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A personal account of involvement with Western Australian forests

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ABSTRACT: In the full paper I will expand upon my experiences in the South West Forests, and relate them to changing community attitudes. Those experiences began when we moved from South Australia when I was 5 to a farm at Boyup Brook. The viability of the property depended upon clearing prime jarrah at a time when the problem of salinity was being recognised. My involvement with environmental and forestry lobbying and activism started whilst I was at university in Perth in the early 70s. In the mid 70s I commenced organic farming at another timber town, Nannup, and established a biodynamic chestnut orchard. Chestnuts are susceptible to forest fungi including dieback and our irrigation water was sourced from dieback infected forest, yet we lost no trees to dieback. I moved to Margaret River in the late 80s where I became more active in the conservation movement and established an environmental research and retailing business, in addition to organic farming. Nannup and Margaret River had much in common - mixed farming communities with a timber industry and an increasing population of 'new settlers'. My conservation involvement led to an interaction with the local Aboriginals. This interaction and the understandings derived from biodynamic agriculture gave me a different perspective on our forests to the prevailing economic one - that the forest has a spirit or lifeforce and is part of a global living ecosystem, as espoused by James Havelock. My business and conservation involvement led to attendance at major international environmental and indigenous forums in the 90s where I discussed issues like forestry with a diverse range of people including David Suzuki, Sir Ninian Stephen, foreign politicians, indigenous leaders and small-scale foresters. In the late 90s I established Haywood farm, a community sustainability consultancy based on digital media. As well as recording forest campaigns, I attempted to record the existence of spirit in the forests. This led to some remarkable experiences, particularly with the cockatoo species that have a special significance for local Aboriginals. More recently I have written on the causes of the decline of our tuart forests, the role of hemp in alleviating commercial pressures on our native forests and future management of our forests. I believe the future will see the continuance of the trend away from economic exploitation towards community forestry and that we will cease felling our forests and attempt to restore their area and quality that existed prior to European settlement. This is consistent with past Aboriginal practice that was based on harvesting from trees rather than the harvesting of trees. Land, especially our forests, represents common ground for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and respect for our ecosystems through holistic land management is a central component of reconciliation.

1 BOYUP BROOK CHILDHOOD

1.1 *The Treeless Plain*

I was born in Adelaide in 1952 and lived for 4 years on our family farm "Crower" at Lucindale in South Australia's South East. The family move to Western Australia entailed driving across the aptly named Nullarbor (treeless) Plain to the luxuriant environment of Western Australia's South West. My recollections of the journey are the distance, the often unchanging landscape and the shortage of water in the arid environment.

1.2 *A childhood fantasy world*

The moss-covered rocks, trees, plants and streams on our Boyup Brook farm were an ideal setting for the fantasy world most children live part of their lives in. Gradually this perspective changed to one of 'human reality'. I often wonder about the similarities between this fantasy world, indigenous interaction with nature and even the aging process we call senility.

1.3 *Down to earth*

As my gradual involvement with farm tasks increased my involvement with nature also changed. A good example was sitting in the apricot tree and shooting birds with a rifle. The bare paddocks that hitherto had little attraction were where we checked and fed the livestock, and I still remember the image of the broad saline valley below the house.

1.4 *Fighting nature with war veterans*

I remember my father being described as 'one of nature's' gentlemen, and my mother has always been a nature lover, so portraying our family as eager combatants in a war with nature wouldn't be accurate or fair. Yet the economic realities of family farming and prevailing well-meant advice demanded that we clear more of the remnant native forest on our property despite the growing recognition of the link between clearing and salinity. We are in an analogous position today with the continued clearing of native forest based on the economic criteria of forestry, agriculture and residential development.

The clearing comprised knocking over the tall trees with a huge metal ball connected by a strong chain to two bulldozers crawling through the forest, pushing up the heaps with the bulldozers, burning and re-heaping them till the ground was clear and level enough for pasture, and picking up the seemingly endless supply of sticks and large rocks. Much of the manual labour was done by men displaced from a war-ravaged Europe and seeking a better life. This country needs environmental repair on a scale not yet commenced and refugees and people from low socio-economic backgrounds overseas may be willing to do such work to gain citizenship.

