature” standpoint that has overwhelmingly prevailed since the Renaissance.

The significance of this study lies in the observation that religious communities are not merely spiritual collectives but also socio-cultural agents capable of initiating meaningful ecological change.⁷ In Australia, where multiculturalism and religious diversity are celebrated,⁸ Muslim communities, especially those affiliated with Sufi orders, are beginning to assert a unique voice in the conversation on environmental sustainability. The present research explores how Sufi communities in Australia reconstruct their spiritual practices and theological orientations to align with contemporary ecological imperatives. It examines how these communities interpret, internalize, and implement the principles of climate justice and environmental protection. On the other hand, it also explores how these communities respond to Australia’s policies on the environment, particularly the ‘Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999’. The EPBC Act constitutes Australia’s primary environmental legislation, which bestows a legal framework to safeguard and manage nationally and internationally significant flora and fauna.

As a secular and multicultural nation, Australia has provided an open environment for various religious expressions, including minority Islamic practices like Sufism.⁹ Unlike the more legalistic or doctrinal expressions of Islam, Sufism often appeals to the spiritual and universal dimensions of faith. This emphasis on inner transformation, love, and harmony has enabled Sufi orders in Australia to engage not only Muslim followers but

also individuals from diverse spiritual backgrounds. Cities like Melbourne and Sydney have become hubs for Sufi activity, housing multiple Sufi orders that reflect global diasporic movements. Within these urban contexts, Sufi communities have found opportunities to integrate their spiritual practices with local socio-cultural dynamics, including environmentalism. This study focuses on three distinct Sufi orders active in Australia: the Inayat Khan, the Nimatullahi, and the Ansari. Each represents a different trajectory of Sufi engagement with eco-spirituality, which reflects varying theological emphases, ritual practices, and community structures. The Inayat Khan Sufi Order, founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan in the early 20th century, is recognized for its universalist approach to Sufism. This community places strong emphasis on the spiritual unity of all religions and promotes harmony between humanity and nature. In the Australian context, this movement operates under the name The Sufi Movement in Australia (SMIA), which falls under the umbrella of the 'International Sufi Movement'.

The Nimatullahi Sufi Order, rooted in Persian mysticism, places significant importance on music and meditation as vehicles for spiritual transformation. The aesthetic and experiential focus of this community allows it to resonate with contemporary ecological movements that also value presence, mindfulness, and the interconnectedness of life. In Australia, the Nimatullahi Order has carved a niche among those seeking spiritual depth through contemplative practices. Their approach to eco-spirituality is more experiential and symbolic, often linking spiritual states with natural phenomena, and encouraging members to see nature as a mirror of the inner self.

The Ansari Sufi Order, led by Ibrahim Ansari in Marayong, New South Wales, offers a more pastoral and socially engaged model of Sufism. With a background in education and spiritual counselling, Ibrahim Ansari has positioned his order as a sanctuary for those seeking guidance in both spiritual and practical matters. The Sufi order offers spiritual counselling grounded in environmental ethics, helping individuals navigate personal crises while reconnecting with nature as a source of healing. In this light, these Sufi orders in Australia are not peripheral actors in the environmental movement but potential catalysts for a new ecological consciousness that integrates inner transformation with outer action.

To the best of our knowledge, there are few studies on Sufism in Australia. Some previous studies of Sufism in this region have adopted a historical perspective, as exemplified by Cook¹⁰ and Hermansen.¹¹ This historical perspective examines the emergence of Sufism in Australia, including its diverse groups and communities, as well as the origins of Sufi orders. In addition, Bouma provides a thorough discussion of religion and spirituality in contemporary Australia, examining how they respond to changes in the world and social policy. However, he does not address the ecological issues that have become a turning point for recent movements within Australian spiritual communities.¹² Furthermore, Snider and McPhedran evaluate mental health treatment in Australia in relation to religiosity and spirituality.¹³ Milani et al.,¹⁴ on the other hand, devoted their research to Australian Sufism,

focusing on the intersection of spirituality and consumerism,¹⁵ and the branding of their spirituality.¹⁶ However, these existing studies have limitations in that they do not address the growing issue of environmental preservation, which is sometimes initiated and integrated within the Sufi worldview.

Therefore, this study explores how Sufi communities in Australia adapt their spirituality to align with environmental sustainability, especially in response to the country's green policies and regulations. It focuses on two main questions: (1) How do these communities conceptualize and integrate their spirituality along with environmental awareness? (2) How do Sufi communities in Australia contribute to environmental protection policies and sustainability efforts? By answering these questions, the research aims to reveal the role of Sufi orders in supporting environmental conservation and their responses to government regulations on environmental protection.

