

Skip Dipping in Australia

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1. Introduction

A small but growing group of well-educated urban dwellers, often in well-paying jobs, is challenging the socially-sanctioned revulsion around waste by engaging in 'skip dipping': sorting through the contents of publicly located skips for items which are still useful. They talk about this practice as a personal and political response to the mountains of good quality items thrown out as waste each year in Australia.² These conscientious objectors to consumerism represent a growing informal movement across the industrialized world.

Over 17 million tonnes of solid waste is disposed of in Australian landfills each year. This waste comes, in almost equal proportions, from municipal waste collection (36 per cent), commercial and industrial waste collection (30 per cent), and waste from the building industry (both construction and demolition) (34 per cent) (Hyder Consulting 2006). Most Australian households already recycle (paper, plastics, glass and organic waste from kitchen and garden), but the skip dippers go beyond this personal household waste reduction to reclaim usable items from commercial and building industry 'skips'.

Decades ago, thrifty practices were inspired by need and a lack of available resources. These days, the practice of finding treasure in trash is being reinvented in an entirely new context: so much is now available that perfectly good items are being thrown out on a regular basis. Skip dipping is distinguished from earlier thrifty practices by the fact that its adherents do not simply object to waste, but clearly identify this waste as the product of a consumer society. Skip dippers draw attention to the environmentally damaging results of so much waste, as well as its unethical dimension in the context of pressing human need elsewhere.

¹ Andrea La Nauze provided valuable research assistance. ² Many Australian skip dippers also participate in the more common practice of salvaging items from piles put out by households for municipal 'hard rubbish' collections. These collections are offered periodically by municipal councils to collect items that are too large to fit in a household rubbish bin. The relatively common practice of salvaging items from 'hard rubbish' collections is important for keeping usable items in use and out of landfill, but is not technically 'skip dipping', since the items in question are not placed in a skip or bin, and there is a degree of community acceptance that people will take what they want from the piles left out for this purpose; that is, the practice of salvaging items from 'hard rubbish' is more socially acceptable than sorting through skips for usable items, including food. One skip dipper interviewed pointed out that this relatively accepted practice of salvaging from hard rubbish is nonetheless 'under threat' from 'this stupid local government move to pick up hard rubbish on demand rather than having a common collection period' (Melbourne, 34).

But like the earlier generation of scavengers, skip dippers gain significant pleasure from their practice, proving that it's perfectly possible to have fun while making a political point.

This report gives an insight into the experiences and motivations of skip dippers in Australia. In this paper, when referring to Australian practice, we have chosen to use the term 'skip dipping' for its distinctively Australian sound in the context of an international movement. When discussing the practice elsewhere, we have chosen to use the term 'urban gleaning' with its traditional connotation of sorting through the chaff to find leftover grains.³

We begin with an overview of the international urban gleaning movement. This movement is largely informal, and it covers a range of practices, but it nonetheless has common characteristics across geographically very different locations. We then present results from a series of interviews with Australians who skip dip on a regular or semi-regular basis. The interviewees are both men and women, aged from their late teens to early 60s, and many of them are in professional employment.

2. Urban gleaning in affluent societies around the world

The information in this section is the result of an extensive internet-based search for terms related to urban gleaning, including: 'urban scavenging', 'urban foraging', 'dumpster diving', 'trash picking', 'skip raiding' and 'freeganism'. However, the informal nature of urban gleaning means that it is unlikely to be fully documented in a publicly accessible way, and hence the account that is given below must be taken to be indicative rather than comprehensive.

Where are urban gleaners active?

As might be expected, urban gleaning as an act of conscientious objection takes place in many of the world's affluent and correspondingly wasteful societies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Australia, and New Zealand.⁴

³ Agnes Varda's highly successful documentary, 'The Gleaners and I' (*Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*) tracks the experience of a range of 'gleaners' in France. The coverage includes, but is not limited to, those who glean in the original sense: in the fields after the harvest. Urban gleaners are also covered. 'The Gleaners and I' won the European Film Awards of 2000 for Best Documentary, and also won 10 other awards in Europe and North America. A follow-up, 'The Gleaners and I: Two years later' (*Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse: Deux Ans Après*) records the response to the original documentary. Both are now available on DVD. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0247380/> (accessed 15 February 2006) and <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0345128/> (accessed 15 February 2006).