1.5 *Sense of community and place*

My enduring memory of Boyup Brook is the interconnectedness of the people as they faced the common challenges of economic survival, raising families, fire and flood. I feel privileged to have been raised in a community where helping out your neighbours was seen as normal, and visits never took place without an exchange of fruit, meat, flowers and/or plants for the garden.

2 GETTING EDUCATED IN PERTH

2.1 *The nature of boarding school*

Moving from a reasonably remote farm to the close society of boarding school at Scotch College was a huge change as was the decreased interaction with nature. I remember keenly anticipating the Duke of Edinburgh Award as we did activities like hiking in the beautiful forested range east of

Perth. I also remember being clipped under the ear during a lesson for looking out at the distant treetops – something I did every day on the farm.

2.2 *The protestant university student*

I completed a Commerce degree at the University of Western Australia in the mid 70s, which was a time of increasing student involvement in issues like the Vietnam war, apartheid, Indigenous rights and the environment. I took part in my first environmental campaign against Alcoa's mining operation in the Darling Ranges that involved clearing jarrah forest.

2.3 *Asian holiday*

During university holidays I worked in north western mining towns before travelling to countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Laos. Asia has tropical and sub-tropical forests unlike anything I had seen at home. They also had different logging methods. I recall a lumbering elephant pulling a tree from the ground and carrying it to a waterway where it could float downstream for processing. Unfortunately, Asian and global forests have been subject to logging by increasingly sophisticated logging that has impacted on the ecosystems and climate of our planet.

2.4 *Joining the grey suit brigade*

I was employed by the Australian subsidiary of EXXON which exposed me to the ideologies of multinational corporations and the pros and cons of working for them. Fossil fuel producers have largely enabled the global development of my lifetime – simultaneously they have dominated econo-political global processes and contributed to significant environmental degradation. The Men of the Trees' Carbon Neutral program recognises this impact and plants trees in the wheatbelt to counteract the emissions of individual vehicles. I began pining for the tops of Eucalypt forest again.

3 NANNUP – TALL TIMBER COUNTRY

3.1 *Farmers, foresters and new settlers*

I moved to a 278 acre farm in 1978 when Nannup's economy was based on forestry and agriculture. The increasing influx of mainly young people leaving the cities for a more self-sufficient lifestyle laid the grounds for the strengthening and diversification of the local economy and also broadened the values and diversity amongst residents.

The four owners of our property all had had a relationship with rural living, although we did not consider ourselves farmers. We were determined to do something different in agriculture, although we were not sure what. We did know that we wanted to be part of agri-culture and not participants of agri-business. This was typical of new settlers, many of whom were learning about and practicing Permaculture as established in Australia and internationally by Bill Mollison.

3.2 *Biodynamic Chestnuts and 'dieback'*

We ran sheep while we learnt more about organic practices, our farm and alternative agricultural and horticultural crops. This process led us to establish an organic nut orchard of mainly Chestnuts, with plantings of Pecans, Hazlenuts and Walnuts. As other partners moved to city-based professions and businesses, I assumed management of the property and gained 'Grade A' biodynamic certification for the orchard.

Biodynamic agriculture was popularised for Australian conditions by Alex Podolinsky. It aims to produce a 'lifeforce' in the soil that benefits the soil, the plants and animals that grow in it, the humans that eat them and hence the whole society, based on respect for nature's interconnectedness.

Ideally, our orchard should have been deep ripped to remove all remnant timber for burning and left fallow with leguminous green manures for at least a year prior to planting. The availability of

4-6 year old Chestnut trees meant that we planted them straight into a hay paddock consisting of fertile valley sandy loam. The paddock had a tall jarrah tree in the middle with a dying crown. We began investigating *Phytophthora Cinnamomi* (dieback) as Chestnuts are highly susceptible and our water sources ran onto the property through dieback infested forest.

Dieback require moist warm soil conditions and host remnant or living plant material for its spread and survival. Agriculture and forestry have directly contributed to its catastrophic spread through south west forests by increasing soil temperatures through canopy reduction or removal, increasing surface water movement, the provision of host material and increased movement of people and machines through susceptible forest ecosystems.

