NOURISHING TERRAINS

Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness

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DEBORAH BIRD ROSE

AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION

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Foreword

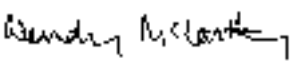
Indigenous Australians have helped to create the landscape. Through their continuing relationship with the land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have developed a comprehensive knowledge of its resources and needs. Their land management practices are complex techniques that rest on a vast body of knowledge which is now being incorporated into biological research, land management, language, art and many other facets of contemporary Australian life.

Indigenous people's wisdom and rights in relation to country are now widely appreciated. Australians of European descent increasingly appreciate that what they have called and cherished as 'wilderness' has a long history of human use, and these areas continue to be the 'nourishing terrains' of Indigenous Australians. This has resulted in a shift in the understanding of wilderness to reflect the human history of those landscapes. As Deborah Bird Rose says 'There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation'.

The role of the Australian Heritage Commission is to identify heritage places which are part of Australia's National Estate. The Commission recognises that Indigenous values and knowledge are important in the management of heritage places, and encourages understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Within this context, the Commission asked Deborah Bird Rose to write this book to explore Indigenous views of landscape and their relationships with the land.

This book provides an overview of Indigenous perspectives, and captures the spiritual and emotional significance of the land to Aboriginal people. The poems, songs and words of Indigenous people included in this book testify the undeniable strength of their feeling and connection with their land.

I hope this book will foster a greater understanding amongst non-Indigenous Australians of the significance of Aboriginal connections with country. Such as understanding is essential if we are to develop better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.



Wendy McCarthy AO
Chair
Australian Heritage Commission

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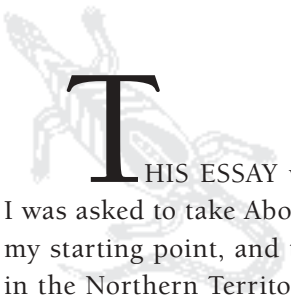


THIS ESSAY was commissioned by the Australian Heritage Commission I was asked to take Aboriginal Australians' concepts of landscape and wilderness as my starting point, and to write about the whole of Australia, not just those regions in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley, and New South Wales where I have some personal experience. In addition, I was asked to include Aboriginal people's own words.

I have been particularly concerned to find a balance between the abstract quality of analysis which creeps in as soon as one starts to generalise about the continent, and the deeply embedded quality of Aboriginal people's own words. Initially I took this to be a contrast between my words and Aboriginal people's words. In looking through hundreds of documents, however, I discovered that when Aboriginal people start to generalise, their words also end up with an abstract quality. This unsettled me, because most of my experience with Aboriginal people has been that people speak straight from the heart, and speak straight to the issues that matter to them. Their immediate and direct words best communicate their relationships to country, and that is what I wanted to communicate to others.

I have come to realise that while explanations have to build a foundation from the ground up, they always run the risk of acquiring the pedantic quality of expository communication. Some discursive strategies, it is clear, inhibit the communication of certain kinds of deeply held knowledge and belief.

By way of analogy, consider the differences between an explanation of love, a love story, a love poem, and love song. Consider, too, the power and passion of a song-poem which is open to multiple interpretations and is rich in sensual imagery. Consider how evocative and mysteriously beautiful are some creative expressions. Each type of communication ~ exposition, story, poem, song, and song-poem ~ offers information. Together they may actually begin to speak to the fullness of the experience of love.

The analogy is intended to convey something of what I have been striving toward in quoting Aboriginal people's explanations, stories, poetry, songs, and

song-poems. Each type of communication carries important information; together they begin to communicate something of the fullness of people's relationships to the nourishing terrains of their lives.

I have drawn only on stories, songs and song-poems which already are in the public domain. Evocative, expressive, and frequently beautiful even in translation, songs and song-poems are often profoundly insightful for strangers in spite of the fact that they cannot bring the context of local knowledge to bear in understanding the meanings of the words.

While I have sought to find a balance between the songs, stories and poems of all the regions of Australia, I have had to keep in mind that this is not an essay about songs but rather an essay about land. My research indicates that in the most settled parts of Australia there is a flourishing of creativity in poetry and song, and that the main themes of this outpouring are identity and history. There are, to the best of my knowledge, very few songs and poems that are actually concerned with specific places.

It does not follow that Aboriginal people in the more settled regions do not have significant relationships to their own country. My experience has been that many people have sustained those relationships against the most overwhelming efforts to eradicate them. It does seem to be the case, however, that at this time these relationships are not a key subject of song and poetry. I do not want to generalise unduly, but I would note that the themes of history and identity emphasise the common experiences that Aboriginal people face, and I conclude that the use of creative arts to forge links among people has a higher priority at this time than does the use of creative arts to express the differences among people. To this I must add that during the course of my work in New South Wales, Aboriginal people have told me time and again that because they have lost so much, they are not prepared to speak publicly about their knowledge in any detail. They fear that they will lose control of that which remains. One can only respect the intense determination which drives people toward exercising extreme control over information. If a day comes when Aboriginal people feel less threatened, it may be possible that they will then want to share more with settler Australians.

Some urban poets and songwriters speak of the cityscapes which form the significant places of their lives, and for those whose home country has been overtaken by a metropolis, their creative expression forms powerful links in the continuity of Aboriginal life in Australia. Because my brief is to concentrate on landscapes rather than cityscapes, I have not sought to incorporate an analysis of city dwellers' complex relationships to their place, and of the significant ways in which relationships to place are mediated by kinship. A beautiful poem by Tony Birch of Melbourne gives a glimpse of some of the riches that are available.

Ladies' Lounge

straddled across
laminex chairs
dragged from kitchens
into the warm streets
these women
would drink shandies
and smoke cork-tips
while the Hit Parade
drifted from the verandah

---

we would sit along
the bluestone gutter
listening to our mothers
singing Cilla Black
they would do nails
brush hair and
touch each other
in a late afternoon
summer sun [1]

A question which keeps arising among non-Aboriginal people is: were Aboriginal people conservationists? This question has aroused a great deal of debate, and much passion has been invested in it. Those who argue that the answer is 'no' point to wasteful practices, to the extinction of giant mammals (an event that may be linked to Aboriginal hunting), and to obvious instances in which Aboriginal people's land management practices have not been fully successful. Those who argue that the answer is 'yes' point to successful management practices, to the loss of species with the cessation of Aboriginal land management practices, and to a world view which is neither human-centred nor geared to the endless satisfaction of human wants.

At stake are issues which go beyond the particular question. I believe that this debate emerges from conflicting world views and visions of humanity. The first position ('no') is built upon the view that wherever you go in the world people are pretty much the same: they all want to consume and compete, to achieve greater power and comfort. The fact that Aboriginal people had so little destructive impact

1 Reproduced courtesy of the author

upon the continent is said to be due to the level of their technology rather than to any fundamental difference in their world view. The second position ('yes') is built upon the view that there are genuine social and cultural differences among the different families of humanity, and that Aboriginal people have developed a system of knowledge and a way of managing the continent that is quite different from the ways that European-derived cultures manage knowledge and land.

I know of no way to resolve this debate, since people remain attached to their world views in spite of conflicting evidence, and there is evidence which conflicts with both views.

My own view, which informs this essay throughout, is this: the terms 'conservation' and 'conservationist' are contemporary terms brought into being by the urgency of the ecological issues which surround us. Aboriginal people were not conservationists in this contemporary sense of the term because they did not have to be. They had managed the continent in such a way that they did not have to face the massive loss of life-support systems.

I believe that Aboriginal people's methods for managing the continent are not the outcome of an impoverished technology (as the most extreme materialists would insist), but rather are the outcome of ways of knowing and understanding the world which settlers have only just begun to appreciate. The real issues, I believe, concern practice and philosophy: what are Aboriginal people's land management practices, and what is the philosophy within which they are embedded.

There is so much to be learned from Aboriginal people ~ about land management with fire, about the species of the continent, about relationships among living things, and between living things and the seasonal forces, about how to understand human society as a part of living systems, taking humanity seriously without making of it the centre of creation. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that many Aboriginal people take quite different views about conservation from those developed by scientists and other concerned citizens.[2] In studying these differences I have come to the view that there is so much to be learned, and the continent is so needy, that every moment spent in a fruitless debate about whether or not Aboriginal people had the kind of conservation ethic that is familiar to non-Aboriginal people is a moment wasted.

My first and most enduring obligations are to the Aboriginal people who have taught me so much. I would mention in particular the women and men of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley who welcomed me to their countries, camps and hearths, shared food, knowledge and good will, and who continue to keep me in line. I must also mention the women of Wallaga Lake (New South Wales) who

2 See B. Rose 1995 *Land management issues: Attitudes and perceptions amongst Aboriginal people of central Australia*, Central Land Council, Alice Springs, for an excellent discussion of some of these differences.

also welcomed and taught me. Along with much else, they enabled me to understand the extent to which Aboriginal culture is sustained in people's kitchens and other domestic spaces. Teaching their children, supporting their kin, taking care of their country, and holding together a culture that is fragile by any standards, these women, and the thousands of others like them, are heroes.

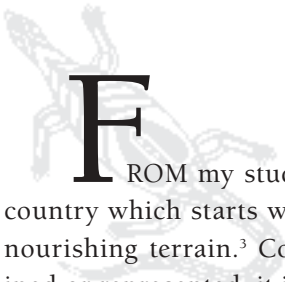
Betty Meehan provided the intellectual stimulus to this essay, and was tolerant during the long period of its gestation. Participants in the ICOMOS-sponsored workshop on Indigenous Landscapes (February 1995) gave me helpful feedback at a crucial moment. Annie Clarke, Cathy Robinson and Steve Chapman very kindly read a rough draft and encouraged me greatly. Darrell Lewis, as ever, gave me invaluable assistance both with editing and with his wide-ranging knowledge.

I thank them all.

Deborah Bird Rose

1

Country



FROM my studies with Aboriginal people I have developed a definition of country which starts with the idea that country, to use the philosopher's term, is a nourishing terrain.[3] Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with.

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like 'spending a day in the country' or 'going up the country'. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease.

A lovely song-poem that speaks to the peace of country is *The Bulbul Bird,* composed in the Ngarluma language of the Pilbara (Western Australia) by a man identified as Waljbira:

Bulbul is here
Follow the stony creek, your track to northern shores!
Bulbul is here
This pool is 'water throughout the year'
Stir my heart and also give rest.[4]

'Water throughout the year' is both a description and the name of a place. The poem is a map of a locale and a map of the states of being which the poet associates

3 Levinas in S. Hand (ed) 1989 *The Levinas Reader,* Basil Blackwell, Ltd, Oxford.

4 C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas 1974 *Taruru; Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara,* Rigby Limited, Adelaide, p. 45. In his notes, von Brandenstein states that the poet used a term which is glossed as 'mind' rather than 'heart'. I can only guess that von Brandenstein used the term 'heart' in the poem because he felt that it more accurately conveyed the poet's intention (ibid, p. 86).

with the place. Locating the bulbul bird/coucal pheasant at the place speaks of permanent water, and probably also to the sacred origins of the place, for the coucal pheasant is a Dreaming figure in the Pilbara, celebrated for stopping flood waters.[5] The poet does not tell us further meanings of the place; that knowledge, we are meant to understand, is not to be sung for an unknown audience.

Country is multi-dimensional ~ it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time. As I use the term here I refer to areas of land and/or sea including the subsurface and sky above, in so far as Aboriginal people identify all these components as being part of their particular country.

Sea and Sky

Around much of the coast of Australia, Aboriginal people own (according to their own law) both the land and the surrounding waters. The creative beings traverse the whole area ~ land, sea, beach, reef, sea grass bed, sky, and fresh water sources. The law of the land is also the law of the sea, and sea, like land, is country that is known, named, sung, danced, painted, loved, harvested and cared for.