⁴ See <http://dumpsterdiving.meetup.com/lists/> (accessed 12 January 2006) and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeganism> (accessed 12 January 2006) and <http://lists.envirolink.org/pipermail/ar-news/Week-of-Mon-20030526/001367.html> <http://scavengeuk.mine.nu/> (accessed 12 January 2006).

What kind of people practice urban gleaning, and what exactly do they do?

Urban gleaners themselves are as diverse and varied as the discarded goods they retrieve and the methods they use to do so. They include people who are: teachers, professionals, students, musicians, families, part-time and full-time wage earners, punks, anarchists, activists, mums and dads, grandmothers and whole families. They participate in a range of activities, from picking up tools left on the roadside, and collecting comics and videos left out with the trash, to leaping into commercial skips with tailor made equipment to pull out food, furniture, and a whole range of other household goods.⁵

(Our reporting of Australian skip dippers, in the following section, focuses on the specific activity of retrieving goods from commercial and construction/demolition industry skips.)

Goods collected by urban gleaners include: fresh produce, bakery goods, canned goods, beauty products, toilet paper, clothing, light bulbs, blinds, material and electrical goods, including IT goods.⁶ One New Yorker has converted his car to run off vegetable oil that he finds in the dumpsters of restaurants whilst students in Sacramento produce their own cider out of found apple juice.⁷ Some urban gleaners, the ‘table divers’ and ‘plate scrapers’, wait until restaurant patrons have finished eating before polishing off their leftovers.⁸

The frequency with which urban gleaners practise likewise varies widely: some rely on it for daily needs and hence go out regularly, others go only occasionally for specific items.⁹

5 See <http://www.infowest.com/business/g/gentle/foraging.html> (accessed 11 January 2006) and <http://www.sacbee.com/content/lifestyle/story/6740625p-7691747c.html> (accessed 12 January 2006) and <http://members.aol.com/TheDumpsterLady/thedumpsterlady.htm> (accessed 11 January 2006) and <http://mytrashy.com/past.html> (accessed 12 January 2006).

6 See <http://freegan.info> (accessed 10 January 2006).

7 See <http://www.sacbee.com/content/lifestyle/story/6740625p-7691747c.html> (accessed 12 January 2006) and <http://www.organicconsumers.org/foodsafety/dumpster100404.cfm> (Newsday.com article, accessed 11 January 2006).

8 See <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/New-Words/040213-freegan.htm> (accessed 11 January 2006)

9 See <http://dumpsterdiving.meetup.com/4/events/> (accessed 12 January 2006) and http://www.thelivingweb.net/dumpster_diving_for_fun_and_profit.html (accessed 12 January 2006) and <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Health/story?id=1407046> (accessed on 11 January 2006) and <http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/studentwork/cns/2004-03-15/600.asp> (accessed on 12 January 2006).

How many people practice urban gleaning?

It is impossible to know how many people practice gleaning due to the informal nature of the practice. However, some indication can be found at the online New York freegan or dumpster diving meet-up group, which currently boasts membership of 194. This website has attracted a further 1 656 people around the world who have expressed interest in becoming members of similar groups.¹⁰

Why do urban gleaners do it?

Not all urban gleaners articulate an explicit political or ethical critique of the consumer society and its negative effects,¹¹ but the general disgust at waste that is reported by many urban gleaners as a motivation for going out scavenging clearly fits in with such a critique.¹² Others, however, practise scavenging for reasons which are unrelated to any critique of consumerism: they simply enjoy the opportunity to procure something useful for free; or they insist that for them, scavenging is a thrill seeking experience, an adventure and a profit making exercise.¹³

What sort of problems do urban gleaners face?