Method

The research addresses the dynamics of Sufi communities in the ventures of nature preservation. It observes three Sufi communities in a distinctive socio-cultural experience of Australia, namely the Inayat Khan, the Nimatullahi, and the Ansari. However, certain Sufi communities are excluded due to their geographic distance and the infrequency of their gatherings, which makes it logistically difficult to obtain information. The method used in this study follows the typical considerations of field research with a qualitative inquiry, drawing on qualitative content analysis and Corbetta's model of social research.¹⁷ It focuses on analyzing the materials (i.e., speeches, acts, words, writings) within those Sufi communities related to the subject of investigation. The data are obtained through interviews, documentation, and taking part in gatherings and spiritual practices. In the interviews, we spoke with key informants, including leaders and followers of Sufi communities, as well as the Darul Fatwa of Australia. Through this, valuable sources were eventually obtained, including books by the community's *mursyid* (spiritual leader), documents of their teachings, audio records of the *Pirs*, leaflets containing devotional songs and praises sung during gatherings. These materials are then examined through the explanatory analysis to locate the subject in its socio-cultural context. This analysis provided details on Sufi communities' perspectives on integrating spirituality with environmental actions and policies, their roles, and their responses to environmental sustainability.

Results and Discussion

The Distinct Path of Sufi Communities in Australia

This study captures the Sufi order movement in Australia, which is of interest to the field of green theology. Among them are located in Melbourne and Sydney. Both locations represent major cities with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds among their

residents. Muslims, in this part of Australia, have the right to apply their various theology and practices as long as they do not cause any disturbance to the other communities. Therefore, they utilize the benefit of social openness to gain followers. Besides, both cities also reflect the way Sufi Muslims have room in introducing Islam through Sufi mediation ways, which draw attention to the other communities outside Islam. However, the Sufi movement in Australia has made significant changes, particularly in the form of Islamic rituals. In this case, various practices are introduced to attract people to participate in the scheduled programs. Below is an explanation of those Sufi groups.

The First is the Inayat Khan Sufi order. This Sufi movement is mainly based in Melbourne, but its branches are scattered across other major cities in Australia, including Canberra, Sydney, Rock Valley, and Queensland. They name this spiritual movement the International Sufi Movement in Australia. This name was likely used to obscure the pluralism and openness of the Sufi movement, regardless of ethnic background or religious affiliation. Historically, this movement was initiated by Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927) during his visit to Europe and America between 1910 and 1926. It may become the first Sufi order founded in the West, spreading among Westerners, including in Australia.

It is initially interesting to note that, over time the Sufi teachings of Inayat Khan have been preserved and spread by the *murîds* (disciples, students). It can be seen from the time when the local leader of this Sufi order led by one of his students to another student, where the idea is still preserved, that is, to introduce and to revive the human spiritual world. Their concept of Sufism primarily centers on three ideas: love, harmony, and beauty (interview with Nuria Daly).¹⁸ These three concepts are interwoven in the movement and activities of this Sufi order and reflect its identity.

Inayat Khan is a well-known scholar. Some people recognize him as both a philosopher and a musician. As a philosopher, his thought has interacted closely with music. For him, music was a path and a means to bring humans into the spiritual realm. The music initiated by Inayat Khan has deeply reflected through his spiritual journey. Therefore, the Sufi pattern of this movement primarily reflects the identity of musical resurrection. Through music, one can find the beauty of God, the harmony of the cosmos, and the love of the universe.

In this Sufi community, there are seven programs designed to synchronize the inner world with the outer world: the esoteric school, universal worship, kinship, music, healing activities, the knighthood of purity, and *zirâ'ât* (farming). However, it is worth noting that the last program, *zirâ'ât*, is much related to the issue of green theology. It refers to spiritual and inner growth, as reflected in the agricultural dimension, to portray the connection between the inner and outer worlds. This program best demonstrates the community's response to eco-sufism regarding ecological sustainability, as its very existence embodies this harmony between material and spiritual dimensions.

The second Sufi order is the Nimatullahi. Like other Sufi orders that emerged in Australia, the Nimatullahi Sufi order has emphasized meditation. The use of music in conjunction with meditation reflects the path of this Sufi order in reviving spiritual agency. This Sufi order is perhaps the Sufi group that has the largest room for meditation. The room was fully furnished with down seats for each person, featuring an Iranian and Arabic poetry painting on the wall. In the front, there was an honorary chair with a prayer mat and some spiritual symbols embedded in it. Some of the interesting symbols found in the front of the room are two axes. According to Habib Modir, the Sufi *mursyid* of Nimatullahi, the two axes symbolize the cutting of the ego.¹⁹

Regarding the Nimatullahi Sufi order in Australia, Modir stated that the Nimatullahi was of an advanced age. This Sufi order was rooted in Iran and Modir also admitted that he was an Iranian. He also confesses that he did not encounter any obstacles in spreading the teachings of Nimatullahi in Australia, as the learning was open to all, regardless of their ethnic and religious background. Moreover, the stressing practice of this Sufi order, which tends to accentuate the spiritual aspect by reviving the soul through meditation, surely aims to present spiritual journeys that are not limited to Muslims, but for all of society. According to him, the followers of this spiritual meditation have risen to fifty people. This number was quite large compared to the other Sufi orders in Australia. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the participants in the spiritual meditation.