A prominent dieback and environmental consultant, the late Dr Ray Hart, was unable to provide an alternative explanation for the survival of our Chestnuts in a highly dieback-susceptible location to my assertion that the lifeforce in our orchard that was attributable to biodynamic practices had enhanced the quality of our produce, the biological activity in the soil and the resistance of the trees.

Recent research shows that dieback can be prevented by phosphate compounds and compost – this is consistent with my assertion about biological activity in the soil providing similar protection partly by increasing the availability of 'locked up' nutrients such as phosphorous to plants.

3.3 *Community activity*

The traditional activities of forestry and agriculture were broadened by new settlers to include organic and permaculture practices, and as a natural progression, action to protect the surrounding natural environment. This action included both community activism and innovation.

Concern about the proposed felling of the tallest known jarrah tree and spraying of weeds in the picturesque Blackwood River valley between Nannup and Balingup were both successful community campaigns that had wide-ranging support and media interest, and were initiated by new settlers.

Successful entrepreneurial activities by new settlers include the invention of the portable Lewis Saw, a solar kiln and the Arbortech wood carving attachment, all of which combined business with ecological values. This was in addition to the local value-added woodcraft industry.

3.4 *Lessening community conflict*

With new settlers challenging long held views and practices in agriculture and forestry there was great potential for community divisiveness and conflict, and to some extent it did occur. The locals were extremely patient regarding new settlers' ways of managing land and attitudes to fire prevention and were generally willing to be of assistance.

There were several factors that aided this process. Firstly, there was a shared love of the natural rural atmosphere of the district. Secondly, the new settlers added a social vitality to the town as well as increasing the viability of local businesses and facilities. Thirdly, all residents faced common disasters such as fire, flood and 'cock-eyed bobs' together. Fourthly, all rural communities are known for the willingness of residents, particularly neighbours, to help each other in shared and regular tasks. Finally, the role of children in breaking down perceived social differences through school activities, after school play and waiting for the school bus was very significant.

Despite the downturn in the local economy due to the cessation of old growth logging, Nannup is a vibrant rural town with a diversified economy based on tourism and horticulture in addition to the traditional agriculture and forestry industries.

There was a 5 acre patch of remnant vegetation on top of the hill on our property where I was married. We could stand near there and see across the vast forest of the Donnybrook Sunklands to the coast at Margaret River – although we often traveled to the unique Margaret River coast, I didn't realise Margaret River was to become our new home.

4 NEW HORIZONS AT MARGARET RIVER

4.1 *God's own country*

When we purchased our new property in the beautiful rolling hills and forest of Rosa Glen (20 km south east of Margaret River) in 1987, the district had already begun the transition from an agricultural and forestry region to a more diverse economy. Margaret River had seen the influx of surfers from all over Australia and the world, attracted by its internationally renowned surf breaks and its natural environment.

Hot on the heels of the surfers were the new settlers, pioneers of the now world class wine industry, and the ever-increasing numbers of tourists. The proximity to the ocean has seen property values and economic activity increase in a way not yet feasible at inland Nannup, To some extent Margaret River is showng the way for 'timber towns' like Nannup in proving that increased population and economic diversification can result in the sustainable replacement of reliance on the timber industry.

4.2 *Haywood Farm*

Our Rosa Glen property was a balance of remnant native vegetation and cleared pasture with the creek sourced from the adjoining state forest. Haywood was my maternal Grandfather's christian name, and it appropriately represented a balance between agriculture (hay) and nature (wood).

We built a passive solar home mainly using timber I had collected from Bunnings Manjimup downgrade piles and fallen timber milled on the Nannup property. We commenced implementing our farm plan that entailed fencing off the remnant jarrah, she-oak and redgum, the creek and our road boundary. Our road frontage was about 1.5 km long and the existing fence was past its useful life, so we put a new fence about 50m inside it and planted a mixture of native and non-native trees between the fences.

The tree planting added to the remnant roadside vegetation so that the trees were more likely to withstand the strong winds prevalent in the area. The native trees planted were mainly from more arid areas so that they could survive the already predicted decreasing rainfall in the region due to global climate change.

