

Risk from Trees Scenario

Approximately 1,200 people of all ages die in car accidents in Australia each year. However we don't remove all cars from the road - we manage the risks with licencing, regulations and road design. The benefit of a car is to those using it. The benefit of a tree is for all of us breathing air and getting value from the trees' role in making the planet liveable.

Much has been written about 'fear' reporting. An unusual 'fearful' event is newsworthy. There are approximately two accidental deaths from trees in Australia each year, (i.e. where the tree fails, not where a tree-worker is injured working on or removing trees).

10,000+ trees were removed from schools in NSW as a result of a death in 2014. Arguably less than one percent of these removals were necessary so the cost to the government was unnecessarily high.

In 2011, trees fell onto two trains on the Blue Mountains line, with one person sustaining minor injuries. As a result, tens of thousands of trees have been removed or severely pruned to mitigate the risk of injury or disruption of services. Nonetheless, lines were severely disrupted during storms throughout Sydney and beyond in recent weeks.

These situations are symptomatic of the over-reaction that usually results after a tree-related fatality of a member of the public. Exaggerated perception of risk from trees arguably results in greater risk from excessive heat (an average tree removed results in approximately 4 tonnes of atmospheric carbon), poor air quality and solar radiation.

Probability of:

Death from Smoking	1: 200
Serious injury from car accident	1: 800
Fatality unintentional accident	1: 2,700
Car fatality	1:14,000
Accidental poisoning	1:16,000
Having a Tattslotto win	1: 8,000,000
Death from lightning strike	1:10,000,000
Death from urban tree failure	1:17,600,000

With climate change affecting our lives so adversely this year, we are tasked with the job of redressing some of the imbalances we have created. The psychology of fear associated with trees has real impacts on our environment. The death of one person from a tree is unusual, it receives a lot of attention and duty of care and insurance become primary factors.

What are the issues around these events? Who are the players creating distortion and over-reaction?

What strategies can redress the imbalances in perceptions of fear and removing risk from our lives?

What are the risks involved with losing trees unnecessarily due to overreaction to perceived risk?

Are there strategies you can propose to decision makers to counteract these extreme responses to risk mitigation?