Matthew Dhulumburrk of Milingimbi spoke of sea 'country' in connection with gaining legal control over portions of the sea (known, not entirely accurately, as 'sea closure'):

> ***The reason we want to close the seas is: the earth is not empty. The reason why we are closing the seas and the land, offshore two kilometres, even though it is not good enough, is that the earth and the sea, the water is not empty ... We got something in it, we always have it and we'll be having it all the time ... The land and the sea not empty sheds that man has built. There's something in it.***[6]

If sea country is an unexpected concept, 'sky country' may be even more so. For many people this is where the lightning men and women live, where their dead relations may be living, and where creative beings have travelled and stopped. In the south-eastern parts of Australia, sky country is where the great creative being Biame stays. Fred Biggs, a Ngeamba man from the Menindee (New South Wales) area described one aspect of sky country. His words not only discuss the sky country but also link it to the earth through seasons and weather:

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5 H. Hall 1971 *A Partial vocabulary of the Ngalooma Aboriginal Tribe*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p4.

6 Submission to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner regarding control of entry onto seas adjoining Aboriginal Land in the Milingimbi, Crocodile Islands and Glyde River Area. 30 May 1980, Written by Mark Dreyfus (NLC) assisted by Matthew Dhulumburrk.

The Star Tribes

Look, among the boughs. Those stars are men.
There's Ngintu, with his dogs, who guards the skins
of Everlasting Water in the sky.
And there's the Crow-man, carrying on his back
the wounded Hawk-man. There's the serpent, Thurroo,
glistening in the leaves. There's Kapeetah,
the Moon-man, sitting in his mia-mia.

And there's those Seven Sisters, travelling
across the sky. They make the real cold frost.
You hear them when you're camped out on the plains.
They look down from the sky and see your fire
and 'Mai, mai, mai,' they'd sing out as they run
across the sky. And, when you wake, you find
your swag, the camp, the plains, all white with frost.[7]

'Promised Lands'

Each country has its sacred origins, its sacred and dangerous places, its sources of life and its sites of death. Each has its own people, its own Law, its own way of life. In many parts of Australia, the ultimate origin of the life of country is the earth itself, as Hobbles Danaiyarri, a Mudbura man of Yarralin (Northern Territory), explained:

Everything come up out of ground ~ language, people, emu, kangaroo, grass. That's Law.[8]

In Aboriginal Australia each country is surrounded by other countries. The boundaries are rarely absolute; differences are known, respected and culturally elaborated in many ways. As David Turner says, Aboriginal Australia is made up of a series of 'promised lands', each with its own 'chosen people'.[9]

Each nourishing terrain, each promised land, was cared for. Aboriginal land management was long thought by Europeans to have been non-existent; Aboriginal people were thought to have been 'parasites on nature' ~ people for whom the labour of working the land was unknown. It is now possible to say with certainty

7 F. Biggs in R. Robinson, 1970 *Altjeringa and other Aboriginal poems*, A H and A W Reed, Sydney, p. 25.

8 Personal communication, see also D. Rose 1992 *Dingo Makes Us Human, Life and land in an Aboriginal Australian culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 57.

9 D. Turner 1988 'The Incarnation of Nambirrirrma' in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions. Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, T. Swain & D. Rose (eds), pp. 470-484. The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, SA. p. 479

that Aboriginal people's land management practices, especially their skilled and detailed use of fire, were responsible for the long-term productivity and biodiversity of this continent.[10] In addition to fire, other practices include selective harvesting, the extensive organisation of sanctuaries, and the promotion of regeneration of plants and animals. Organised on a country by country basis, but with mutual responsibilities being shared along Dreaming tracks, and through trade, marriage, and other social/ritual relationships, management of the life of the country constitutes one of Aboriginal people's strongest and deepest purposes in life, as well as making up much of their daily lives in so far as it is still possible for people to take care of their country.

Country, ideally, is synonymous with life. And life, for Aboriginal people, needs no justification. Just as no justification is required to hunt and kill in order to support one's own life, so there is no justification required in asserting that other living things also want to live, and have the right to live their own lives. It follows that other species, as well as humans, have the right to the conditions which enable their lives to continue through time: minimally to the waters and foods on which they depend, and to the sanctuaries in which they cannot be hunted or gathered or harmed in any way. It further follows, as I will discuss in greater detail below, that all living things have the right to their own Law and custom, to their own sacred places and rituals.

A 'healthy' or 'good' country, is one in which all the elements do their work. They all nourish each other because there is no site, no position, from which the interest of one can be disengaged from the interests of others *in the long term*. Self-interest and the interest of all of the other living components of country (the self-interest of kangaroos, barramundi, eels and so on), cannot exist independently of each other *in the long term*.

The interdependence of all life within country constitutes a hard but essential lesson ~ those who destroy their country ultimately destroy themselves.

Country must also be contrasted with landscape as that term has developed in some arenas, for the term 'landscape' signals a distance between the place, feature, or monument and the person or society which considers its existence. One can ask questions about what people will choose to conserve in a given landscape. One can ask questions about the multiplicity of values that a landscape has for people. But these questions cannot readily be asked within an Aboriginal concept of country because country has its own life, its own imperatives, of which humans are only one aspect. It is not up to humans to take supreme control, or to define the ultimate values of country. Aboriginal relationships to land link people to ecosystems 'rather

10 D. Bowman 1995 'Why the skillful use of fire is critical for the management of biodiversity in Northern Australia', *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 105-12. Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin.

than giving them dominion over' them.[11] In this mode of thought, the values of life are pre-given in the sacred origins of the world.

There seems to me to be a fundamental philosophical gap between European cultures of conquest and Aboriginal cultures of balance. Dominant European cultures of colonisation, and at this time the dominant political and economic cultures of Australia, assert that some living things are to be eradicated, or, more negligently, simply stranded on a path toward death. This has been called, without irony, the survival of the fittest. I say 'without irony' because from a life-centred perspective it is difficult to discern the long-term fitness of practices which destroy the practitioners' own life-support systems.

In contrast, many indigenous peoples do not articulate a justification for life precisely because they hold life inherently to be significant. The contrast emerges most provocatively in consultations with Aboriginal people about the eradication of feral animals. Bruce Rose reports that:

> killing some animals to look after others involves value judgements which are not necessarily part of the Aboriginal world view ... Ethics and value judgements which support playing favourites with some species over others do not fit easily into the Aboriginal world view.[12]

Life is meaningful, and much human activity ~ art, music, dance, philosophy, religion, ritual and daily activity ~ is about celebrating and promoting life. Country is the key, the matrix, the essential heart of life. It follows that much Aboriginal art, music, dance, philosophy, religion, ritual and daily activity has country as its focusor basis.

Not only is life valued, but the systemic quality of life is valued too. Within this holistic system of knowledge, each living thing is a participant in living systems. Celebration of life is a celebration of the interconnections of life in a particular place which also includes the humans who celebrate.

One of the powerful Groote Eylandt clan songs, the song for the West Wind, brings together the life of the beings within the country and the changes which resonate through the country, along with human ownership of the country:

West Wind

I've tossed it now, wind and song,
To the flat land,
Bare, treeless flat land.
I've tossed it now, wind and song.

11 B. Rose, op. cit., p. xviii.

12 B. Rose, ibid., p. 91.

To the flat land,
Bare, treeless flat land,
To the sandy flats.
The wind is testing its strength,
Blowing down to the ants' path
With its tiny pebbles,
Down to the tiny heaps of gravel,
Down to all the heaps of gravel.
I followed the flat land
In my country. Where is Ekilyangba?
It's in my country.
Where is Ekilyangba?
I've set my foot there.

I've trodden
On the path,
The narrow path,
Ant path.
Red ants,
Meat ants,
Tiny ants.
Parrots screeched,
Flying low over their ant friends.
Ant paths,
Ant tracks.
Wind striking grass,
Parting grass,
Rustling.
My grandfather's wind,
Tiny ants' wind,
Thin ants' wind,
The west wind has veered away.[13]

Each country is understood by its people to be a unique and inviolable whole. People assert that other species also understand the country this way, and indeed that the country understands itself this way. Each whole country is surrounded by other unique and inviolable whole countries, and the relationships between the countries ensure that no country is isolated, that together they make up some larger

13 J. Stokes & Aboriginal Advisers, 1981, *Groote Eylandt Song Words*, Angurugu, Groote Eylandt, p. 10.

wholes ~ clusters of alliance networks, Dreaming tracks and ceremonies, trade networks, tracks of winds and movements of animals. In this way a working system can be known to exist way beyond one's own countries, but no one ever knows the full extent of it all because knowledge is of necessity local. The fact of localised knowledge is itself Law. This system does not invite people to assume that they can or should know everything. Nor does it commend itself to people who believe that they can and should (or already do) know everything.

The holistic quality of country has a further implication: when questions arise of intervention in order to protect something, Aboriginal people are likely to respond with requests to do nothing or with requests to preserve the whole system in which the particular is embedded. Thus, for example, members of the Ginytjirrang mala (clan) of Arnhem Land call for a management strategy for the seas which depends on local knowledge, local responsibilities, and local action, and which emphasises that land and sea are all part of the same Law:

> ***When talking about land and sea in Yolngu way, the sea is the same as the land. On our lands in the Northern Territory land rights legislation allows us to make the decisions concerning exploration and mining proposals in our country. But land rights stop, under your law, where the sea meets up with the land. We want the right to say yes or no to exploration and mining in our land and sea country and we want this right fixed in the constitution so it cannot be changed ... Our management arrangements for the sea are at least as complex as yours; but at least most adult Yolngu understand how their own system works. And our system has worked for us for thousands of years. We think this is due to our relationship to the sea. In our law Manbuynga and Rulyapa, we are all related as kin to the sea. We thus use the sea and have access in accordance with our law which derives from these kinship ties.***[14]

Knowledge ~ local, detailed, tested through time ~ is the basis for being in country. Aboriginal people take notice of their country, and through the attention they give to country, their communication becomes two-way. Communication is based on the ability to understand what is happening and where it is happening. The song-poem by Sam Mitchell of the Pilbara makes this point indirectly as he sits in his house and sings of what is happening way off in his country:

14 Ginytjirrang Mala with the assistance of A•D•V•Y•Z for the Northern Land Council and Ocean Rescue 2000 ≈ November 1994. 'An Indigenous Marine Protection Strategy for Manbuynga ga Rulyapa', unpublished mss, pp. 6, 9. Manbuynga and Rulyapa are two main currents in the sea.

Thunderstorm

After sundown the clouds start to burn,
A big one is bending low, stays and breaks up,
Then it rounds again and raises its forehead high.
On both ends sheet lightning shines.
In the middle where the first layer is gone,
You can see the flash, even inside your home.
Everything dissolves.
In the desert, wide-spread falls the cloudburst,
Drenching all the trees between the two sandhills.[15]

Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, a Rembarrnga man of Arnhem Land, spoke of these matters in a story he told about his country:

I'm here telling you this story in this place called Bulara ~ that's the big country name for this area. ...

We used to make our camp sometimes without water. Then early in the morning we'd get up and sing out and look at the country carefully, so we could find water and go hunting.

That's what this part of Arnhem Land is like. Other places are all right but here in the middle you've got to talk to the country. You can't just travel quiet, no! Otherwise you might get lost, or have to travel much further. That's law for the centre of Arnhem Land. For Rembarrnga people.

My father used to do it. We used to get up early in the morning and he'd sing out and talk. Sometimes he didn't talk early in the morning, only when travelling and we used to stop and he'd talk then in language.

It would make you look carefully at the country, so you could see the signs, so you could see which way to go. ...