The legal status of picking through garbage is complex and varies by jurisdiction. To be stolen, property has to be owned or valued, so garbage is not an eligible object of larceny. However if bins are located on private property, access to them could be deemed trespass.¹⁴

Food safety and hygiene is also a concern, but many urban gleaners report never having been made sick by dumpstered food.¹⁵ Dr Michael Greger, in a page on food safety advice on a freegan website, suggests avoiding meat, fish, eggs, and unpasteurized cider/juice.¹⁶ He also warns that while soft foods should be tossed at the first sign of mould, hard or firm foods such as cabbages, peppers, broccoli and many other foods, can be trimmed of mouldy spots and eaten safely.¹⁷

¹⁰ See <http://dumpsterdiving.meetup.com/4/events/4828490/> (accessed 12 January 2006).

¹¹ See <http://freegan.info/?page=interview> (accessed 12 January 2006).

¹² *ibid*

¹³ See <http://w3.panam.edu/~rvinson/dumpster.html> (accessed 10 January 2006) and http://www.thelivingweb.net/dumpster_diving_for_fun_and_profit.html (accessed 12 January 2006)

¹⁴ The Laws of Australia (Online), Law Book Company, Sydney.

¹⁵ See <http://www.sacbee.com/content/lifestyle/story/6740625p-7691747c.html> (accessed 12 January 2006).

¹⁶ See <http://freegan.info/?page=DoctorsNote> (accessed 13 January 2006).

¹⁷ *ibid*.

Freegans argue that much of the food tossed out by businesses is fine to eat and Dr Greger confirms that in the US, “sell by” and “use by” dates are not safety dates.¹⁸

Freeganism as a specific form of urban gleaning

The term ‘freegan’ is a combination of ‘free’ and ‘vegan’, although its use is sometimes extended to describe people beyond those who are vegan, that is, those who refuse to consume or otherwise use animal products in any form.¹⁹ The term appears to have originated from the argument that the ethical position of veganism logically leads to the practice of urban gleaning: ‘It should go without saying that ‘vegan’ also must mean ‘green,’ since anything that hurts the environment is necessarily harming the habitats of animals.’²⁰

The wasteful and environmentally destructive production and consumption of modern growth economies is seen by freegans not only as destructive to animals but also as harmful to people.²¹

Freegans therefore refuse to participate, to various extents, in such economies. Instead of buying goods, freegans instead obtain some or all of the goods that they use from the large volumes of waste generated in affluent societies. Whereas standard consumer boycotts favour one product over another, freeganism is sometimes described as the ultimate boycott: the refusal to buy at all.

An in-depth Australian study of freeganism, in both individual and collective social forms, was carried out by Ferne Edwards in 2005. Edwards’ ethnographic study used social movement, consumption and urban culture theories both to analyse freegan subcultures, and to discuss the relationship of these subcultures to identity ascription and social change.²²

18 See *ibid* and <http://www.sacbee.com/content/lifestyle/story/6740625p-7691747c.html> (accessed 12 January 2006).

19 This broader use, is, however, contested. One person we spoke to argued: ‘If you are not vegan to begin with then I don’t think you can be freegan.’

20 See http://www.animal-lib.org.au/more_interviews/patatricejones/ (accessed 09 January 2006).

21 See <http://www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-fre2.htm> (accessed 10 January 2006).

22 Edwards carried out in-depth interviews (av. duration one hour) with 30 people currently participating in, or had previously participated in, freeganism – the reclamation and consumption of food ‘waste’. Interviewees were predominantly male in their early 20s, located in metropolitan Melbourne. The study provides interesting background information and a thorough literature review pertaining to her approach. For more details please contact ferne.edwards@rmit.edu.au. In contrast with Edwards’ study, our study (reported in the next section) was designed to be less ‘deep’ but more inclusive. Short interviews were conducted with 20 people who responded to our call for participants who obtain ‘goods, including food, from industrial dumpsters (e.g. at supermarkets) or from other places where these goods are intended to go to landfill’. Our study thus included some people who salvaged in building and construction industry skips but did not glean for food. We did not ask our interviewees about their participation or otherwise in various subcultures. Our interviewees were equally split between male and female, mostly aged in their 30s (age ranged, as in Edwards’ study, from late teens to early 60s), and interviewee locations included 8 in Melbourne, 6 in Canberra, 4 in Queensland, 1 in New South Wales, and 1 in Western Australia.