The third Sufi order is the Ansari Sufi order, based in Marayong, New South Wales. The leader of the Ansari Sufi order is Sheikh Ibrahim Ansari. His original name is Victor Spiegel. Victor Spiegel grew up in California during the 1960s and 1970s, when it became the spiritual supermarket of the world. He was a college teacher when he discovered the beauty of spirituality, which led him to devote his life to Sufism. In California, the sheikh encountered several ways to approach God offered by the people. After twenty years of spiritual searching, he met Sheikh Taner Ansari, whom he considered the one who answered his spiritual thirst. Sheikh Taner Ansari was the pir of the Qadiri Rifai Tariqa. Sheikh Taner Ansari then appointed Ibrahim Ansari as the representative (*khalifah*) of the Ansari Sufi order.²⁰

The main rituals of this Sufi order are *dzikr*, *râbithah* and *shuḥbah*. According to Taner Ansari, the historical knowledge and teachings of the Qadiri Rifai Sufi order should be put into practice, as Sufis aspire to understand and adore God and His will. Sheikh Taner was accompanied by his wife, Shaykha Muzeyyen Ansari, to accept counseling with an emphasis on spiritual enhancement. They refer to this as counseling with Sufi healing.

Like others, the healing practices of this Sufi order were primarily rooted in meditation and music therapy. However, they are more aware of using psychological methods in assisting with spiritual restoration. According to him, the hearts are the ones that take great joy in a deepening, loving connection with the Divine. An exceptionally genuine, though unseen, energy connection can be made by the human heart. In this case, the Sufi healer who intercedes on behalf of human life possesses credentials by

virtue of their relationship with God, the Divine. In its understanding of disease, medical science has made enormous strides. The same is true of Sufi healing. The study of healing has advanced our understanding of how the body and mind respond to vibrational energy patterns, and more broadly, how to control energy.

The Ansari Sufi order has a *zâwiyah* (Sufi corner) in Sydney. This *zâwiyah* has a green garden. The Sheikh stated that approximately twenty members of the Ansari Sufi order participate in the communal ritual at this *zâwiyah*. The sheikh of the Ansari Sufi order stated that Ansari means 'helpers'; accordingly, they may serve as helpers for both human beings and the universe.

Based on the above description, the Australian Sufi orders have shaped the unique form of Sufism. The limited number of people who join the Sufi order suggests that the society's religiosity tends to be more personalized. The Sufi order in Australia is open to all people, regardless of background, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. Muslims, Christians, and even Atheists are welcome to join the spiritual journey and meditation independently. They are not forced to be followers, nor are they required to be active members. In this case, the Australian Sufi order serves as a spiritual agency that promotes spirituality amid human crises.

From Spirituality to Environmental Harmony

The concept of love was of great importance in relating Sufism to God and the entire creation of God. The term 'love' was sacred in Sufism, as it encompasses every step of the Sufi journey. It is the attribute of God that Muslims believe He endowed humans and all creatures with love as an instinct. In Islam, God has revealed ninety-nine beautiful names and attributes, among which is the attribute of love, known as *al-Wadûd* and *al-Muhibb*. Among God's attributes are two that denote the form of loving: *al-Rahmân* and *al-Rahîm*. Through the Qur'an, God also states '*yuhibbuhum wa yuhibbûnah*'/'God loves the believers, and they love God' (Q.S. Âli 'imrân / 3:31, Al-Mâ'idah / 5:54).