The law about singing out was made like that to make you notice that all the trees here are your countrymen, your relations. All the trees and the birds are your relations.

15 Song by Sam Mitchell, sung in Njangumarda language and translated by S. Mitchell, in C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas, op. cit., p. 17; 67.

There are different kinds of birds here. They can't talk to you straight up. You've got to sing out to them so they can know you. ...

That's why I talked to the birds this morning, and all the birds were happy. All the birds were really happy and sang out: 'Oh! That's a relation of ours. That's a relation we didn't know about'. That's the way they spoke, and they were happy then to sing out.[16]

16 P. Wainburranga, 'Talking history' *Land Rights News*, 2, 9, July 1988, p. 46.

2

Wilderness and the Wild

WILDERNESS, David Brower says jokingly, is a place 'where the hand of man has not yet set foot'.[17] It is important to recall that 'wilderness' has not always been positively conceptualised in the 'civilised' world. Agriculturalists tilled the earth, and kept the 'wild' or untamed world at the edges of the fields or beyond the walls of the gardens.[18] Nation-states contrast themselves with the uncontrolled and wild 'barbarians' or 'savages' beyond the rivers or walls that mark the edge of centrally controlled society. On the other hand, positive evaluations of wilderness also have a long genealogy: in Jewish and Christian thought wilderness can be a place where God's presence is intensely encountered. The modern interest in wilderness is related in complex ways to the conceptual domains of the past, but adds to them a positive evaluation concerning preservation and conservation. Positive values of wilderness include: helping to safeguard biodiversity; maintaining sources of spiritual renewal; opportunities for self-reliant recreation; maintenance of significant opportunities for scientific study in natural ecosystems.[19]

Bearing in mind the complex history of wilderness concepts, the issue which gives immense urgency to our concerns about the future of our ecosystems is the egocentric quality of standard European and American-derived concepts of wilderness. They all involve the peculiar notion that if one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land, then the land must be 'natural' or empty of culture. In the context of Australian settlement by Europeans, it does not require a great leap of imagination to realise that the concept of terra nullius (land that was not owned) depended on precisely this egocentric view of landscape. Not seeing the signs of ownership and property to which they were accustomed, many settlers assumed that there was no ownership and property, and that the landscapes were natural.

17 David Brower was the first executive director of the Sierra Club and founder of Friends of the Earth. This statement appears in 'Wilderness and the Wildness Within Us', *Habitat,* 1978, 5, 6, p. 7.

18 J. Wright, 1980, 'Wilderness, Waste and History', *Habitat,* 8,1, 27-31.

19 M. Robertson, K. Vang & A. Brown, 1992, *Wilderness in Australia, Issues and Options*. Australian Heritage Commission, ACT.

Ross Gibson writes of how English people had imaginatively grasped their own home country: 'Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, and inscribed into an elaborate and all engrossing national history'. He contrasts the symbolic density of the Old World with the elusive quality of settler Australian society: 'Australians, by contrast, seem to be neither here nor there'.[20] One of the reasons why it is possible, 200 years after first settlement, to suggest that Australians seem neither here nor there, is that many Australians have avoided accepting, or even attempting to understand, that at the time of their arrival this continent already had been discovered. It was already travelled, known, and named; its places were inscribed in song, dance and design; its histories were told from generation to generation; its physical appearance was the product of specific land management practices; its fertility was the product of human labour which had been invested in the land. In the words of the great anthropologist W E H Stanner, Aboriginal people moved 'not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significations'.[21]

The egocentric view of landscape, wherein one either sees oneself or one sees nothing at all, constitutes a kind of blindness; it closes off the evidence of what really is there. Aboriginal people understand settlers well in this regard. Anzac Munnganyi, a Bilinara man of Pigeon Hole (Northern Territory), said:

> ***White people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And put the flag; put the flag.***[22]

His imagery of white people stumbling around in unknown country and yet having the arrogance to 'put the flag' and claim the land strikes me as immensely insightful.

A definition of wilderness which excludes the active presence of humanity may suit contemporary people's longing for places of peace, natural beauty, and spiritual presence, uncontaminated by their own culture. But definitions which claim that these landscapes are 'natural' miss the whole point of the nourishing Australian terrains. Here on this continent, there is no place where the feet of Aboriginal humanity have not preceded those of the settler. Nor is there any place where the country was not once fashioned and kept productive by Aboriginal people's land management practices. There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation.

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20 R. Gibson, 1988 'Formative Landscapes', in *Back of Beyond, Discovering Australian Film and Television,* S. Murray (ed), pp. 20-33. Australian Film Commission, Sydney. See also R. Gibson 1992 *South of the West: Post-colonialism and the narrative construction of Australia.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

21 WEH Stanner, 1979 *White Man Got No Dreaming.* ANU Press, Canberra, p. 131.

22 Personal communication.

In 1986 Daly Pulkara and I were travelling from Yarralin (an Aboriginal settlement excised from Victoria River Downs station) to Lingara (an Aboriginal settlement excised from Humbert River station) in the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory. The route was familiar to us both, but we stopped because I wanted to film some of the most spectacular erosion in the Victoria River District. I asked Daly what he called this country. He looked at it long and heavily before he said: 'It's the wild. Just the wild'.

Daly went on to speak of quiet country ~ the country in which all the care of generations of people is evident to those who know how to see it. Quiet country stands in contrast to the wild: we were looking at a wilderness, man-made and cattle-made. This 'wild' was a place where the life of the country was falling down into the gullies and washing away with the rains.[23]

Owned and Loved

The High Court's Mabo Decision marks an historic moment in the public consciousness of settler Australians: for the first time Aboriginal and Islander people's ownership of country has been formally and publicly acknowledged. While Aboriginal people welcomed the decision, it did not alter their own views of themselves, for most of the Aboriginal people of Australia never ceased to understand themselves as people who are unshakeably linked to their country through complex legal (in Aboriginal law), emotional, economic, intellectual and spiritual ways.

As the *Native Title Act 1993* is beginning to have some impact on the nation, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on specific cases of ownership. The Meriam people have had their say and won, and their words are in the public domain. James Rice explained ownership in his terms:

This area, this land is ours. Our ancestors were living here. There were no white people here ... I know my boundaries; I know my areas. I can name them where the ancestors been naming all these places. These are not any white people's names ... I say Basmet ~ this is my ancestor's name. And this land belongs to my ancestors.[24]

Inscribing the Human Spirit

Back in the 'wilds' of the Daly River reserve, a Marringarr woman named Ataying sings of a hill named Yendili which is located in her country. The song was given her by the spirit of a deceased man who appeared to her in a dream:

23 Some of the implications of Daly's statement are explored further in D. Rose 1988 'Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic', *Meanjin,* 47, 3, 378-387.

24 Quoted in N. Sharp, 1994, 'Malo's Law in Court: The Religious Background to the Mabo Case', Charles Strong Memorial Trust Lecture, Charles Strong Memorial Trust, Adelaide.

yendili yendili arrgirritni
yendili yendili arrgirritni;
aa ... yengina

You will hang onto this Yendili country,
my dear daughter [25]

Not only the hand of humanity, but the spirit and mind as well, have been active on this continent for millennia. Thus, the nourishing terrains of Australia have offered people joy, beauty, and celebration. Through labour, imagination and spirituality Aboriginal people have managed and celebrated their country. Some of their songs, like this Yawuru song-poem, tell of the utter joy of life:

Glowing like the sacred blood
you appear.
Riding up and down on the waves,
quickly the stranger arrives.

The turtle arrived
from the south
glistening and glimmering in the waves,
shining and glittering on the waves.[26]

Song-poems almost invariably situate the singer in known, named, created, and understood country:

Whirlwind

A whirlwind rises high.
I am bound for Pilanu,
Where the Rainbow-Snake cut open the ground.[27]

Since 1788, with the progressive cessation of Aboriginal land management practices (discussed in greater detail below), with the increasing congregation of Aboriginal people in settlements, and with the introduction of new forms of land use and land management, there is developing a pervasive 'wild' ~ a loss of life, a loss of life support systems, and a loss of relationships among living things and

25 Transcribed, translated, and discussed in A. Marett, 1991, *'Wangga* songs of northwest Australia: Reflections on the performance of Aboriginal music at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society '88' *Musicology Australia,* vol. xiv, 37-46, p. 40.

26 E. Worms, 1957 'The Poetry of the Yaoro and Bad, North-Western Australia', *Annali Lateranemse,* v. 21, 213-29. Worms notes that this song, sung by a man named Mangana, was sung while spearing turtles from the top of the sandstone cliffs of Roebuck bay. People said that the turtle arrives regularly from the south towards the end of the trade wind season, in October-December.

27 C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas, op. cit., p. 6.

their country. For many Aboriginal people, this 'wild' has the quality of deep loneliness. The hauntingly beautiful song of the Chrysophase Band from Central Australia tells its own story:

***Tjanu Anu Wilurara* (They all went West)**

One time I was standing, staring
As the sun was setting in the West
I was feeling so sad.

What's happened to all the people?
What's happened to all the people?

A child told me
They have all gone West
It's wonderful out West.

It's the land of our Grandfather
The Western Land
The Western Lands.

I've kept it in my mind
And now whenever there's a wind blowing
I get a stabbing pain
Right through my eyes.

What's happened to all the people?
What's happened to all the people? [28]

28 The Chrysophase Band, by Peter Watson and Richard Kanari; on the album 'From the Bush', CAAMA Music, Alice Springs.

3

Nothing is Nothing

QUEENSLAND PEOPLE, according to Peter Sutton, an anthropologist with broad experience of Aboriginal cultures, have a saying: 'Nothing is nothing'. The corollary to this profound statement is that everything is something. Nothing is nothing because everything has an origin in the creation of the world.

Sutton explains that any one person or other living thing is capable of knowing only a portion of what can be known. And while some meanings are more significant than others, 'there is no alien world of mere things' or of things with no meaning.[29]

Living Things

Nourishing terrains are the active manifestation of creation. This does not mean that everything that happens is right or good, but it does mean that everything that happens has creation as its precondition. For many Aboriginal people, everything in the world is alive: animals, trees, rains, sun, moon, some rocks and hills, and people are all conscious. So too are other beings such as the Rainbow Snake, the Hairy People and the Stumpy Men. All have a right to exist, all have their own places of belonging, all have their own Law and culture.

Many of the super-ordinary beings interact with people. Stumpy Men, for example, give people new songs,[30] as do the Munga Munga women.[31] Many of these beings also act as guardians of country ~ taking care of the people who belong there, and harming people who do not belong there. They are powerful and unpredictable beings, and are often associated with particular places where people ought not to go. Some of these beings are regarded as secret and thus are not to be discussed publicly: they guard the country especially during ceremonial activities when people and other beings may be particularly vulnerable.

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29 P. Sutton 1988 'Dreamings', in Dreamings; *The Art of Aboriginal Australia,* pp. 13-32. Viking, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic, p. 13.