4.3 *Overcoming community conflict*

The primary sources of community conflict were over roadside planting of trees and differing visions for the region. Traditionally, farmers kept roadsides clear of trees to protect fencing and lessen the fire risk. New settlers who planted trees disrupted established practice, which led to some heated arguments and dead seedlings. Allowing our tree planting to gradually colonise the roadside avoided this confrontation.

The generally conservative views of the local farmers and business people contrasted with the vision of the new settlers and this initially led to a lot of conflict in the community. As the population increased, new settlers became more involved in the community and lifestyle properties displaced farming this conflict lessened.

Potential conflict over forestry dissipated as the Margaret River closed down and the mill at Witchcliffe began to scale back operations. This occurred without major impacts on the local economy – a sign of times to come for the south west timber industry generally. At the same time the plantation industry and high standard timber crafts increased.

4.4 *Community conservation*

Concern about the environment that was increased by my involvement in organic and biodynamic agriculture led me to join the Leeuwin Conservation Group Inc. and later to be elected its President. Due to the increasing development pressure, forestry was one of many issues covered by LCG. All such issues (mining, coastal development, roadside burning, regional planning, residential development, transport planning) impact on native vegetation and the integrity of nature.

The expression of concern about the environment is but one of the voluntary community activities, yet it is one that can label participants as 'anti-everything' and 'rent-a-crowd', and lead to potential conflict with other community members. It is interesting that at local, state, national and global levels that community conservationists have usually led the changes in general community awareness and political processes for many important environmental issues – the Old Growth logging campaign in Western Australia is a pertinent example. Being able to retreat to the serenity of Rosa Glen and live what we were preaching in nature was important.

Similarly, the retail business we established that sold products that we assessed as being better for the environment fitted well with environmental activism and enabled convenient access to products we wanted to use to build and live in our home.

4.5 *Common ground*

Many of the environmental campaigns have involvement of Aboriginal representatives and conservationists. Whilst their views do not always coincide, there is enough common ground that their concerns are similar. Indigenous peoples all over the world have lived for long periods in harmony with nature whilst colonisers have tended to live in conflict with the land and its first peoples. The growing societal appreciation of nature brings hope for reconciling our differences with nature and each other. After all, we are all indigenous to somewhere and to the planet we all share.

5 THE AMERICAN CONTINENTS

5.1 *Visiting Turtle Island*

My involvement with conservation and environmental retailing led me to participate in International conferences and trade fairs in what the first peoples of North America call Turtle Island. In 1990 I attended Globe 90 in Vancouver where I took part in the forestry streams. Australia's only ever Ambassador for the Environment, Sir Ninian Stephen chaired a debriefing session for Australians at the end of the conference – he asked me my opinion of Australian forestry. I replied that it was amongst the most sustainable forestry industries in the world, and that this was a real concern as our industry was (and still is) unsustainable.

British Columbia is a beautiful part of our globe and I stayed for an extra few weeks. I travelled north to Whistler and hired a small seaplane to go filming in the majestic mountains. We took off from a placid valley lake and soon were soaring amongst the mountain tops. What I saw was both exhilarating and horrifying as the steep slopes below us were scarred by logging and even further below the discolouration in the streams from the resultant soil erosion was clearly visible.

I saw the representations of the industry about its sustainability in a new light and began to understand why the first peoples of Canada had protested outside the entrance to the Globe conference. It was a refreshing for the soul to finally arrive back home and walk around the 100 acres of bush on our property.

5.2 *Vancouver to Rio*

Two years later I was back in Vancouver for Globe 92 where there was a feeling of optimism and anticipation in the air as the Globe conferences were a lead-up to the Earth Summit later that year in Brazil. Following the conference I drove down the north west coast to take up an invitation to attend 'Peace and the Planet' in Eugene, Oregon.

Peace and the Planet was organised by the World Peace University, now the Institute of Global Education, and bought together mainly indigenous people from all over the world to discuss the threats to their land and peoples from the increasingly materialistic global society. There was a feeling of resilience and pride here, but no sense of optimism and anticipation. The first peoples of the world have little hope for outcomes from political talk-fests as they have much experience of the predominance of private property rights and the economy over nurturing of nature and their people.