3. Skip dipping in Australia

We conducted a series of structured interviews over the period December 2005-February 2006 in which we asked Australian urban gleaners, called ‘skip dippers’ in this study, a number of questions about their practices.²³

Our interviews were confined to people who skip dip at least partly as a principled response to the mountains of waste produced in affluent societies. The discussion below therefore excludes people who skip dip solely on the basis of physical need. It is noted, however, that one of the internationally accepted ‘rules’ of urban gleaning is to leave enough for others who may need it.

In the original interviews we used the term ‘freeganism’ to describe the practice of reclaiming resources from ‘rubbish’. However interviewees themselves named their practice skip dipping, skipping, dumpster diving, dumpstering, salvaging, gleaning, scavenging, bin raiding, scoring, or foraging.²⁴ We found that most interviewees had rather lukewarm feelings about the term freeganism, and for this reason, as well as the fact that the word ‘freeganism’ has a quite specific meaning (see previous section), we have used the more inclusive term of ‘skip dipping’.

The skip dippers we interviewed came from a broad range of backgrounds. When asked for their professional employment, they identified themselves as: computer programmer; IT consultant; engineer; designer; trainee landscape architect; public servant working in local government (x 2); non-profit association project worker; environmental campaigner; freelance creative project developer/waitress; musician/activist/environmentalist/other; retired; artist/activist; student/casual retail assistant/activist; student.

Most of the skip dippers we interviewed live in Victoria or the Australian Capital Territory, with a couple of others based in Queensland or New South Wales. This is the result of the snowball sampling technique we used. However, responses in the interviews confirm that the practice occurs Australia-wide.²⁵

Quotations include the location and age of the interviewee.

²³ Please note the existence of one previous study on urban gleaning in Australia, which takes a slightly different focus (Edwards 2005). Please see previous footnote for more details.

²⁴ Names used elsewhere in the world in addition to the above: garbage geeks (people) and trashpicking (the practice). See for example <http://scavengeuk.mine.nu/> (accessed 7 Feb 2006) and <http://mytrashy.com/tips.html> (accessed 7 Feb 2006).

²⁵ One skip dipper recorded his 2004 takings in Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne on-line. See <http://homepages.ihug.com.au/~lanceh/2quarter.html> (accessed 8 Feb 2006). Catalogue of good skip locations (in Sydney, Hobart and Melbourne) available at <http://conway.cat.org.au/cgi-bin/skippy> (accessed 8 February 2006).

How long have you been practising skip dipping?

Our skip dippers had been reclaiming resources from ‘rubbish’ from anywhere from six months to thirty-plus years. A few specified carrying on a tradition instilled in them by a parent:

... my Dad used to take me on missions to the tip when I was very young. He grew up during the war and knows what it is to have nothing. (Melbourne, 34)

My father was a child of the depression, and my mother’s grandfather was of a similar bent. (Canberra, 48)

Most of our skip dippers specified that they practised weekly or monthly. Some go out specifically for the purpose. One skip dipper admitted (with accompanying laughter) that when she is in a major city:

I can sometimes get obsessive and go several times a day! (Canberra, 36)

For others, it is simply a matter of seizing the opportunity when it presents itself:

If I see a skip that looks interesting as I’m driving along, I stop and check it out. (Canberra, 48)

Most of the skip dippers who responded said they practised both alone and with others. If with others, they usually went in groups of two to four people – with friends, flatmates, or family (interviewees specified all levels of family: children, siblings, partners, and parents).

Most of the skip dippers knew a number of other people who practised skip dipping; their estimates ranged from under ten other people to more than thirty other people. When asked where these other skip dippers were located, every state in Australia was mentioned. The responses reported here from our small sample of skip dippers can therefore be considered to be simply one glimpse into a considerably wider informal social movement.