30 Marett, op. cit., p. 40-1.

31 See D. Rose 1992, op. cit., pp. 95-7.

Percy Mumbulla of the south coast of New South Wales told Roland Robinson about one extra-ordinary being ~ Dulagal (also Doolagarl):

My father, old Jacky Mumbulla, and a woman Nardi, who was good at climbing trees, took some old warriors out with them once for company. They were going out for gum-boughs, koala bears, or anything they could find.
One old-man wanted to go off alone. They say to this old-man, 'You knock on a tree if you find anything'.
This old-man goes off and climbs a tree after a gum-bough. He goes out along a bough. He throws his tomahawk and hits a bear. The bear falls down, thump! Then this old man slips on the bough and falls. He breaks his back. All this time old Jacky Mumbulla and his tribe do not hear a knock on any tree. 'Right-oh', my father sings out, 'gather up all the gum-boughs or whatever you've got. We start back home to the camp' ...
My father says to the tribe, 'If that old-man is not back by daylight, we must go out to find him'.
'Right-oh,' the others call out.
Daylight. The old-man has not come back. My father wakes up the tribe. 'Come on, all you young fellows, we have to go out for that old-man'.
They find tracks and follow them to where the old-man had dragged himself to a big log ...
The old-man told them that at night a doolagarl, a hairy-man, had smelt him out. The doolagarl came over to where the old-man lay behind the log. But the old-man was a clever fellow. He called out and spoke to the doolagarl. That hairy-man stayed and looked after the old fellow all night ...[32]

The presence in the world of a range of beings which European cultures define as supernatural conveys a strong sense of vivid presence ~ of country bursting with life. Areas which Europeans have often seen as desolate and lacking life, and which are certainly inhospitable to many species, are likely to be seen quite differently by the Aboriginal people who belong there. In 'The Spirit Song about Lake Eyre', Jimmy and Leslie Russell sing a song which was given to them by an older relative who was taught it by a spirit who led him all over Lake Eyre country. The song refers to a mythic being; his body is the whirlwind, and only his eyebrows show. The song also refers to the piyatja 'goblins' who live on the slopes of Mt Margaret. In amongst these creatures are other living creatures ~ crows, and the poet himself:

32 Percy Mumbulla in R. Robinson, 1968, *Aboriginal Myths and Legends*, Sun Books, Melbourne, pp. 211-2.

'Only Eyebrows' he is called,
He is only eyebrows.
'Only Eyebrows' he is called.

'Only Eyebrows',
'Only Eyebrows',

He travels crossways, across the lake,
Crossways indeed
'Only ...

'Only Eyebrows',
'Only Eyebrows',

He travels crossways across the lake,

The piyatja *goblins, the* piyatja *goblins are painted up*
Like banded snakes they look,
Yes, like banded snakes.

They are dancing now, painted up
You see them sleeping by the creek.

They are painted, all painted,
Like banded snakes they are painted.

They resemble dark flowers
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Dark flowers
In the distance the huge flock
Of crows.

In the distance the huge flock
The flock of crows
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Dark flowers.[33]

33 'The Spirit Song about Lake Eyre', sung by Jimmy and Leslie Russell in the Wangkangurru language; Recorded, translated and annotated by L. Hercus, 1990, in *The honey-ant men's love song and other Aboriginal song poems,* R Dixon and M Duwell (eds), pp. 112-5., University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

Dreaming

Silas Roberts, first Chairman of the Northern Land Council, stated:

> ***Aboriginals have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aboriginals see themselves as part of nature. We see all things natural as part of us. All the things on Earth we see as part human. This is told through the ideas of dreaming. By dreaming we mean the belief that long ago, these creatures started human society. These creatures, these great creatures are just as much alive today as they were in the beginning. They are everlasting and will never die. They are always part of the land and nature as we are. Our connection to all things natural is spiritual.***[34]

In some parts of Australia Aboriginal people use the term 'Dreamtime' referring to a period of time located in the distant past; sometimes this term is also used to refer to the creative beings of that time: the Dreamtime beings. Other Aboriginal people use the term 'history' to refer to the creative period; creative beings are then often spoken of as having acted 'in the history'.[35] Still other people use the term 'story'. Jim Wafer, a gifted student of Arrernte (Arunta) cultures of Central Australia, discusses the term *altyerre* (alchera, altjira) about which there has been a great deal of debate among non-Arrernte people.[36] Wafer's research indicates that one of the primary meanings of the term is 'story'. In Arrernte cosmology, a central term is *altyerre ileme* ('to tell a 'story''), and this term also means 'dream'.

> In the Arrernte view, the primary evidence of the events which happened in Story is that they created phenomena which have a tangible presence in the world of everyday reality. Such phenomena include petroglyphs, cave paintings, rocks, mountains, rivers, and other artefacts and natural features, which are referred to by the term *altyerr-iperre* ... [This] term means something like 'things that come into being as a result of events that happened in Story.'[37]

Whether the world comes into being by Dreaming, by history, by Story, or in Dreamtime, Aboriginal people's explanations about this on-going creation of the world are similar throughout the continent. Mussolini Harvey, a Yanyuwa man from the Gulf of Carpentaria explains:

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34 Quoted in B. Neidjie, S. Davis & A. Fox, *Kakadu Man,* Mybrood P/L inc, NSW, p. 13.

35 See for example, D. Tunbridge 1988 *Flinders Ranges Dreaming,* Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, p. xxviii.

36 J. Wafer & A. Green, 1989 *The Simpson Desert Land Claim; Area 1: The North-West Simpson Desert, Anthropologists' Report,* Central Land Council, Alice Springs, p.46. Wafer notes that Spencer & Gillen and the Strehlows have offered explanations of this multi-faceted term. More recently, Patrick Wolfe takes a critical look at the terminology (P. Wolfe 1991 'The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 33: 197-224).

37 Wafer & Green, op. cit., pp. 46-7.

White people ask us all the time, what is Dreaming? This is a hard question because Dreaming is a really big thing for Aboriginal people. In our language, Yanyuwa, we call the Dreaming Yijan. *The Dreamings made our Law or* narnu-Yuwa. *This Law is the way we live, our rules. This Law is our ceremonies, our songs, our stories; all of these things came from the Dreaming. One thing that I can tell you though is that our Law is not like European Law which is always changing ~ new government, new laws; but our Law cannot change, we did not make it. The Law was made by the Dreamings many, many years ago and given to our ancestors and they gave it to us.*

The Dreamings are our ancestors, no matter if they are fish, birds, men, women, animals, wind or rain. It was these Dreamings that made our Law. All things in our country have Law, they have ceremony and song, and they have people who are related to them ...

The Dreamings named all of the country and the sea as they travelled, they named everything that they saw. As the Dreamings travelled they put spirit children over the country, we call these spirit children ardirri. *It is because of these spirit children that we are born, the spirit children are on the country, and we are born from the country.*

In our ceremonies we wear marks on our bodies, they come from the Dreaming too, we carry the design that the Dreamings gave to us. When we wear that Dreaming mark we are carrying the country, we are keeping the Dreaming held up, we are keeping the country and the Dreaming alive. That is the most important thing, we have to keep up the country, the Dreamings, our Law, our people, it can't change. Our Law has been handed on from generation to generation and it is our job to keep it going, to keep it safe.[38]

Nganyintja Ilyatjari, a Pitjantjatjara woman from the country around Mt Davies, described the origins and significance of her country:

Our country, the country out there near Mt Davies, is full of sacred places. The kangaroo Dreaming has been there since the beginning, the wild fig Dreaming has been there since the beginning, many other women's Dreamings are also there. In other places men and women's Dreamings were together from a long time ago ...

38 Mussolini Harvey, quoted in John Bradley, 1988, *Yanyuwa country; the Yanyuwa people of Borroloola tell the history of their land,* Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, pp. xi-xi.

These places have been part of the sacred Dreamtime since the beginning of time, they were made then by our Dreamtime ancestors ~ like the kangaroo. Our country is sacred, this country is sacred.[39]

Animals, trees, rains, sun, moon ~ all are conscious. They watch us humans, and think about us. No one person, animal, tree or hill knows everything, and the purposes of much that exists may remain obscure to others. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that obscurity, from a human point of view, is not the same as purposelessness. There is a profound sense that this world was not created specifically for human beings. Wisdom for humans lies in being aware of life systems and in behaving responsibly so as to sustain the created world. Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia see and understand that other living things ~ birds, kangaroos, flying foxes, Rainbow Snakes and all the rest of them ~ also know that wisdom lies in being aware of life systems and in behaving responsibly.

Totems

I have occasionally experienced scepticism toward the term 'totem', perhaps because of its textbook quality. Like other anthropologists I have queried the appropriateness in Australia of a term deriving from the Ojibwa language of North America. However, my conversations with Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia have led me to accept the appropriateness of the term. The best definition is that developed by the late Professor Stanner:

> What is meant by Totemism in Aboriginal Australia is always a mystical connection, expressed by symbolic devices and maintained by rules, between living persons, whether as individuals or as groups or as stocks, and other existents ~ their 'totems' ~ within an ontology of life that in Aboriginal understanding depends for order and continuity on maintaining the identities and associations which exemplify the connection.[40]

While Stanner and others have generally thought of totems in terms of the relationships between the person or group of people and the species, it is the case that many totemic relationships also involve country. With land-based totems there is a three-way relationship between the people, the species, and the country. The totemic relationship invariably requires that people take responsibilities for their relationship with another species, and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species. Where the totemic relationship also involves land, people are further implicated in a set of responsibilities toward that land, and their well-being is linked to the well-being of that land.

39 'Women and Land Rights', 1983, in *We Are Bosses Ourselves*, F. Gale (ed), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p. 57.

40 WEH. Stanner 1979 op. cit., pp. 127-8.

In the course of my work with the Mak Mak (White-breasted Sea Eagle) Clan of the flood plains south-west of Darwin, I asked a few people to tell me what the Sea Eagle (their totem) meant to them. Their answers included:

~ ***My strength. The strength of that land.***

~ ***You can feel it in yourself, you belong there. It's your country, your dust, your place.***

~ ***You remember the old people.***

~ ***They [the birds] always greet me. It's home.***

~ ***Safety and security.***

~ ***You see the birds, you see the country, and your senses come back to you. You know what to do and where to go.***

Countries were created to be nourishing places for all the living things who belong there, and humans have the responsibility, by Dreaming, to care for the country. The late David Burrumarra, a senior Yolngu man, discussed the Dreaming figure Lany'tjun who gave law and life to the Warramirri clan:

[Lany'tjun] ***said everything in Warramirri areas comes under Warramirri people. Don't trouble the land', he said. 'Don't spoil the land. Be careful in the use of the land'.***[41]

They Were All People Too

Individual Dreamings walked in the shape of humans and in the shape of their particular species or being. Ancestral to the people and the animals of today, it is from them that it is possible, and indeed imperative, to trace a kinship among the living things of the world.

Charlotte Williams of Woodenbong in the New England ranges told the story of the Vine:

There was a vine whose spirit was a man.
These forest vines, they were not made by men,
they were the spirit-people's vines. And someone
cut this vine and there this man is struggling
to be alive. This is my own grandfather's song.

41 David Burrumarra in I. MacIntosh, 1994 The Whale and the Cross; *Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.,* Northern Territory Historical Society, Darwin, p. 75.

'I am here,' the song says. 'I am this vine.
My life is going away from me, from this ground,
this place, this dust. My ears are ringing.
Gaungun the spirit-woman is making my ears no good.
My ears are ringing. I'll see this world no more'.

And one man came along and saw this vine
struggling to be alive. He covered it with dust.
When I think of my old people, how they would
sit down and sing their songs to me,
I could cry ... [42]

Dick Donelly's story of the Platypus in the Clarence River region of New South Wales tells of the creation of specific features of the land, and the close kinship between humans and animals:

The Platypus

Djanbun's the platypus. He was a man one time.
He came out of Washpool Creek, the old people said.
Djanbun's travelling, a firestick in his hand,
across the big mountains to the Clarence River.
He's blowing on the firestick to make it flame.
But it won't flame, and wherever the sparks
fall down from the firestick they turn to gold.

The platypus man's mouth starts to get wide
from blowing on the firestick. We used to blow
on the firestick when we were young. My mother used to say to us,
'Don't blow on the firestick
like that, or you'll be like Djanbun the platypus'.