After the conference we drove up into the Oregon hills to a hot springs retreat nestled amongst the native conifer forest. Logging of these forests is a controversial issue and as we drove back towards the coast we passed through little timber towns that reminded me of our south western ones. In our forests, one of the icon species whose habitat and food sources have been impacted by logging is the Red Tailed Cockatoo – here it was the Spotted Owl. I spotted a typical American 4 wheel drive with a bumper sticker: 'I love spotted owls – fried.' Although rather humorous, it was typical of the often confrontational attitudes of all sides involved in the conservation debates. I tried buying a meal of fried spotted owl at the local cafe with no success.

Driving back into Vancouver late at night I became lost and stopped at a large lit up building to get directions. It turned out to be a timber processing factory owned by a corporate conglomerate who probably owned the timber concession I had filmed 2 years earlier. It was quite surreal as pieces of wood were travelling back and forwards on conveyers to points where they were sawn and planed, with not a human in sight. After wandering around for about 15 minutes absorbing the aroma of freshly sawn conifers, I found a worker in the tea room and got directions back to Vancouver city.

By contrast, I attended a Greens Canada function where I met and listened to Canadians such as Chris Maser who have been involved in community and small lot forestry – their attitudes to nature were a pleasant change to what I had experienced in the mountains near Whistler and in the lumber factory in Vancouver.

The Earth Summit turned out to be an event to give the world's econo-political powers permission to continue the status quo that has provided their influence and often their raison d'etre. I took part in the NGO Forum where we negotiated alternative 'people's treaties' on the same issues of the Earth Summit proper – for me it was the treaties of 'Food Security' and 'Sustainable Agriculture'. It was an educative process as we used multiple simultaneous translations as do global bodies such as the United Nations. There was also a 'North/South divide' as people from more developed countries were focused for example on methods of practice, whereas the South American participants were more concerned with econo-political issues like access to what had often been their lands.

Leaving Rio de Janeiro to travel home, I bought a t-shirt that had an image of two whales frolicking in the ocean, with the caption underneath "Save the Humans". It summed up my impressions of the two years of International Environmental conferences as I believe that human beings are heading lemming-like over the proverbial cliff as we continue to use economic rationale to justify continuing exploitation of nature instead of nurturing our global habitat. Ironically, in the time scales of nature this attitude has, and will continue to, undermine the economic sustainability of our global society.

From Sao Paulo we flew north over the vast expanses of the Brazilian rainforests, commonly known as the lungs of the world. School day science, where trees absorb CO2 and convert it to carbonaceous growth and oxygen, tells us that all forests are vital in providing a continuing suitable habitat for humans and other species.

I also thought about some of the remarkable Indigenous peoples I had met and seen at an Earth Summit event organised by American anthropologist Daryl Posey, called Earth Parliament. I was flying over the lands that had been their home for countless years, and I thought about the knowledge they had, and its value in teaching us how to survive in our rapidly changing world. I also wondered about the impact of air travel on those lands as incompletely burnt hydrocarbon fuels land on the leaves of trees and interfere with the crucial process of photosynthesis that facilitates our oxygen supply.

I had a conversation in Rio with David Suzuki about indigenous knowledge and initiatives such as biodynamic agriculture and I wondered if he had walked on the land below me and learned from those remarkable people.

My thoughts turned to home, and I considered these issues in the Australian context. Firstly that Australia is an arid land with the remnants of oxygen- and rain-producing forests mainly hugging the coast and we continue to log them whilst expressing concern about the logging of Brazilian and Asian rain forests. Secondly that our own Indigenous people have similar knowledge of nature and

its plants, and that this important knowledge will be denied us whilst we continue to function as an exploitative society.

6 BACK TO THE SOUTH WEST

6.1 *Selling the farm*

Although I appreciated the saying attributed to Chief Seattle about how can we sell the land and the sea and the sky, in 1996 I commenced three years of selling real estate in Margaret River: an interesting learning experience for a conservationist. The speculative real estate industry encourages a materialistic focus on land that is often inconsistent with a conservation ethic. Margaret River has much cleared farmland yet its residential development has involved clearing of remnant native vegetation and attempts to protect that vegetation are seen as contravening private property rights.

6.2 *Haywood Farm and old growth*

We sold the farm in 1998 and I moved to a small property in town where I established Haywood Farm as a Community Sustainability Consultancy and video recorded environmental campaigns and Indigenous culture in the Margaret River region, and the intensifying south west forest campaigns.