What is the best thing you have found while skip dipping?

I ... was part of a group who found 26 boxes of Ferrero Rochers [chocolates] ... Last week in Batemans Bay, we found about four bottles of wine and some beer. (Canberra, 27)

A whole leg of smoked ham for my dog. A whole skip full of packaged cake from holland, still good. A whole skip of sacks of potatoes, still good. (Brisbane, 35)

Recently, a good wheelbarrow (Canberra, 31)

A little soft toy of a Tasmanian tiger (Melbourne, 33)

Perfectly good pairs of jeans that fit me (Canberra, 62)

Half a carton of cold beer (Newcastle, 23)

A working DC 1.5 horsepower electric motor (Canberra, 48)

Mangoes! (Brisbane, 19)

A brand new trampoline in a K-mart skip, it was just missing a few legs ... we're going to redistribute that to a rural family, they'll fix it up for their kids (Canberra, 36)

Nice big chunky bits of timber from which I have made furniture or included in my own renovation projects (Canberra, 48)

Some of the other perfectly usable items our interviewees had found disposed of in skips included the following.

Food: full boxes of cans, jars or other containers with one broken and spilled onto the labels of the others (e.g. honey, pasta sauce, UHT milk); full boxes or bags with one product broken and smearing the others (e.g. one egg in a dozen, one orange in a 2 kilogram bag); bread; biscuits; muffins; lollies; chocolate; chips; muesli bars; cheese; dips; butter; tofu; jelly crystals; nuts; rice; pasta; rice crackers; pet food; yoghurt; fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs of all sorts; spices; sugar; pizza bases; doughnuts; cheesecakes; wine; beer.

Personal items: toys; books; clothing (trousers, shirts, wigs); a full set of golf clubs; bicycles; hair shampoo and conditioner; baby oil; body scrub; baby wipes; handwash; tissues; soap.

Household items: large kitchen bin with lid, in as-new condition; sandwich toaster, still usable; serving tray; crockery; desks; chairs; cut flowers; rubber gloves; laundry powder; energy efficient bulbs; kitchen timer; mattress; stereo.

Building and gardening materials: lengths of really nice wood of all sorts; 2mm steel sheeting concrete reinforcing rod (medium carbon steel, hence useful for many things); stainless steel; copper plumbing fittings/pipe; garden hoses; chicken wire; insulation batts; hardiplank and gyprock off cuts; lengths of PVC pipe; empty 20 litre buckets; half empty bags of cement.

When asked what proportion of the contents of skips would be recyclable or compostable, most of the interviewees felt that a good deal of what is currently discarded as waste could be reclaimed as resources.

With respect to supermarket skips, responses varied, but most interviewees felt at least half of the contents could be composted or re-used. Figures ranged between 30 and 100 per cent. Most interviewees also felt that a substantial proportion of the material found in construction or demolition industry skips could be re-used or re-cycled, with responses ranging from 'minimal' to around 80 per cent. Several pointed out that that the re-use of discarded building materials depended on 'how much effort you are willing to put into it' (Canberra, 48).

Why do you practise skip dipping?

For most of the skip dippers, their practice had both personal and political dimensions. This question elicited varied responses with recognisably common themes.

The most common theme was an objection to the overconsumption and waste of affluent societies, usually coupled with a clear awareness of the ecological and social consequences of such overconsumption and waste:

I am horrified by what people throw away - both the social and environmental implications. Why bring more resources into the world when functional items are already there? (Melbourne, 34)

... it reduces consumption and gives a little leeway on the capitalist overdrive, there is so much abundance in western societies and so much waste ... (Brisbane, 35)

[I skip dip] because it's good food that will be going to waste otherwise. It is living off the excess of this wasteful society so in a way it is zero impact. I am not supporting any corporation or company to produce, package and transport additional food nor am I giving them my money. (Newcastle, 23)

Can't stand good materials, especially timber – forests – being wasted. The more we recycle building materials the less pressure we place on the Earth in resource extraction. (Canberra, 48)