When Djanbun gets down to the Clarence River,
he's got a big mouth from blowing on the firestick.
He starts to wonder, 'What am I going to do now?'.
He'd got tired of trying to make the firestick flame.
So he throws the firestick down, and he thinks,
'I'll jump into the water'. As soon as he jumps
in the water, he turns into a platypus. That's him,
that's Djanbun now. He was a man one time.

42 C. Williams, in R. Robinson, 1970, op. cit., p. 53.

Now Billy Charlie, he found this nugget of gold at the place where Djanbun jumped into the water. When I heard about this, I thought, 'Well now, that's the firestick he found'. Because he found that gold where the firestick was thrown down.

The old people told me this story. They showed me the way Djanbun went across the mountain range.[43]

Knowledge

It is one thing to know that nothing is nothing, but it is quite another thing to know what any given thing is. Aboriginal law is land-based, by which I mean that it is specifically associated with and applies to particular country. In her work with Adnyamathanha people in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia, Dorothy Tunbridge formed an understanding of the intimate links between Dreaming, land and Law:

> To Adnyamathanha elders the Dreaming signifies two things above all, the land and the law ... For the people, the stories are the land. In the language Yura Ngawarla, 'telling (someone) a story', *yarta wandatha,* means simply 'telling (someone) the land *(yarta)'* or 'linking (that someone) to the land'.[44]

Kuku-Yalanji people of the rainforest of North Queensland tell of the origins of ceremony:

Long ago, when all the land was flat, Kurriyala came from the west. His first stopping place was Narabullgan', Mount Mulligan, which he formed out of his droppings. On top of this granite mountain he made a huge lake, then a deep gorge as he crawled away. He moved on to another big mountain which he made in the form of a snake. He called it 'Naradunga', now often known as Mount Mulgrave. Then he moved further north until he came to Fairview where he made a huge mountain out of lime and a big lagoon. After this he went northwards to his own people to a place called Bushy Creek. He saw his people dancing but they were not painted properly or dressed correctly so he came out from hiding and showed his people how to paint their bodies and how to dance.[45]

43 D. Donelly in R. Robinson, 1970, op. cit., p. 43.

44 Tunbridge, op. cit., p. xxix.

45 J. & S. Erbacher, 1991, *Aborigines of the Rainforest,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Ownership and transmission of knowledge is a crucial key in understanding people and their country. The actual information which people possess, teach, exchange, and inherit constitutes intellectual property. And knowledge, in all Aboriginal systems of information, is specific to the place and to the people. To put it another way: one of the most important aspects of Aboriginal knowledge systems is that they do not universalise. Moreover, the fact that knowledge is localised and specific is one of the keys to its value.

Eric Michaels developed this understanding from his work with Warlpiri people in Yuendumu:

> Aboriginal society de-emphasises material wealth, and values information. Lacking writing, most information is personal property, stored mentally. Dances, designs, stories, and songs are all formats for storing information and for displaying it in ceremonial and educational settings. The subjects of these are usually narratives describing how ancestral figures create and recreate the land and its resources. This occurs in a special form of time/space which is translated as 'the dreaming'. The sum of these stories is called 'the law'.[46]

Law belongs to country and to people. It is embedded, of course, in society and culture, and it is intellectual property which is not freely available to all. Essentially, if knowledge is constituted as evidence of relationships among persons and between persons and country, then it is most assuredly not available to all and sundry. Such a system is subverted through any form of 'freedom of information'. If there is one thing that is absolutely not free, in Aboriginal land tenure systems and in Aboriginal politics, it is knowledge. This point is often misunderstood by settler Australians who, when told something, feel free to use that information as they wish. In truth, the fact that a person has been told something does not mean that they therefore have the right to tell others. Rights to knowledge are graded, and the best rule is the same as the rule for country (discussed below): always ask.

As the Ginytjirrang Mala (clan) indicates in an oblique way, in addition to group ownership of intellectual property, gender and age restrictions apply to some knowledge:

In the Yolngu world view, water is the giver of sacred knowledge, all ceremonies and lands. Whether it's fresh or salt, travelling on or under the land, or in the sea, water is the source of all that is holy. The word gapu, meaning water, is for anyone to use, including women and children. But there is another deeper meaning for the word which is only for the elders to know, that is why talk about water must be 'at

46 E. Michaels, 1986. *The Aboriginal Invention of Television in Central Australia 1982-1986*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p.3.

the feet of the old people'. There is 'surface' water and 'inside' water. The land carries it along an 'inside' path. And then it comes out as spring water in the sea. The salt water is on the surface and the fresh water is inside. And Yolngu stories are the same ~ there are stories which go outside and there are inside stories too.[47]

Knowledge is intimately detailed at the local level, and belongs to the people of the country. It is therefore incumbent upon strangers to respect the knowledge (secret and open) of the local group. People, too, are not nothing. Riley Young put it this way:

Because I know this Law. Aboriginal people follow this Law now.
You know, because we know this land.
We know so much ...
Don't reckon Aboriginals only muck. We know! [48]

47 Ginytjirrang Mala, op. cit., p. 5 (inverted commas reproduced in conformity with the original).

48 Personal communication, Riley Young, see also D. Rose 1990 'A Distant Constellation' *Continuum, An Australian Journal of the Media*, 3, 2, 160-173, p. 170.

4

Sacred Geography

Sacred place, all over our Aboriginal land was sacred, but we see now they have made a map and cut it up into six states.

Myra Watson [49]

THE AUSTRALIAN continent is criss-crossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth. Performing rituals, distributing the plants, making the landforms and water, establishing things in their own places, making the relationships between one place and another. Leaving parts or essences of themselves, looking back in sorrow; and still travelling, changing languages, changing songs, changing skin.[50] They were changing shape from animal to human and back to animal and human again, becoming ancestral to particular animals and particular humans. Through their creative actions they demarcated a whole world of difference and a whole world of relationships which cross-cut difference.

Kakawuli ***[bush yam] come up from Dreaming. No matter what come up, they come out of Dreaming. All tucker come out from Dreaming. Fish, turtle, all from Dreaming. Crocodile, anything, all come from Dreaming. Kangaroo,*** **makaliwan** ***[wallaby], all birds, all from Dreaming.***

Big Mick Kankinang [51]

49 in F. Gale, ed, 1983, op cit, p. 55.

50 Minimally this term 'skin' refers to social categories the English technical terms for which are section, sub-section, semi-moiety and the like (depending on the precise organisation of the skins).

51 Personal communication.

One of the great creator beings of the south-east, Nguril (Ngurunderi) is commemorated in a song sung by a man named Pound who came from the Lachlan River area of New South Wales:

Look here! Nguril did this!
That is what Nguril did.
Look here! Nguril did this!
Plain after plain, with flowing creeks,
To the River's water.[52]

Where they travelled, where they stopped, where they lived the events of their lives, all these places are sources and sites of Law. These tracks and sites, and the Dreamings associated with them, make up the sacred geography of Australia; they are visible in paintings and engravings; they are sung in the songs, depicted in body painting and sacred objects; they form the basis of a major dimension of the land tenure system for most Aboriginal people. To know the country is to know the story of how it came into being, and that story also carries the knowledge of how the human owners of that country came into being. Except in cases of succession, the relationship between the people and their country is understood to have existed from time immemorial ~ to be part of the land itself.

The relationship between other species and country is that they too belong there because they have their origins in Dreaming. Other species act as they do, communicate as they do, live where they do, and interact as they do because Dreaming made them that way.

Gendered Places

Dreamings travelled; they were sometimes in human form, and sometimes in animal or other form. But whatever the form, they were almost inevitably either male or female. Dreaming men and women sometimes walked separately and thus created gendered places. There are now women's places and men's places: places which are associated with one or the other because Dreaming made it that way. There are varying degrees of exclusion: places where men can go but must be quiet, places where they can look but not stare, where they can walk but not camp, and then there are places where men cannot go at all, ever. There are places where men cannot drink the water, cannot even look at the smoke that rises from women's country. And of course the same is also true with respect to men's places, men's country.

Mary Nangala Young and Agnes Napaljarri of Yaruman community (Ringer's Soak) in the Kimberley region of Western Australia tell the story of a woman's

52 R. & C. Berndt, 1993, *A World that Was; The Yaraldi of the Murray River and the Lakes,* South Australia, Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press, pp. 221; 594.

place in their country. The story is about the Dreaming women who travelled through this region, going east:

> ***This is the story about damper and how all the soak water came to Yaruman. Two Nungurrayi sisters, they were collecting seeds from the barrabi tree at Kulurrjaru (Banana Spring). They used those grinding stones to grind the seeds and they made a damper. They made a hole in the fire and put the damper inside and suddenly they saw the damper swell up and it exploded. They were frightened and hugged each other and they ran and turned into two big trees. Banana Spring is a place for women only. The smoke from their fire went under the ground and made all the soaks around Ringer's Soak.***[53]

Along with gendered places, there are also ceremonial activities which belong exclusively to women, instituted for them by Dreaming. For many Aboriginal women, their independence of place and Law gives them a social autonomy which they value. Borroloola women offered these words about women's daily life and ceremonial law:

> ***We are Aboriginal women. We talk for our hunting business, ceremony business. We used to go hunting, we can't wait for the men. We are ladies, we go hunting and feed the men too ...***
>
> ***Men never used to boss over the women. We are bosses ourselves, women ourselves. Sometime man use to work for woman too when we come back from hunting, tired and everything and husband to work for us ...***
>
> ***We still have ceremonies these days for young boys, like that little boy there, and women dance with that old people only, but then everybody see us too ...***
>
> ***And we having other ceremony our own with the woman herself, that important, nobody see, only* djunkai *can stay there to watch, old man. He look, and he off again. When we have the big ceremony business and we can't see men.***[54]

Gulaga, or Mount Dromedary, one of the sacred mountains of the Yuin people, is a woman Dreaming, a female mountain, and yet a place with many places. On

53 P Taylor (ed), 1988, *After 200 years; Photographic Essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia Today,* Aboriginal Studies Press Canberra, p. 47.

54 'Borroloola women speak', 1983, in *We Are Bosses Ourselves,* op. cit., p. 71. The translator added a note saying that she had been involved in a women's ceremony, and it is so secret that it was difficult for the women to speak of it in a public context.

Gulaga there are places for everyone, and there are places only for women. There is knowledge that women and men hold and teach separately, as well as knowledge that they hold and teach together:

> For the Yuin people who have been born and raised at Wallaga Lake, Gulaga is part of their lives. They grew up in intimate association with it, and they have known since they were capable of knowing that the mountain is powerful, important, and theirs. Their feelings toward the mountain, acquired as part of their growing up, are both consciously articulated and accepted as an integral part of being who they are. As one man explained to me:

It's sacred to us. It has been for years and years. It's like a monument. It's important to us. It's just natural ... The old people always talked about it. It's ours.[55]

One of the women told me:

You've got to understand, Debbie. I'd give my life for this mountain.[56]

Centres of Life

The living world can be divided up into portions or countries, each of which is a unit or living system. Each country is independent; this means that it is its own boss. But no country is self-sufficient. Each one is surrounded by other countries, so that across the continent and on into the sea, there is a network of countries. No country is ruled by any other, and no country can live without others. It follows that no country is the centre toward which other countries must orient themselves, and, equally, that each is its own centre.

In contrast, settler Australians understand the continent by reference to the distances between the centres (usually cities), and the remoteness of areas far from cities. Much of the continent, in settler terms, is remote. But for the Aboriginal people who live in these remote areas (and undoubtedly for many of the settlers who also live there), where they are is the centre. As Eric Michaels pointed out, from the perspective of the Tanami region of the western Northern Territory, Canberra is a very remote place indeed.[57]

Discussions of country readily slide into abstractions, and it becomes easy to forget that we are talking about specific places, homes for specific life. Aboriginal people are situated within their own country emotionally, psychologically and

55 D. Rose 1990 Gulaga, *A Report on the Cultural Significance of Mt Dromedary to Aboriginal People*, Forestry Commission of NSW, p. 34. Further information about sacred mountains of the south coast of NSW is contained in B. Egloff 1979 *Mumbulla Mountain. An Anthropological and Archaeological Investigation*. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Sydney.