There were two aspects to the old growth campaign. Firstly there was the non violent direct actions against logging and proposed logging. In addition to slowing the destruction of forest coupes these campaigns attracted media interest which helped raise public awareness. The protesters were mainly young people and were derogatively labelled as ferals – they were the equivalent of the protesting hippies of the 1960s and 70s. The direct actions helped create division and minor violent retaliation from industry participants who saw the campaigns as directly threatening their right to work and earn a living from the forests.

These divisions were exacerbated by the then state government not recognising the trend of public opinion towards a cessation of old growth logging and not preparing the timber communities and industry for the inevitable change.

The second aspect of the campaign was the rallies, media campaigns and lobbying that took place in the towns and cities. A good barometer of public opinion was in Margaret River, once a timber town, where all businesses in the main street closed for the public rally. This was partly because of the importance of the natural environment to the local tourist industry.

The city-based campaign that had long been coordinated by the Western Australian Forest Alliance was rapidly gaining support as high profile figures like Eagles coach Mick Malthouse and fashion designer Liz Davenport stood up publicly for these magnificent trees.

The overall campaign had similarities with 1970s campaigns like the one against the Vietnam war, as a group of committed individuals gained increasing public support until political decision-makers had to act. The initial core group were similarly seen as rabble rousers or worse, but were eventually shown to be trend setters for the conscience of the community.

6.3 *Black cockatoos and blackberries*

One of the many consequences of logging our forests is the reduction of habitat and food sources for many native animals and birds, including the Red Tailed Black Cockatoos that have a special cultural significance to Indigenous Australians.

These magnificent birds live in hollows in old red gum trees – the hollows are formed by branches breaking off at the main trunk, and allowing a hollow to form inside the tree. Red gum trees starting to grow today will not form suitable hollows for at least a couple of hundred years.

I had been filming a community campaign and a person who was making nesting boxes for Cockatoos in the Darling Ranges south of Perth. Afterwards I went filming in a nearby forest to try and capture features that show the ‘spirit in the trees’ that some conservationists and Aboriginals talk of.

It was a hot day and I followed a butterfly (an Indigenous North American woman had told me that if I was lost or unsure where to go in a forest to follow a creature such as a butterfly) down into a valley where the creek was still running. The level of the creek was just high enough that a gnama-like (a gnama hole is a small rock water hole historically used by Australian Aboriginals) hole in the granite creek bed was full and circulating, whilst if the level was lower the water would be stagnant.

I noticed a nearby blackberry bush and walked over and had a delicious feed from this prickly and invasive introduced weed. Next to it was another plant that had a nutty type of seed on it – I crushed a little bit, put it on my tongue and it tasted quite nutritious. Soon I was having a two course feast, although I still don't know if the latter plant was an introduced weed or not.

I sat down under a huge and majestic redgum tree and heard the unmistakable squawking sound of a flock of approaching cockatoos. They settled in the crown of the tree above me and began pecking at the redgum blossom which rained down on me and soon made a carpet of flowers under the tree. I thought I had discovered heaven on earth.

The Olympic torch had come to Busselton and I filmed a now deceased Aboriginal elder carrying it down the main street of the town where previously he and his family had been treated as outcasts in their own country.

I made the decision to follow the torch east to the Olympics in Sydney, and to film indigenous and landcare issues along the way, with the intention of seeing Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman win her 800 m race.

7 EASTERN STATES

7.1 *Heading eastward*

Travelling through the wheatbelt was a sobering experience as the abandoned buildings visible from the road showed the effect of farm amalgamations on rural population and communities, and the land degradation from past agricultural practices was also evident. This was offset by the obvious attempts to revegetate cleared and saline land.

When I arrived in Kalgoorlie, I saw the Olympic torch start its journey across the Nullabor on the Indian Pacific train and headed north into gold and station country. With the exception of television news coverage, I didn't see the torch again until it reached Kangaroo Flats in Victoria on the other side of Australia.

My first stop was the small gold mining town of Ora Banda. I shared a campsite with a team who were implementing a simple revegetation method on exploration and mining tenements. Using two wheel drive vehicles they established shallow rip lines; within three years the combination of wind and surface water flows moved enough seeds from nearby native vegetation that new plants grew.