Among the concepts that Sufism introduced is love. The love has become a landmark where Sufism has existed through time. The early female Sufi, Rabi'a al-Adawiya, has also marked the importance of love for God. For her, love is a central point to which human beings relate themselves to God.²¹ Loving is a means of nihilating others, but not God. If someone loves God, then there is no place for hating God's creatures, as all creatures are also manifestations of God. According to the Sufis, love enables a believer to embrace the spiritual beauty of God, which is manifest in all things, and it is this love that allows the believer to love God through all things.²² Furthermore, the concept of love has been explored by Jalaluddin al-Rumi. The idea of love has become a defining characteristic of Sufism in the hands of al-Rumi. It is worth noting that the central idea of Sufism, as presented by al-Rumi, lies in the concept of love.²³

In the context of love, it is important to note that all Sufi orders in Australia have given it considerable attention in their spiritual practices. According to the tenet of the Nimatullahi, love is important in defining oneself with God. The Nimatullahi is akin to the Sufi order, with a spiritual discipline dedicated to selfless service and love for all human beings (<https://sufi.nimatullahi.org>). The self is full of humanity, which often manifests as selfishness and corruption. Human traits are those that most often make people aware of God. Therefore, bringing love into the spiritual humanity space would lead humans to reconsider their self-identity in relation to God. Habib Modir, the murshid of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, even stated that love is to diminish the ego. That is how the Nimatullahi used two axes to cut away human egos, bringing them closer to God.²⁴

The Nimatullahi Sufi order places great emphasis on meditation. They are open to anyone joining the self-meditation in their hall. The meditation takes about forty-five minutes. During the meditation, the lights are turned off, and one hears calm, mindful audio in the hall. In this deep meditation, one may find peace and tranquility, which then leads to a greater love for oneself and God. At the end of this meditation, one would hear the voice of Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, the founding father of Nimatullahi Sufi order. Among his talks, he emphasizes the importance of loving God, which should be demonstrated by loving His creatures, not only humans but also the cosmos. Thus, the best way to relate to God is to love His creatures and preserve nature.

In relation to nature, a diminished ego means that people should be aware of their environment. A good climate creates positive vibes, bringing people into a state of tranquility, which in turn leads to spiritual maturity. The ego that should be weakened is the ego that exploits and destroys nature, as it tends to feel powerful over other creatures. In this line, the leader of the Ansari Sufi order, Ibrahim Ansari, also stressed the significance of controlling the ego. This is due to the fact that it forces “you to go beyond yourself”, in other words, it forces you “not to be your own master”. “You want to continue to gather experience so you can develop good battle habits. A Sufi is a warrior against the *nafs*, fighting a battle against the little self that is jamming Allah’s signals.”²⁵ Controlling the ego also has implications for one’s behavior towards the environment, in that he/she will control their ego so as not to be tempted to exploit it.

In the context of the environment, Ibrahim Ansari emphasizes the importance of love and gratitude. He stated, “When you love Allah, and do things because you are grateful for your life, the mountains, the sea, and the air, then you can see that Allah is always there, and with you and loving you.”²⁶ Therefore a grateful person respects the environment. He/she will not be tempted to exploit nature, since he/she knows that one may take some resources from nature following his/her needs. Exceeding the limits of his/her needs means that he/she is not grateful for God’s gifts.

Additionally, the idea of love in the Nimatullahi Sufi order is maintained to serve humanity. The lack of humanity in recent days shows that spirituality has been neglected,

as it teaches us to love others. Therefore, today's problem of humanity could be solved through a spiritual practice that leads humans to a tranquil heart, loving themselves, others, creatures, and God (interview with Habib Modir). This notion of love seems identical to that of the Hazrat Inayat Khan Sufi order, where love underlies the idea of cosmic harmony. This cosmic harmony largely depends on human confraternities, regardless of religious background. In Inayat Khan, cosmic harmony is introduced through music, as he was renowned as a musician alongside his popularity in philosophical thought. Music, meditation, and remembrance (*dzikr*) are introduced to the members. One of the practices in meditation and remembrance with the concomitant of instrumental music is the motion of the head to the right and left, with pronouncing 'Hû'. The *Hû* is quite popular in the Sufi tradition, which denotes God as *Allâh*.

In the social order, the Hazrat Inayat Khan Sufi order attempts to create harmony between humans and the universe. They believe that both humans and the universe are creations of God, and that love is the immense bounty one can feel through the beauty of God and all creation in a harmonic vibration. In this notion, Nuria, the woman murshid of Hazrat Inayat Khan, stated that through music, we could feel all of God's creation in harmony, and we, as humans and God's creation, could experience unity with nature. Therefore, the very idea of this Sufi order is to introduce love, harmony, and beauty to the human being,²⁷ like some prayers of the confraternity of Hazrat Inayat Khan, which were once read in weekly gatherings.