56 Personal communication, 1990.

57 E. Michaels, op. cit..

metaphysically. When the country is well, people are likely to be well too, and thus to experience a sense of satisfaction and order in their own place. Rhys Jones has explored Gidgingali people's ordering of country, and he is able to contrast their perception of order with the dismayed sense of disorder that Frank Gurrmanamana experienced on a visit to Canberra.[58] Jones described Gurrmanamana's perception:

> Here was a land empty of religious affiliation; there were no wells, no names of the totemic ancestors, no immutable links between land, people and the rest of the natural and supernatural worlds. Here was just a *tabula rasa,* cauterised of meaning. Discussing the history of this place and being shown archaeological sites and nineteenth-century pictures of old Aborigines of the region, Gurrmanamana said that once long ago, Aborigines had lived there and that they would have known these attributes of the land which still existed somewhere, but that now, in his own words 'this country bin lose 'im Dreaming'. He was disturbed by this.[59]

People paint the designs of their own country, sing the songs of their own country, tell the stories of their own country, take care of the places and life of their own country (to the extent that they are able to do so under current circumstances). According to their own law, they do not paint, sing or speak other people's country unless they have been specifically allocated the right to do so. Unless authorised, they do not burn other people's country, hunt in other people's country, or interfere with other people's Dreamings. Knowing what one is responsible for also means knowing what one is not responsible for, although, of course, Aboriginal people are subject to the same temptations toward irresponsibility as everyone else in the world.

Daly Pulkara told me once that his people are 'born for country'.[60] In many parts of Australia Aboriginal people believe that the spirit (or one spirit) that animates a foetal human is a spirit from the land: an ancestral Dreaming spirit, or a human spirit (baby spirit) resident in a particular locale. Known in English as 'conception Dreaming', these beliefs promote special relationships between an individual person, sites and tracks, and Dreamings. These beliefs also situate people as part of the outpouring of life of the country. That is, country gives forth life, and included in that life are the people of the country. In some areas the place where one is born is spiritually and materially significant. Women's rituals (some secret, some performed in small family groups) establish a spiritual relationship between

58 R. Jones 1985 1985 'Ordering the Landscape' in I. Donaldson & T. Donaldson, *Seeing the First Australians,* pp. 181-209, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

59 ibid, p. 207.

60 Personal communication; he was referring to his own branch of the Ngarinman language-identified people.

the person and their mother's country or their country of birth.[61]

These multi-faceted relationships are holistic. The purpose and meaning of life are located in the relationships between people, their home countries, their Dreamings, the plants and animals, geological formations and waters, and each other. Galurrwuy Yunupingu, Chairman of the Northern Land Council, explains:

The land is my backbone, I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. The land is the art. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me. My people recorded these things about our land this way, so that I and all others like me may do the same.

I think of land as the history of my nation. It tells us how we came into being and in what system we must live. My great ancestors who lived in the time of history planned everything that we practice now. The law of history says that we must not take land, fight over land, steal land, give land and so on. My land is mine only because I came in spirit from that land and so did my ancestors of the same land. We may have come in dreams to the living member of the family, to notify them that the spirit has come from that part of our land and that he will be conceiving in this particular mother.

The land is my foundation. I stand, live and perform as long as I have something firm and hard to stand on.[62]

How Many Arks?

Holistic systems are often thought to be closed and therefore incapable of incorporating new elements. In fact, quite the opposite is true for Aboriginal understandings of country. These holistic systems are capable of accommodating a great deal of in-put, as long as that which is new is socialised into the system.

An example of this abstract statement is found in the dual organisation of the Yolngu peoples of Arnhem Land. Everything in the Yolngu cosmos is part of one of two major divisions. Everything is either Dua or Yiritja, and everything Dua exists in relationship to everything Yiritja, and vice versa.

What happens when a system that encompasses everything encounters something that has never before been part of the system? The early anthropologist Lloyd Warner described the process:

61 See D. Rose 1992, op. cit., pp. 61-2 for a discussion of an 'open' ritual of infancy. Where birth, or 'borning', is said to confer a relationship of ownership, as among Western Desert peoples, a relationship between person and country is generated in women's secret rituals (discussed briefly in the *Transcript of Proceedings, Tempe Downs Land Claim,* 1995).

62 Quoted in A. Fox, 1983 (Winter), 'Kakadu Man and Landscape, *Heritage Australia,* p. 27.

> Everything in Murngin [Yolngu] civilization is divided on this dual basis. There is nothing in the whole universe ~ plant, animal, mineral, star, man, or culture ~ that has not a place in one of the two categories ... The allocation is made on the basis of an association ...
>
> To illustrate the principle: a red parrot is Dua because of his association with the Dua creator women; red parrot feathers, one of the chief articles of decoration, are Dua because of this; baskets covered with red parrot feathers are Dua. The spear thrower is Dua, the sting-ray spear belongs to the same moiety, but the wooden spear is Yiritja. The shark belongs to the Dua moiety; the barramundi is Yiritja, as is black duck ...
>
> The white man is Yiritja, therefore all of his culture is Yiritja ... The white man is Yiritja because the Malay trader before him was Yiritja.[63]

Virtually everything can be accommodated, from tin cans to Toyotas, but everything must be accommodated according to the logic of country. This logic is that each country is its own centre, holds its own law, and is subservient to no other country.

An example to illustrate accommodation according to the logic of country, is that of Noah's Ark. In Jewish and Christian sacred history, God decided to drown the wicked world in a great flood, but he told Noah to build an ark, and to put into the ark a pair of each of the different kinds of animals in the world. God then made the rains to fall for forty days and forty nights, and because Noah and his family and the pairs of animals were safe in the ark, the earth was repopulated after the flood. God then founded a covenant with Noah and all the other living creatures; the sign of the covenant is the rainbow.[64]

In this story we see a set of unities: One God, One flood, One Ark, One mob of people, One set of animals, One covenant. In many parts of Aboriginal Australia this story has been heard and accepted. What Aboriginal people have done by way of accommodation is to localise the story. Arks are usually understood to be secret, and although I have seen several arks and heard of more, I have never been authorised to say much about them.[65] It is certain, however, that there are numerous Arks in Australia. And none of these is Noah's Ark; rather these are all the other Arks ~ the Arks for all the other people and countries and animals.

In the logic of country it is not possible that all the people of the world could

63 L. Warner 1969 [1937] *A Black Civlization; A Social Study of an Australian Tribe,* Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass, pp. 30-1.

64 Genesis, chapters 6-10.

65 H. Petri & G. Petri-Odermann 1988 'A Nativistic and Millenarian Movement in North West Australia,' in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions; Ethnographic and Historical Studies,* T Swain & D Rose, eds, pp. 391-398, Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, SA. This article discusses an Ark of the western desert.

have been dependent on One God, One Noah, One Ark, One covenant. Clearly, every country must have had its own Ark. It does not surprise Aboriginal people that Europeans talk about Noah's Ark, because that one is theirs. But equally, it does not appear to be reasonable that Noah had a monopoly on God or a monopoly on Arks. Those things which are truly important happen everywhere.

In some parts of Australia other figures have been accommodated according to the logic of country: God, Jesus, Captain Cook, Ned Kelly, Leichhardt, and others find a place within country.[66] These stories take us beyond country and into philosophical and political issues of colonisation. The important thing to bear in mind in the context of nourishing terrains is that holistic systems are open to accommodation of that which is new, and that Aboriginal systems of philosophy and ecology accommodate the new according to the logic of country.

Between Countries

Yolngu living between Djimardi (Blyth River) and Wurrunguyana (the mouth of Walker River) communicate with each other effectively in their own various languages. We all paint ourselves in the same way and following the same dreaming paths in our ceremony. We all dance the shark and the crocodile. These are the totems and their dreamings which we share ~ our common history. The crocodile dreaming path and ceremony unites us as the crocodiles journey comes from the East right around to the West. The crocodile is an important dreaming which extends throughout, and holds together the region: the shark does likewise. There is also star dreaming and the Djan'kawu sisters. Many dreamings unite the area from inland and out into the sea.

There are other groups whose dreaming comes from inland and stops in our country, and we then carry them out into the deep water. This is how meaning is carried, through the journeys of our totems and we are united through Manbuynga and Rulyapa; together we flow out into the sea. In fact this water goes far northwards beyond the boundary between Australia and Indonesia.[67]

The tracks and relationships which connect people also give people rights to travel; mobility extends far beyond a particular country. John Bradley records a

66 See D. Rose 1995, 'Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins', *Oceania*, 65, 2, 175-86, for an analysis of Ned Kelly and other 'white' figures in Aboriginal narratives and for further references to what has become a good-sized body of literature; see also K. Koepping 'Nativistic Movements in Aboriginal Australia, Creative Adjustment, Protest or Regeneration of Tradition', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions; Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, T Swain & D Rose, eds, pp. 397-411, Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, SA.

67 Ginytjirrang Mala, op. cit., p. 4.

song composed about 60 years ago by a Yanyuwa (Island) woman whose boyfriend travelled to the mainland to attend a ceremony. Later in the day she saw smoke billowing from grasslands away to the south. The fire had been lit by people gathering for ceremony, and she composed this song, which was sung in the 1990s by Harriet Johnson Mambalwarrka:

Oh, I wish that I were a bird,
And I would fly,
And maybe see you,
at the fire,
burning there in the south.[68]

Those who travel experience excitement along with the homesickness and fear of being in an unknown place. Many years ago a man named Andrew, who was from the Coorong, went up the Murray where the salt water mingles with the fresh. He put his thoughts into a song-poem:

I have that strange feeling, a strange feeling,
Of a floating, shifting stream of salt water.
I have that strange feeling, a strange feeling,
I have that strange feeling, of a stream dragging along [trees].

Look!
I'm frightened,
I haven't been here before! [69]

Annie Koolmateri of the Lower Murray spent years and years living in her husband's homeland ~ the Coorong. She composed a song about her love for that place:

Let me sing about the Coorong,
Where the mighty seas roar,
Sounds like music in the springtime,
Singing songs of long ago.[70]

The ties which link countries one to another follow Dreaming tracks, trade routes, and marriage networks. The whole of the Australian mainland was part of one vast system of trade and knowledge, and information networks are apparently

68 Quoted in J. Bradley 1995 'Fire: emotion and politics; A Yanyuwa case study' *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 25-31. Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin, p. 26.

69 R. & C. Berndt, 1993, op. cit., pp. 595.

70 M. Breen, ed, 1989, *Our Place, Our Music,* Aboriginal Music: Australian Popular Music in Perspective, Volume 2, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, p. 25.

thousands of years old.[71] Dreaming travellers and localised Dreamings interact, and on a regional basis can be linked with each other into ritual communities comprising as well the people who perform the sacred celebrations of life. Regions are connected, as countries are connected, and information travels along these 'highroads of cultural influence'.[72]

In the 1990s information is still valuable, and a great deal of the coherence of Aboriginal life on the continent is now managed through the increased mobility available with motor vehicles and airplanes, and through the media ~ local and national radio, and local and national television.[73]

Sacred Sites

Dreaming places are sites where life and Law continue to be brought into being. Victoria River (Northern Territory) people emphasise the contingent quality of continuity in the world. It seems to me that for them the world is constantly being created anew. Procreation ~ the process of bringing life into being ~ is what makes the world go round.