Heading north past Leonora I filmed leasehold station country where a combination of overgrazing by cattle, sheep and goats had wiped out many native plants so that there was no seed bank for this cost-effective revegetation method. I recalled the vision of a Japanese farmer, Masanobu Fukuoka, who proposed aerial reseeding of the world's deserts using clay and nutrient pelleted seeds.

Travelling south to Kalgoorlie I stopped at the Cooringie community established by a now deceased Aboriginal elder and Korean war veteran and his late wife. It reminded me of meeting Hopi elders at the Peace and the Planet conference in Oregon eight years earlier as the Hopis were interacting with practitioners of Buckminster Fuller's ideas, and Cooringie was a retreat for Aboriginal boys where Geodesic domes decorated with Aboriginal designs, solar panels, a wind generator, organic gardens and cultural teaching were the focus. It also reminded me of a discussion with Vietnam war veterans on an Anzac day in Perth about the similarities for national survival between defending the county militarily and protecting its environment.

7.2 *Eastern states*

Having driven across the Nullarbor, I filmed the Olympic torch again in Kangaroo Flats outside Bendigo. Bendigo is the home of the Bendigo Community Bank group and I had gone there to open an account at their head office. I met up with a Pitinjara man there who convinced me to travel through his country to Alice Springs.

We stopped for a couple of days on a farm near a small South Australian town called Greenways. At the time of European settlement the settlers had consulted with local Aboriginal people before clearing trees for pasture. The result was that the majority of the property was left untouched – today it is a viable sheep farm that is also a haven for native species including koala bears. It is a good example of the cooperative approach to land management and custodianship that the future of this country requires.

The short visit to Alice Springs lasted for a year. Alice Springs is close to the geographical centre of Australia and like an oasis in the desert. The environment and climate of the region are harsh and it is a tribute to the local Aboriginal people that they have survived there for so long. The vegetation there is sparsely distributed and Aboriginal people could not understand the continuing logging of our southern forests.

The intrusion of weeds had not passed Alice Springs by, and the banks of the Todd River are lined with introduced plants like kikuya and doublegees. However, the release of the calicivirus had lessened rabbit numbers, and combined with the increased rainfall that seems to be part of climate change, had caused station owners to report an increase in the populations of native plants.

Watching the obvious pride that Aboriginal people felt watching Cathy Freeman in the Olympic opening ceremony, and later standing on the podium to accept her gold medal, is a memory I will never forget. It would however pale into insignificance should we genuinely appreciate their cultural understandings of this land and nature.

After a year I headed down the Old Ghan railway line to South Australia. The rail route was littered with the jarrah sleepers that had been used in its construction – I pulled out my camera and remarked that our old growth forest can be found anywhere. Further down the track to the west of Lake Eyre I came across another oasis in the desert, Coward Springs, which is a camping ground built from the old sleepers and adjoining a wetland that had been fenced off from livestock and allowed to regenerate.

Soon I was heading back across the Nullarbor again to Western Australia, excited by the recent state elections that had seen a change of government based on the Labor Party's commitment to protect the state's old growth forests.

8 SOUTH WEST OBSERVATIONS

8.1 *Old Growth protected*

Knowing that public opinion was a significant factor in achieving the political commitment to protect part of our natural heritage was encouraging for the future of our natural environment.

This policy and commitment was formalised by the adoption of a new ten year Forest Management Plan. Whilst this is a step forward it must be remembered that continued logging will take place in forest that have been degraded by past forest management practices.

Whilst the recent improvements in Western Australian logging practices have set new standards in a global context, talk of sustainable forest management based on intrusive mechanical and materialistic exploitation is premature in a society where non-Aboriginal Australians have not yet lived for the life cycle of a Eucalypt tree.

8.2 *Tuart decline*

Travelling from Perth to Margaret River, I was shocked to see the state of health of the Tuart forests, which originally covered hundreds of kilometres of the coastal plain on either side of Perth.

Their range has been steadily decreased by clearing for residential development and agriculture since the establishment of the Swan River colony.