The idea of meditation emerged as a uniform identity within the Australian Sufi order. The Ansari Sufi order, however, places a strong emphasis on religious counseling and also devotes attention to meditation and God's remembrance. The word of Allah and *Hû*, like Hazrat Inayat Khan, has marked the way this Sufi order performs its spiritual purification. Further, the idea of *dzikr* does not occur only with humans; all of God's creation in the world is also engaged in *dzikr* (remembrance). Sheikh Taner Ansari stated, "*Everything in the universe is praising Allah,*" which means that humans should also be aware of the manifestation of all of God's creation, remembering it as they do.²⁸

The awareness of Ansari Sufi order towards the universe as a manifestation of God has also appeared in the writings of Ansari Taner. There are numerous micro and macrocosmos used to define the human self in relation to God. In maintaining the human self, for instance, Taner introduced the levels of souls within humans into four: The *rûhanî rûh* that corresponds to the world of Allah, the *sulthânî rûh*, which is a wrap of the archangelic world, the *syerani rûh* and *jismânî rûh*. Each of the four souls of humans maintains a relationship with the spiritual world from which it came. Furthermore, Taner explained that the human body is composed of elements from the universe. He says that "the *body also comprises four separately classified entities, namely earth body, air body, fire body, and water body.*"²⁹ The integration of the human body into the universe implies that humans should be aware of their existence alongside the cosmos, as they are created to be the viceroy and to maintain the universe's sustainability.

Sheikh Ibrahim Ansari also stresses the significance of listening to one's heart. He said "So you ask your heart and Allah what is it that you should do right now. If there is no response and something needs to be done, you go with whatever is available. Sometimes your heart will give you a message, and you can choose to act upon it. That is *âdâb* (ethics).³⁰ For Sheikh Ibrahim, *adab* is the beginning and end of Sufism. He further stated that "*Without it, the teachings and spiritual worlds are worthless. It defines the correct way to interact as true humans*".³¹ In this context, Sufis also stress the importance of maintaining *âdâb* (ethics) toward the environment. The Sufis maintain a respectful attitude towards the environment, as they believe that nature also reflects God's names and majesty.

In this case, Ibrahim Ansari further underlines that nature is a manifestation of God's names. He stated, "The heart is a mirror that has become encrusted with dust. We clean and polish it to reflect the Divine Light that shines upon us. The created world is thought of as a manifestation of Allah's 99 names. When we have completed the cycle of cleansing ourselves of our attachments (*nafs*), we return to see the world with a deeper connection and understanding. Through Allah's manifestations, we are now open to learning and expanding our awareness of creation. We can participate without attachment to the outcome. If there is any attachment, it is being a servant of Allah."³²

In this regard, one may observe that from the perspective of Sufis, cleansing oneself of lower-level attachments (*takhallî*) may serve to transform one's perception of nature. In the next level, the Sufis will progress into a deeper awareness that the creatures are manifestations of the Divine (*tahallî*).

Ibrahim Ansari underlines that the Ansari Sufi order also demonstrates its commitment to ecological sustainability, as can be seen from its preference to use solar panels. The members of the Ansari Sufi order strive to live well with the earth. They also aim to balance science and spirituality. For Sheikh Ibrahim, "all the physical things of this world are metaphors for the spiritual world. They are reflections and signs of deeper meanings." "Everything you see at play is Allah. There are just manifestations of Allah."³³ One's conception that creatures are manifestations of God has implications for his/her awareness that he/she cannot exploit nature. He or she must treat all other creatures with kindness and justice. This conception stands in contrast with the viewpoint that nature is profane.

Sufis see that all creatures are interconnected, most notably to the Divine, as the source of creation. "All creation intersects Allah. Everything is related, whether you look at it atomically, molecularly, the Big Bang, or as God's creation; everything is connected at the source. When did you have the arrogance to imagine that you are isolated and alone? It is time to leave that teenage prideful existential angst behind and rejoin the rest of creation that is in continuous conversation with Allah. Imagine seeing everything around you as manifestations of Allah. You are here to learn about Allah directly and through Allah's manifestations."³⁴

Cosmos is regarded as a manifestation of God, so the Sufis have the responsibility to respect nature. Further, he also emphasizes the importance of nature as a medium for meditation, stating that “Take breaks to allow you to return to the heart-center or keep something in your pocket that reminds you of Allah, like prayer beads. A picture of your teacher or of nature is helpful, and the micro-Zen gardens evoke moments of meditational peace. When the action gets too intense to allow you to think clearly, excuse yourself and withdraw appropriately. Return to your spiritual practice until you feel capable of being unattached to the outcome.”³⁵

Ibrahim Ansari emphasizes that Sufis view natural phenomena through their unique perspective. They consider these things manifestations of a miraculous and infinite source of wisdom, even though many people regard them as the lowest form of creation. Anything, including garbage, can ignite a mystical experience. As a matter of fact, that is the same principle and purpose of garbage and fecal matter. The best plants grow from waste, whether it's steer manure or rotten compost from the garden. It is transformed by the gardener's labor into beauty, food, scents of paradise like the honeysuckle and rose, all from the stench of the lowest materials.³⁶ In this regard, one may see Sheikh Ibrahim's concern with environmental sustainability. Organic garbage will be transformed into the nutrition for the plants, which are vital for the life of people and the sustainability of the planet. Inorganic garbage, however, poses a threat to the environment if it is not appropriately managed.