There is nothing 'natural' about the continuity of life on earth, nor is continuity a process which can be taken for granted. Humans and others are conscious moral beings participating in the lawful processes through which the continuity of life is assured. Law is made manifest in country, and country is sustained as a lawful place, through the conscious participation of living things.

Where Dreamings performed actions, or where they came to rest, these places are known as sacred sites in contemporary terminology. In the earlier anthropological literature many of these sites are known as totemic centres or increase sites. The restrictions which surround sacred sites vary from site to site, region to region, and from context to context. It is always unwise to generalise and to look for absolute rules. The people who belong to the site, and who are its owners and custodians in Aboriginal Law, know how the site should be managed, and they assert their right to be consulted.

Always Ask

Relationships between countries are sustained by a system of reciprocity and respect which Fred Myers, an anthropologist who has worked extensively with the

71 For a continental overview see D. Mulvaney 1976, ''The Chain of Connection': the material evidence', in N. Peterson (ed), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia,* pp. 72-94, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra; see I. McBryde 1987 'Goods from another country: exchange networks and the people of the Lake Eyre Basin' in *Australians to 1788,* D. Mulvaney and J. White, eds, pp. 253-73, Broadway, for a view of regional networks; for a view of the extent of Pleistocene information networks, see D. Lewis, 1988, *The Rock Paintings of Arnhem Land, Australia. Social, Ecological and Material Culture Change in the Post-Glacial Period.* BAR International Series 415, Oxford.

72 W Stanner 1933 'Ceremonial Economics of the Mulluk Mulluk and Madngella Tribes of the Daly River, North Australia. A Preliminary Paper,' *Oceania,* IV, 1, 156-175, p. 172.

73 See for example, E. Michaels, op. cit., and E. Kolig 1981 *The Silent Revolution.* ISHI Publications, Philadelphia.

Pintupi people of the western desert, defines as 'always ask'.[74] Knowledge is local, and strangers know little or nothing; it is in their interest to ask. Beyond the obvious self-interest of finding water and food, and keeping clear of dangerous places, there are further considerations. Ownership of country and knowledge is manifested through rights to be asked. While Aboriginal people rarely say 'no', provided that the request is in keeping with what is appropriate for a given place or use, they insist upon their right to be asked, and hence upon their right to say either 'yes' or 'no'. There is, in fact, a highly developed protocol for encountering places and people where or among whom one is counted a stranger or a newcomer.[75]

The situatedness of country depends upon boundaries, by which I mean an organised geography of difference. Aboriginal boundaries, however, while they promote and rely on difference, mark difference primarily in order to overcome it. Boundaries are permeable, flexible, rarely monolithic. Nancy Williams's work with the Yolngu people has led her to the insightful expression: 'a boundary is to cross'. She explains:

> For Yolngu ... boundaries on land mark discontinuities: changes in ownership. But for Yolngu, boundaries do not exist primarily for the purpose of excluding non-owners. Rather, Yolngu use boundaries to express various categories of rights, both to users and owners.[76]

Most settlers failed to acknowledge Aboriginal ownership of land right from the start. Jimmy Manngaiyarri, a very old Malngin man whose home country is around Limbunya station in the Northern Territory, put it this way:

Why he never say: 'Oh, come on mate, you and me live together. You and me living together, mates together ... Mate together. Live together. One* mangari *[food; literally non-meat foods]. One table. Cartem up wood together. No more fighting one another ... You and me can work for the country all the same then'. I might want to go this way down to Sydney, longa your country where you been born, well twofellow be fifty [sharing equally] on country. You can go this way down to England, you can go over there, and back from there, well you'll be fifty.

But you never do that. You decided to clean the people out [eradicate them] from their own country.* Ngumpin *[Aborigines] never been go

74 F. Myers 1982 'Always Ask: Resource Use and Land Ownership Among Pintupi Aborigines of the Australian Western Desert.' in *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers,* N. Williams and E. Hunn, eds, pp. 173-195. AAAS, Washington, DC.

75 S. Hallam 1983 'A view from the other side of the frontier: or, 'I met a man who wasn't there ...'', *Aboriginal History,* 7, 2, 134-56.

76 N. Williams 1982 'A Boundary Is to Cross: Observations on Yolngu Boundaries and Permission', in *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers,* N. Williams and E. Hunn, eds, pp. 131-54. AAAS, Washington, DC, p. 148

and kill you there longa England. He never made a big war longa you there, finish you there. NO! You did the wrong thing, finishing up* ngumpin. *Like that now, no good that game. Well, you made it very hard.[77]

Laws about trespass exist because there is a need for them. If there were no trespassers there would be no laws against it. Aboriginal people who fail to ask are evaluated in the same way: they have done something wrong. April Bright spoke about some trespassers whom she believed to be Aboriginal:

On one occasion we discovered that people had driven out to [our] area and lit fires, burning the cane grass. We began to hunt for turtles and located a large number. But for each one that we located and went to dig up, all we pulled out was rotting pieces of turtle. The hibernating turtles were cooked and had rotted. The burning of the cane grass caused the water temperature to become too hot. The fire was lit by Aboriginal people who did not know the country. They did not have any consultation with our people for the country. We call this 'indiscriminate burning', regardless of what persons they are.[78]

Those who 'just came up blind, bumping into everything' have the potential to damage the country, and damage to country hurts people. It hurts them emotionally and spiritually, and may also hurt them physically. In 1963 the Queensland government allowed the American company King Ranch Incorporated to clear scrub and raze rocks that bore rock art. It was a site from which the local Djirbal people's spirits emerged, and to which they returned when they died. Paddy Biran sang about it:

Ngaa ... now then
mist which lies across the country
a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-nginbi
dynamite which exploded
the place becoming cleared
mist which lies across the country
a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-nginbi
dynamite which exploded

77 Personal communication; see also D. Rose 1992 op. cit., p. 194.

78 A. Bright, 'Burn Grass' in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 59-62. Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin, p. 62.

Ahh ...
my father's father's country
I had to sing about it
mist which lies across the country
the place becoming cleared
a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-nginbi
dynamite which exploded
Ahh ... mist which lies over the country

mist which lies over the country
dynamite which exploded
the place becoming cleared
I had to sing about
my father's father's country
dynamite which exploded
a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-nginbi
mist which lies across the country
dynamite which exploded [79]

79 Recorded and documented by R. Dixon, 1993, in 'Australian Aboriginal Languages, G. Schultz (ed), *The Languages of Australia,* Occasional Paper no. 14, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Highland Press, Canberra.

5

Dreaming Ecology

It is part of our responsibility [to be] looking after our country. If you don't look after country, country won't look after you.

April Bright [80]

THE RELATIONSHIPS between people and their country are intense, intimate, full of responsibilities, and, when all is well, friendly. It is a kinship relationship, and like relations among kin, there are obligations of nurturance. People and country take care of each other. I occasionally succumb to the temptation to sort these relationships into categories ~ there are ecological relationships of care, social relationships of care, and spiritual relationships of care. But Aboriginal people are talking about a holistic system, and the people with whom I have discussed these matters say that if you are doing the right thing ecologically, the results will be social and spiritual as well as ecological. If you are doing the right spiritual things, there will be social and ecological results.[81] The unified field of Dreaming ecology is demonstrated very clearly in the intersection of sacred sites with ecological sanctuaries.

Sanctuary

In many areas the sacred site is protected. No hunting, fishing, gathering or burning can take place within prescribed boundaries. Often the site is a nesting or breeding place. Dreaming sites thus function as refuges ~ if there is a Dreaming site that is focussed on a nesting or breeding area, and there is a prohibition on hunting in that area, there is effectively a refuge in which the particular species, and all the other species who use the area, are safe from human predation.

80 A. Bright, op cit, p. 59.

81 B. Rose, op cit, p. 12, reports similar findings in his extensive interviews with Aboriginal people in Central Australia.

Ursula McConnell states that on Cape York many Dreaming sites are located in areas in which the particular species is prevalent. She also notes that Dreaming sites are located near fresh water, and the fresh water is understood to be the final resting place of deceased members of the clan.[82] Human members of the clan originate in these wells or springs, and when they die one of their spirits returns to the clan well. The welfare of the species with which the clan is identified, and the welfare of the human members of the clan, and the welfare of the site, are all interconnected.

In New South Wales, Dame Mary Gilmore, daughter of one of the early Wagga Wagga settlers, wrote about sanctuaries, contrasting Aboriginal promotion of species with the settlers lack of management:

> ... when I asked my father why we could not get fish as formerly he said, 'When the blacks went the fish went:' meaning that the habit of preserving the wild was destitute in the ordinary white settler. Yet at that time the white population on the rivers was only a fraction of what the black had been. ...
>
> Beside the fish, where there were deep valleys, running water and much timber, the natives invariably set aside some parts to remain as breeding-places or animal sanctuaries. Where there were plains by a river, a part was left undisturbed for birds that nested on the ground. They did the same thing with lagoons, rivers, and billabongs for water-birds and fish. There once was a great sanctuary for emus at Eunonyhareenyha, near Wagga Wagga. The name means 'The breeding-place of the emus' ~ the emu's sanctuary. The one-time fish-traps on the Darling, the Murrumbidgee, and the Lachlan all indicated sanctuary; the small fish would escape, or could multiply beyond the rocky maze that formed the trap or balk; the large remained within the fishing area. When on the lower side the fish were plentiful and the upper part required a rest, keystones were lifted, or put in if they have been lifted, and sanctuary was moved over the barrier.
>
> Pregan Pregan lagoon at North Wagga Wagga was a sanctuary for pelicans, swans and cranes; and the land between it and the Murrumbidgee was a curlew sanctuary. I have forgotten what that was called, though I remember that my father gave it the name he had from the blacks. At Ganmain and Deepwater there were alternately swan and duck sanctuaries. The law of sanctuary in regard to large or wide breeding-grounds, such as Ganmain and Deepwater, where once there were miles and miles of swamps (as also down near Deniliquin), was that each year a part of the area could be hunted or fished, but not the same part two seasons in succession.[83]

82 U. McConnell 1930 'The Wik-Munkan Tribe, Part II, Totemism,' *Oceania,* 1, 1, 181-205.

83 M. Gilmore, 1963 [1934] *Old Days: Old Ways,* Sirius Books, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, pp. 117-8.

In the video 'Sites We Want to Keep' [84] Ted Thomas states that Najanuga (Little Dromedary, a small mountain near Tilba Tilba on the south coast of New South Wales) is both a resource site for birds' eggs and a sanctuary for the birds. According to Ted Thomas, birds were protected in the area around Najanuga; only old people gathered eggs from there, and they always took a limited number. Najanuga is thus one of the original bird sanctuaries of the continent.[85]

One of the best documented examples of sanctuaries is along the Dreaming track of the red kangaroo in Central Australia. This track traverses some of the toughest desert country in the world, and sites coincide with the most favoured areas for kangaroos. As the sites are protected, so too are the kangaroos at these sites.[86] These are places to which living things retreat during periods of stress, and from which they expand outward again during periods of plenty. Peter Latz, a botanist who has carried out extensive work in Central Australia, notes that the most sacred/protected places are likely to be places where a number of Dreamings meet up or cross over. He describes them this way:

> ... there's a lot of dreaming trails which cross over, these are really important places. They are so sacred you can't kill animals or even pick plants. And of course you don't burn them. You might burn around them in order to look after them.[87]

Waters of Life

Australia is the most arid inhabited continent on earth, and it is not surprising that throughout the continent a great deal of people's knowledge and management is oriented toward waters. Water sources were carefully maintained. Quite literally, they made the difference between life and death.