Sickening waste. I often collect and redistribute – not \$ profit- motivated. (Melbourne, 38)

It was also common for interviewees to criticise consumerism directly:

I'm a conscientious objector to ... consumerism ... I think of skip dipping as part of shopping and a general practice of drawing nutrients directly from the urban landscape. (Melbourne, 43)

Entering into a climate-controlled, psychologist-designed, ultra-bright commercial environment is unsettling. Security cameras, all the packaging competing for your attention, 'offensively non-offensive' music, scripted interactions, fly- bys and fuel savings and the rest. I feel dirtier from going into a supermarket than getting knee deep in old vegies... (Melbourne, 31)

It's really important to me not to participate in the gross excesses of our society, to consider the lifecycle of what we use, to value the things we have, make good purchasing decisions... (Canberra, 31)

... to save our wonderful planet from the destruction of consumerism and our wasteful culture (Brisbane, 19)

The skip dippers interviewed also specified a number of more narrowly personal benefits. Most commonly, interviewees described skip dipping as an enjoyable activity – even a bit adventurous – which is also ethical and which saves money.

It's cheap and it's arguably the most ethical way of eating ... It's sometimes good just to go adventuring at night, to be in places when no one else is around, find something good and get a nice surprise. Urban hunter-gathering adrenaline rush. Also free food tastes better. (Melbourne, 31)

It's free ... it's fun and ethical and a bit challenging for people. (Brisbane, 35)

I live on student assistance from Centrelink and so it helps to get free food, it's also generally really fun, adventurous and social. (Newcastle, 23)

[Skip dipping] is actually really good fun. You never know what you're going to find (sometimes nothing - sometimes heaps!) ... You also get to eat lots of junk food that you wouldn't normally buy! (Melbourne, 31)

Others emphasised how skip dipping fits into more specific personal values:

[Skip dipping helps me] to remind myself to eat what is available rather than always needing to buy more – kind of similar to an attitude of working with seasonal produce. (Canberra, 27)

I love the aesthetic of old stuff, and the materials it is made of, as well as the history it carries. I prefer it to new stuff. Also I love the 'thrill of the kill' of finding something, that it's a unique thing ... I like the thought of having 'rescued' it ... [skip dipping allows me] to acquire the things I need while ... stopping more things going to landfill and more resources being used, were I to go out and buy a 'new' whatever it is. (Canberra, 31)

Many skip dippers specified that while they enjoyed finding good things for free, the 'saving money' aspect of skip dipping is not the main attraction:

I can afford to live without [skip dipping], yet it helps financially... (Canberra, 27)

The cost, while a consideration, isn't the main one. (Melbourne, 31)

How do you feel when you practise skip dipping?

Two main themes were recognisable in interviewees' responses: political awareness and concern, and personal enjoyment. For most interviewees, both of these themes were present. Several interviewees also made reference to the challenge that skip dipping poses for current social norms.

Some interviewees place more emphasis upon political awareness.

I often feel quite disgusted at the amount of food being thrown out every night, sometimes I wonder why the food is being thrown out, as it is often not out of date ... It makes me feel better to know that I am not feeding this system, yet I understand that the food wouldn't be there without the overconsumption. (Canberra, 27)

[I feel] slightly less like a consumer schmuck... [Skip dipping is] a little bit liberating ... I mean you aren't going to dumpster one night, then get sucked into the latest addictive consumer fashion the next. You're building an immunity to that trap by actively doing something socially abhorrent. (Melbourne, 31)

If I were challenged (I never have been) I think I would feel fine about explaining myself, because to my mind, anyone who is stopping things going to landfill has the moral high ground. (Canberra, 31)

It's responsible, progressive behaviour, a tidal change against sickening capitalism. (Melbourne, 38)