Australian Sufi Orders and Their Responses to Environmental Policy

In recent decades, environmental policy in Australia has evolved toward a more integrated and ethical framework that addresses ecological protection, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation while maintaining economic growth. This framework, expressed through the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)*, the *Climate Change Act 2022*, and the *Nature Positive Plan (2022)*, reflects an acknowledgment of the interdependence between human activity and the natural environment. Meanwhile, within the sphere of spiritual and philosophical traditions, Sufism offers insights into humanity's relationship with nature. The teachings of the three Sufi movements in Australia provide an ethical and spiritual worldview that complements the philosophical underpinnings of Australia's environmental governance. The paragraphs below explore how the core principles of these Sufi orders resonate with and conceptually reinforce the goals of Australian environmental policy.

The Sacred Unity of Existence and the Protection of Biodiversity

A central tenet of Sufi thought is *tauhîd* or the unity of existence. The three Australian Sufi orders believe that all creation is a manifestation of the Divine and that humanity's role is to live in harmony with this unity. Inayat Khan's Sufi order, which reflects the

teaching that there is one holy book, the sacred manuscript of nature, suggests that nature itself is a direct revelation of divine wisdom. Similarly, the Nimatullahi Order, rooted in Persian Sufism, emphasizes that the universe is a mirror reflecting God's attributes, and that respect for all beings is an act of worship. In addition, the Ansari Sufi order, in many ways, underlines the disengagement from material excess and a deep reverence for nature. This spiritual framework encourages its members to conceive environmental conservation as an integral part of their faith. It promotes a lifestyle in harmony with the natural world and, accordingly, respects and conserves biodiversity.

This metaphysical understanding parallels the ethical foundation of Australia's environmental policies, particularly the *EPBC Act*, which identifies *matters of national environmental significance* such as threatened species, migratory species, and heritage areas. By framing biodiversity and ecosystems as national priorities deserving of legal protection, the policy echoes a secularized version of the Sufi recognition of life's sanctity and interconnectedness. Where Sufism calls for the protection of divine manifestations in nature, the EPBC Act codifies this reverence through regulatory frameworks and conservation mechanisms. Both perspectives affirm that the well-being of the whole depends upon the flourishing of each part.

Interconnectedness and Systemic Thinking in Environmental Governance

In Sufi cosmology, the unity of existence (*wahdah al-wujûd*) also entails a deep awareness of interdependence among all forms of life. Inayat Khan's spiritual humanism encourages practitioners to cultivate harmony with the rhythm of the universe, recognizing that the spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of existence are inseparable. The Nimatullahi tradition likewise integrates the principles of spiritual chivalry and service, including moral responsibility toward the environment as an extension of compassion for all beings. In addition, the Ansari's paradigm, which holds that all of God's creation is interconnected, implies that humans cannot exploit nature and must treat all other creatures with kindness and justice.

It is worth noting that within this concept of interconnectedness, the Anshari Sufi order also engages in interfaith environmental work through shared activities such as tree planting, community gardens, and climate awareness forums, including interfaith prayer services for the Earth. They help build relationships across religious boundaries while focusing on a shared ethical goal, namely protecting the planet. The Inayat Sufi movement translates its interreligious concerns into environmental engagement, as can be seen from its participation in interfaith climate coalitions, hosting eco-spiritual gatherings, and contributing Sufi perspectives to multi-faith environmental initiatives.

Australia's environmental framework mirrors this interconnected worldview through its systemic and cross-sectoral approach. The *Climate Change Act 2022* establishes national targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43 percent by 2030 (relative to 2005 levels)

and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. It also mandates that the Climate Change Authority conduct ongoing reviews to adapt policies in response to ecological data. Similarly, the *Nature Positive Plan (2022)* integrates biodiversity protection with economic and social planning, promoting ecosystem restoration as essential for both environmental and human health. This approach reflects a shift from fragmented management to holistic systems thinking, congruent with Sufi ecological consciousness, in which all forms of existence are part of a single, interrelated organism.

Inner Transformation and Policy Reform

Sufism teaches that outer harmony must arise from inner transformation. The spiritual journey, or *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self), requires confronting greed, pride, and heedlessness, vices that, in a modern context, can also describe the drivers of ecological degradation. Inayat Khan urged his followers to cultivate attunement to the divine rhythm, which manifests as ethical balance in daily life. The Nimatullahi similarly emphasizes *self-discipline*, *humility*, and *service* as means to align human will with divine will. The Ansari also highlights the importance of listening to one's heart, so that it can inspire *âdâb* (ethics).