In the last twenty years the health of the remnant Tuarts has steadily declined due to a complex mixture of causes including industrial and hydrocarbon fallout, water table depletion and pollution, loss of integrity of Tuart ecosystem, mining and insect attack. Combined with the changing climate these continuing causes may mean future generations will not experience the beauty of the Tuart forest.

8.3 *Invasive weeds*

A variety of plants have been introduced to Australia since European settlement for agricultural and aesthetic reasons. The extent of establishment of plants such as Blackberries, Arum Lillies, Kikuya, various pasture species and thistles means that we either have to accept the changed environment or commit to weed eradication on a scale never tackled in this country or other parts of the world.

The former option will have implications for the survival of native plants and for the diet of native animals. Plants such as Blackberries are also known as habitat for introduced pests such as rabbits that have their own impacts on native flora and fauna.

The eradication option will entail a choice between chemical control and the associated impacts, or manual control that will require funding and a labour force that will need community and bipartisan political commitment over a long period of time.

The Margaret River Regional Environment Centre has been coordinating a weed control project on the river at the northern entrance to town that involves the cooperation of Mission Australia, the Augusta Margaret River Shire Council, the State Emergency Service, consultants and volunteers. The main workforce was provided by Mission Australia's work for the dole participants.

Although on a relatively small scale, this project illustrated the challenges of weed control projects. Firstly, it was difficult to get local volunteers involved due to the work, family and community commitments residents have. Secondly, even though work for the dole participants are told the tasks they are doing are important, their payment is well below the minimum wage so they have low levels of motivation. Thirdly, because of the project's proximity to the river, the decision was made not to use chemical control – the existence of rampantly intrusive weeds like kikuya increased the challenge. Fourthly, because of the involvement of Mission Australia participants and volunteers, there was a requirement for a safety assessment that was done by State Emergency Services and for public liability insurance.

9 THE WAY FORWARD WITH OUR FORESTS

9.1 *Sustainable coexistence*

In addition to protecting our old growth forests the State government initiated a process that saw the formulation and adoption of a State Sustainability Strategy that established internationally renowned benchmarks for sustainable development.

Sustainable development simultaneously satisfies the economic, social and environmental aspects of society for present and future generations. It represents a new paradigm in decision making as it is based on the concept of cooperative decision making. It also assumes a longer term political outlook than is the case under our existing government and corporate bodies – a time scale more in keeping with that of nature than at present.

It also involves looking at challenges and problems in a different way: for example, great advances have been made in waste management by looking at waste as a resource rather than a problem. To rectify climate change and environmental degradation we similarly need to look at the excess of Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere as a resource rather than a problem – after all it is tree food.

There is a growing body of scientific and anecdotal knowledge showing that our local and global environments are experiencing severe stress and change, due to relatively recent unsustainable

decision making. This decision making has focused on economic, and to a lesser degree social, factors and hardly at all on environmental ones. Therefore, for decision making to produce truly sustainable outcomes in the present and future, the environment must be the primary consideration in applying the precautionary principle.

Pre-requisites for continuing human existence are access to clean air and water and to unpolluted food. For Aboriginal Australians the forest provided all three without the need to fell it. Today, the forest plays a crucial role in the provision of clean air and water. To continue to log our forests is in clear contravention of the precautionary principle of sustainable development.

The recently adopted Forest Management Plan should be seen as a window of opportunity to prepare our society for the transition to the nurturing and expansion of our forests. In Western Australia we have an economy and resources that are the envy of the rest of the world, and the orderly loss of timber industry jobs will not be significant, especially if they are replaced by ones in tourism and environmental repair. The existing and expanding plantation industry will support a timber industry of the future, as well as having environmental advantages for the often degraded land it occupies.

Perth is presently facing a water shortage that appears to be a long term one, and much consideration is being given to ways of providing water to the city. Most of the proposed methods are expensive and possibly unsustainable.

At the same time we need to mobilise a large workforce in regional Australia to carry out the tasks of environmental repair. A good starting point and trial for the rest of this country and the planet would be to cut out the plantings of introduced species within our south west forests and establish low cost villages there that will provide a workforce for the environmental repair in a location where there is relatively reliable rainfall and plentiful supplies of underground water.

I recommend that the initial trial be done in a block of forest of 1000 hectares between Nannup and Margaret River.

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