Others emphasise the dimension of personal enjoyment, and report feeling:

liberated, excited, like I'm doing the world and myself a favour (Melbourne, 34)

alive (Melbourne, 43)

excited, happy, sometimes a bit dodgy if I'm getting caught knee deep in a bin by someone, radical (Brisbane, 35)

good – but embarrassed if others see me at it (Canberra, 62)

dirty... in a good way. And liberated. (Melbourne, 27)

different, naughty, sneaky, defiant (Brisbane, 19)

like I'm part of the solution rather than part of the problem (Canberra, 38)

excited, sometimes slightly nervous, and a bit naughty! (Melbourne, 31)

good – getting food for free with no guilt for the impact it has had, as it would have gone to waste (Newcastle, 23)

like I've made some victory over the system – and I feel pleased because I've taken an opportunity when it arose. (Canberra, 48)

Have you encountered any problems when practising skip dipping?

Most of the skip dippers we interviewed had not encountered major problems themselves. They referred most often to negative responses received as a result of violating social norms – 'Dirty looks from people who don't understand' (Melbourne, 34). Some specified that such initial negative responses can sometimes be overcome.

Some supermarkets tell you to leave, some ask you to put food back. I haven't experienced violence, yet know people who have. People are more often frightened. (Canberra, 27)

You can get covered in meat juice or something I guess ... [security] have probably ignored me on [many] occasions ... I usually don't mind meeting supermarket workers too much, they sometimes look disgusted, but I smile and talk to them like it's the most ordinary thing in the world. (Melbourne, 31)

Shop owners can be spun out you're going through their bin, but usually with friendliness they're ok, and often help out by bringing out extra stuff, or even once I got a job offer! They thought I was really poor and desperate! I didn't have the heart to tell them I was a happy middle-class uni student. (Brisbane, 35)

[With construction/demolition industry skips] sometimes there is competition. Also you have to be a bit careful, if the load is stacked with heavy stuff on top of the stuff you want. Often there are sharp objects, and these are sometimes covered in fluids of indeterminate origin. Skips themselves are dangerous, if you have to get into something that's 8 feet deep and almost empty you can do yourself an injury. [Interviewer: and you might not be able to get out?] That too... (Canberra, 48)

4. Conclusion

Our research shows that, contrary to stereotypes of skip dipping as an activity confined to those who are young and poor, skip dippers are found across a wide range of age groups, and include many people who are also professionally employed. Although skip dipping might be seen as a ‘fringe’ activity by many Australians, as dirty or dangerous, our research also suggests that many of those who practise it are motivated by genuine ethical concern, and are cognisant both of its dangers and the way it confronts current social norms. The ethical and practical awareness of the skip dippers we interviewed is consistent with our internet-based research, which revealed a set of ethical and practical ‘rules’ for urban gleaners that change little from nation to nation.²⁶ These ‘rules’ are entirely relevant to the Australian context (see box).

‘Rules’ for skip dipping safely and legally

Avoid bins behind locked gates or which are clearly marked with no trespass signs.

Stick to night time (or very early morning) or out of sight places in order not to be detected by police/passers by or employees.

Wear tough clothing and shoes and carry a torch.

Dive with a partner or in a group (especially for women).

Avoid bins associated with medical practices, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies or any other bins that may contain hazardous waste and materials.

Don’t take people’s paperwork or personal information.

If it smells like bleach or rat poison, don’t touch it, it may have been put there deliberately to discourage people scavenging.

Don’t leave a mess.

Leave enough for someone else.

26 See: <http://www.dumpsterdiving.net/viewtopic.php?t=42> (accessed 13 January 2006);
<http://www.dumpsterdiving.net/viewtopic.php?t=48> (accessed 13 January 2006);
<http://www.frugalvillage.com/dumpsterdiving2.shtml> (accessed 10 January 2006);
http://www.dailytexanonline.com/home/index.cfm?event=displayArticle&istory_id=494647 (accessed 11 January 2006); <http://www.allthingsfrugal.com/dumpster.htm> (accessed 11 January 2006);
<http://www.frugalvillage.com/dumpsterdiving2.shtml> (accessed 11 January 2006);
<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/1/29/215523/088> (accessed 10 January 2006);
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