Australia's ongoing environmental reform process parallels this principle of continual self-examination. The government's response to the independent review of the EPBC Act, leading to the *Nature Positive Plan*, reflects an institutional process of "self-purification." By acknowledging shortcomings in enforcement, transparency, and monitoring, and by creating new agencies such as *Environment Protection Australia* and *Environment Information Australia*, the state is engaging in a form of collective accountability. This mirrors the Sufi path of *mujâhadah* (striving against the ego), where progress requires honest reflection and structural change. Just as Sufism teaches that the purification of the heart precedes harmony with creation, effective environmental governance depends on reforming institutional and ethical foundations.

Service (*Khidmah*) and Shared Responsibility

These three Australian Sufi communities frame spiritual practice as active service (*khidmah*). For Inayat Khan, love for God expresses itself through love for humanity and all creation. The Nimatullahi masters interpret the Sufi path as a spiritual chivalry that manifests in generosity, justice, and ecological responsibility. The Ansari tenets also stress the importance of maintaining *âdâb* with the environment, as they believe that nature also reflects God's names. In these traditions, spirituality is not confined to inward contemplation but extends to social and environmental engagement.

It is worth remarking that the Ansari Sufi order has instigated permaculture projects and sustainable design education. Within this Sufi order, one may find the Ansari youth

club, which teaches sustainable living practices, which comprise food cultivation and resource management. This proactive approach nurtures a deep linkage between spiritual teachings and ecological responsibility. In this vein, one may observe that the Ansari Sufi order is not only concerned with providing a theological basis for environmental protection but also with its practical aspects, such as permaculture projects and sustainable design education (both rooted in Sufi teachings).

This emphasis on service aligns with the participatory ethos of Australian environmental policy. The establishment of mechanisms such as the *Nature Repair Market* and partnerships with Indigenous communities reflects the principle that environmental stewardship is a shared national and moral duty. By encouraging businesses, communities, and individuals to contribute to restoration and conservation, the policy enacts a secular equivalent of Sufi *khidmah*, service to creation as service to the Creator. Both perspectives locate environmental care within the broader framework of ethical responsibility and collective wellbeing.

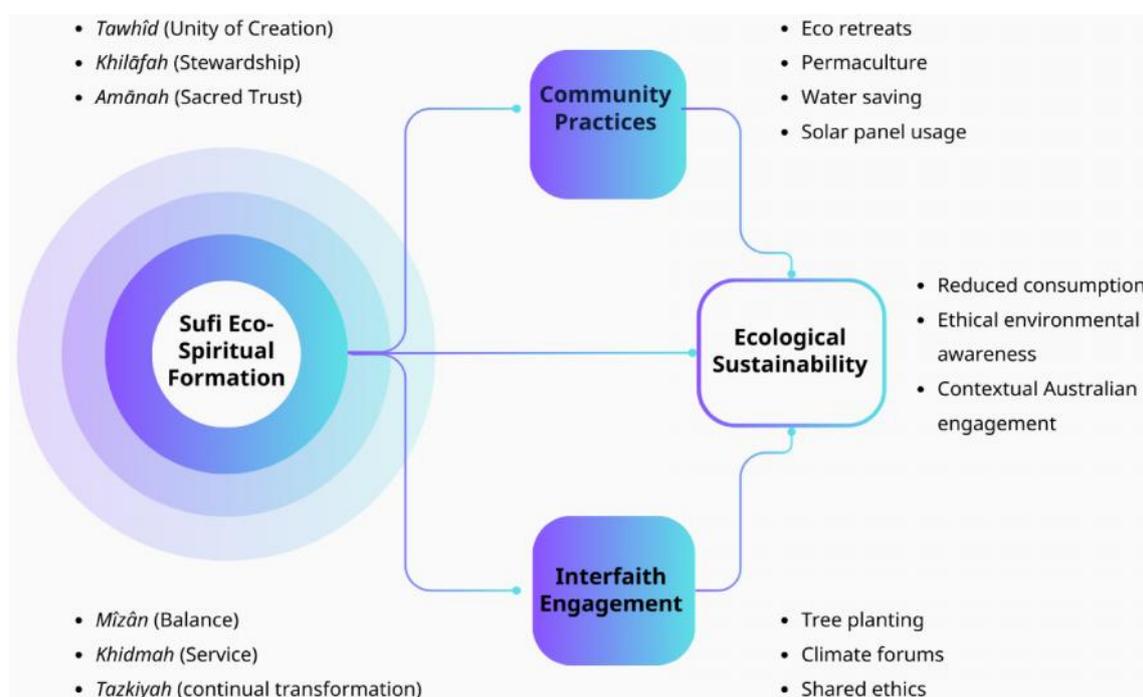
Harmony Between Material Progress and Spiritual Ecology

Sufism advocates moderation (*i'tidâl*) and balance (*mîzân*) in all aspects of life. Inayat Khan taught that material progress that is not tempered by spiritual awareness leads to disharmony, while true civilization requires the integration of science, economy, and spirituality. The Nimatullahi tradition similarly values balance and justice (*'adl*) as the foundation of a righteous society. Greed and excess, in this view, are not only moral failings but also ecological disruption. The Ansari, on the other hand, emphasizes harmony by viewing natural phenomena, including waste, as manifestations of divine wisdom. They believe that even garbage can be transformed into life-sustaining beauty and environmental sustainability.

Australia's environmental policy articulates a comparable aspiration: to reconcile economic growth with ecological sustainability. The *Powering Australia Plan*, renewable energy initiatives, and infrastructure funding for green transitions exemplify efforts to achieve this balance. In Sufi ethical terms, these initiatives can be understood as attempts to restore *mîzân*, the cosmic balance that sustains life. Just as Sufism seeks equilibrium between the material and spiritual, Australia's environmental framework seeks equilibrium between development and preservation.

The above paragraphs unfold that the teachings of the three Australian Sufi orders offer a spiritual complement to the ethical and philosophical foundations of Australia's environmental policy. Both systems, one mystical and inward, the other legislative and outward, share a common orientation toward harmony, interdependence, and stewardship. Sufi metaphysics provides a spiritual ecology rooted in unity (*tawhîd*), balance (*mîzân*), service (*khidmah*), and continual transformation (*tazkiyah*). At the

same time, Australian policy operationalizes these values through laws, targets, and institutional reforms that aim to protect biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and promote sustainable growth. Ultimately, Sufism reminds us that environmental care is not merely a political or scientific duty but a sacred trust (*amânah*). The heart of sustainability lies not only in policy compliance but in awakening to the unity and sanctity of all existence. In this way, the Sufi worldview deepens the moral dimension of environmental governance in Australia, suggesting that the path to ecological balance, like the Sufi path itself, requires both inner and outer transformation, guided by love, harmony, and service to the whole of creation. To conclude the discussion, here is an illustration of the concepts and practices of spiritual ecology adopted by the Australian Sufi communities.



Picture 1: The Spiritual Ecology of the Australian Sufi Communities

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that all Australian Sufi orders addressed in this article share a common platform for responding to ecological sustainability, particularly in relation to Australian environmental protection policies. They perceived that all the cosmos's structure is a manifestation of the Divine Latent. Therefore, when addressing the issue of ecological sustainability, all Sufi orders are comfortable stating that performing good deeds for nature is a manifestation of doing good to the Divine.

In this light, it is important to note that theoretically each Sufi community leader seeks to conceptualize Islamic environmental teaching and provides a spiritual ecology rooted in *tauḥîd* (unity), *khilâfah* (stewardship), *amânah* (sacred trust), *mîzân* (balance),

khidmah (service), and *tazkiyah* (continual transformation). These principles have contributed to shaping the community's environmental awareness and encouraged members to view environmental care as a divine calling. These teachings are practically manifested in their spiritual practices, such as meditation, contemplation (*murâqabah*), and spiritual retreats (*khalwa*), which are often held in open natural spaces such as forests, mountains, rivers, parks, and deserts. These practices allow participants to deepen their engagement with the Earth and strengthen their connection to nature.

It is also posited that Sufi communities in Australia may exemplify the 'green movement' and contribute to a positive impact on society. Although they are not as prominently featured in mainstream environmental activism, they have demonstrated a commitment to environmental stewardship and linked their spiritual practices to ecological sustainability, including eco-retreats, permaculture, water-saving practices, solar panel use, and involvement in interfaith environmental engagement.

These ecological awareness and commitment are of utmost significance, theoretically and practically, to their very contribution to a better sustainability of the world we live in years to come. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of spiritual practices with ecological sustainability offers a unique framework for understanding the role of religious communities in environmental stewardship. By aligning their environmental efforts with spiritual principles, Sufi communities in Australia offer an alternative model of eco-spirituality that has the potential to inspire other faith-based groups to adopt similar practices, which in turn could influence broader ecological movements worldwide. From a practical perspective, their involvement in sustainable energy initiatives serves as a valuable example of how grassroots religious movements can contribute to global environmental goals. As such, the work of Sufi communities in Australia provides a meaningful contribution to the ongoing global discourse on how spiritual teachings can support and enhance environmental sustainability.

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