Throughout the arid regions (it is estimated that 70% of the continent is desert[88]) there is or was finely detailed knowledge of springs, places where one can dig to find water (soaks), of trees which hold water, of roots which can be dug for water, and of the signs by which these water sources are known. There are the fresh water wells of the Simpson desert (Northern Territory, New South Wales, South Australia), the Murchison-Greenough area of coastal Western Australia, and the

84 'Sites We Want to Keep', video produced by the Australian Heritage Commission, 1988. Discussed further in D. Rose 1990 *Gulaga, A Report on the Cultural Significance of Mt Dromedary to Aboriginal People,* Forestry Commission of NSW.

85 Women also possess knowledge concerning Najanuga which deepens the understanding provided by Ted Thomas and which is strictly their own. Their knowledge enhances the understanding of sanctuary, linking it to other living things (D. Rose, ibid., p. 71.).

86 A. Newsome 1980 'The Eco-Mythology of the Red Kangaroo in Central Australia,' *Mankind,* 12, 4, 327-34.

87 P. Latz 1995 'Fire in the desert: Increasing biodiversity in the short term, decreasing it in the long term' *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 77-86. Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin, p. 70.

88 B. Kavanagh, 1984, *Survival Water in Australia's Arid Lands,* ANU, Canberra, p. 31.

region around Broome (Western Australia) where the desert comes right down to the sea.[89]

Aboriginal people's use of these waters differed greatly from European settlers' use. The indigenous people attempted to use the water to best advantage by working from the most arid places with the most ephemeral waters in toward the more well-watered areas with more permanent waters.[90]

Around the north, west and south quadrants of the Simpson desert, for example, Arrernte people's countries are organised along the major rivers which flow into the desert and disappear there. These rivers are dry most of the time, but with rain they start to flow, and at the same time, the desert begins to flower. Arrernte people followed their rivers out into the desert, singing songs of the country and of the Dreamings who travelled these same routes; they sang of flowers, colours, and butterflies, of love and desire, and of all the sudden joyful life. They followed the tracks of Dreamings who brought ceremony, and groups that might only see each other during the best rains (which might be years and years apart) met up at major Dreaming centres for regional ceremony, trade, marriages, initiations, dispute resolution, and to enjoy the temporary abundance of the flourishing desert.[91]

Rockholes, soaks, wells, rivers, claypans, springs and the like form part of the subsistence geography of country and invariably part of the sacred geography as well. Especially in the deserts, the tracks and sites of Dreaming significance link surface and subsurface water sources.[92] As we have seen, the most plentiful and most reliable water sources are also likely to be sites in which plants and animals are protected. In arid Australia, water is life for everybody, not just for people.

There is a totemic focus on wells in various parts of Australia, and there is an elaboration of clan wells in Arnhem Land and Cape York. Where salt and fresh waters meet or mingle, or where fresh water is found untainted by nearby salt, these are areas of heightened significance.

The Groote Eylandt clan song of the Frog is a lovely example of interconnections between animals and seasons, and of the geography of fresh water on land and in the sea:

89 Some of the wells I refer to here are ones I have been shown by Aboriginal people. For further references see, for example, R. Jones 1985 op cit [photo p. 200]; L. Hercus 1985 'Leaving the Simpson Desert', *Aboriginal History,* 9. 1, 22-41; T. Strehlow 1965 'Culture, Social Structure, and Environment in Aboriginal Central Australia', in *Aboriginal Man in Australia,* R. Berndt & C. Berndt, eds, pp. 121-45, Angus and Robertson, Sydney; L. Warner 1969 op cit.

90 R. Gould 1969 'Subsistence Behaviour among the Western Desert Aborigines of Australia', *Oceania,* 39, 4, 253-74.

91 I derive this information from Arrernte people's evidence in claims portions of the Simpson Desert which were presented under the *Aboriginal Land Rights* (NT) Act 1976.

92 R. Gould, op cit.

Frog

Frogs make the cloud streaming with water,
They made the cloud.
Water spirits kept searching for them, calling.
Frogs call from the sea to their pool,
Frogs call from the sea to their pool.
Babbling from the sea in their brackish spring,
They are half submerged there,
Bathing in the sea, washing themselves.
They sniff the air.
Where has the old tide gone?
Their washing place is there in the running tide
Now they've disappeared from sight in their pool.

They've disappeared in the brackish sea.
Clouds rear up darkening there.
Over there they call to their mates in the pool.
Frogs of the rain clouds and fresh water,
In their spring out at sea they've slipped from sight.[93]

Rituals of Well-being

Sacred sites are rarely random, and many of them (but not all) are places where rituals can be conducted which have the effect of replenishing the members of the species which has its source of origin at that site.

Increase rituals, as they are usually called in the literature, are rituals aimed toward the regeneration of a particular species, but the term may be misleading. Peter Latz says that people are not aiming to initiate uncontrolled increase. What they are aiming for is to maintain the levels of resources within their country.[94]

We might consider that these rituals are maintenance rituals. Because human beings live by obtaining and consuming resources, the obligation seems to be on humans also to regenerate these resources. I use the term 'rituals of well-being' in order to emphasise that these rituals are aimed to promote life but not to promote it promiscuously.

I should emphasise, too, that there are many straightforward ways of promot-

93 J. Stokes & Aboriginal Advisers, op cit, p. 26.

94 Latz 1982 Bushfires and Bushtucker: Aborigines and Plants in Central Australia, MA Thesis, University of New England, p. 108-9.

ing well-being. There are actions like carting seeds around and placing them where they will grow well, leaving a certain amount of food in any area for the other animals who depend on it, and leaving portions of tubers in the ground to provide the basis for growth for the coming year.[95]

Rituals of well-being involve a variety of procedures, the most complex of which are ritual performances including song, dance, and body paint, which are carried out over long periods of time. There are also modest ritual actions in which people use green branches to strike the tree, the stone, the antbed, or whatever it is that is associated with the species. The action of striking is intended to stimulate the consciousness and activity of the Dreaming, with the effect that that species will be stimulated to more growth.

In his studies of central Australia, Peter Latz concludes that increase ceremonies were carried out for each of the important food plants utilised by the desert Aborigines, although some species are grouped together. The same is true of animal species. He also finds that it is possible to carry out rituals in absentia ~ you do not have to be at the site in order to make things happen.

'The Seed Song from Pulawani'[96] tells of heat and drought, and the will to live, at a site called Pulawani in the Simpson Desert. The song was sung by Mick McLean; Pulawani is in his country. In his song he sings the growth of the plants, and then he sings the harvesting. He sings of the ceremonial gathering that is made possible by the abundance of food, and he sings the food itself. The song is sung to increase hard-shelled seeds like Acacia seeds; in the increase ceremony special round stones were placed at the butt of trees and the relevant verses were sung. Luise Hercus, a linguist with unparalleled experience in the Simpson Desert, worked closely with Mick McLean over many years; she states that this song particularly belonged to his sister Topsy who was born at Pulawani well. The life of the country, the lives of the people, the songs and ceremonies, the ecology and the care all come together in McLean's song:

Dry leaves everywhere,
Dry leaves fallen on the ground.

[This verse is sung in a whisper, it is a spell to turn what is dry green.]

95 These practices are attested to in much of the literature, and are part of my own learning experience with women of the Victoria River District, the Finnis River flood plains, the Kimberley, and Central Australia. See as examples: J. Goodale 1982 'Production and Reproduction of Key Resources Among the Tiwi of North Australia', in *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers,* N. Williams and E. Hunn, eds, pp. 197-210, AAAS, Washington, DC; B. Gott 1982 'Ecology of Root Use by the Aborigines of Southern Australia', *Archaeology in Oceania,* 17, 59-67; R. Hynes & A. Chase 1982 'Plants, Sites and Domiculture: Aboriginal influence upon plant communities in Cape York Peninsula,' *Archaeology in Oceania,* 17, 38-50; R. Kimber 1976 'Beginnings of farming? Some Man-Plant-Animal relationships in Central Australia', *Mankind,* 10, 3, 142-51; P. Stevenson, 1985, 'Traditional Aboriginal resource management in the wet-dry tropics; Tiwi case study,' *Proceedings of the Ecological Society of Australia,* 13, 309-15.

96 'The seed song from Pulawani', sung by Mick McLean in the Wangkangurru language; Recorded, translated and annotated by Luise Hercus, in R Dixon and M Duwell, (eds), op cit, pp. 118-23.

Dry stump, become light green!
Dry stump, become light green!

Dry stump grow green!
Dry stump grow green!

[The old dead stump begins to become green now:]

Dry stumps, dry stumps becoming soft green.
Dry stumps, dry stumps becoming soft green.

[New leaves are beginning to show and roots are growing:]

Roots are growing
Roots are growing
Roots are swelling with sap.

Roots are running out further
Roots are running out further
Roots are growing.

Roots are spreading further
Roots are spreading further
Roots are swelling with sap.

The roots are growing big, huge,
Tall trees are standing there.

Green, green colour all around
Green plants in vast numbers
Are standing up straight.

Ripening plants with green colour all around
Green colour all around.

They put it by the tree.
yes, they put it by the tree.
The stone
They put a stone at the side of the tree.

[They bury a stone at the butt of a tree.]

The stone is by the tree,
Yes, the stone is put by the tree,
The stone is at the side.

They take the seed, with a stone they pound it.
They pound it, they smash it.

[Now tomorrow we will eat them]

They grind the seed.
They grind the seed.
May that tree remain there, standing alone.
May that tree remain there, standing alone.

It stands there
A dark tree,
A dark tree alone.

Clover is growing there, clover.
They start cooking the dough.

They are painting themselves for a ceremony.
They are painting-up
For a ceremony.[97]

The handle,
The handle,
It is a stone-axe he looks at

It is a stone-axe he holds.
It is a stone axe, a stone
He looks at it, he picks it up,
It is a stone-axe, a stone.[98]

They are pounding,
They are smashing up the seeds
With a stone they are smashing them up
With a stone.

They are breaking off the shell from the seeds to make food
They are breaking it off to the side
They are breaking and tossing away the shell.

97 According to the annotations: 'Mick McLean said that this verse was 'right alongside my country', it referred to the Pulawani well itself, and to the ceremony which was held right there, p. 122.

98 According to the annotations: The large pounding slab, used for cracking hard seed, is being likened to a stone axe. p. 122.

To promote the well-being of animals and plants it is necessary that the appropriate rituals be performed by the correct people (that is, the people whose totem or Dreaming that species is or whose country it is by other forms of relationship). Sites repeat across the landscape, so that the well-being of any species does not depend merely on one site but is linked to people in many places, all of whom carry out their responsibilities.

Rituals of well-being benefit others both locally and regionally. Thus for example, when kangaroo men perform the rituals to ensure the well-being of kangaroos, all the people in the area benefit. The emu men perform their rituals, the honey-ant men perform theirs, and so on ~ and all the different groups benefit from the work of each group. In many parts of Australia it is forbidden (permanently or on a temporary basis) to kill one's own totemic species, and some people also do not eat their own species. Restrictions vary, but they have the effect of creating more interdependence.

The differences established in Dreaming are differences which generate mutual interdependence. No person or family can be self-sufficient; all depend on the others to sustain the rich and enduring life of the world.

Danger

Nothing is nothing, and there are Dreaming sites of which humans are wary. Remember that everything that exists owes its existence to Dreaming, and that everything is located. There are sites which are specific to mosquitos, for example, and people say not to go close, and not to disturb the site or there will be too many mosquitos. The same is true for poisonous snakes and other dangerous creatures. There are sites for bad colds, for boils, and for diarrhoea. One stays away from these places unless one is planning to make surreptitious warfare, because they are dangerous places.[99]

One can use the power of dangerous places to make people sick, or even to kill them, but like all forms of warfare, this is a risky business. On the other hand, the power of dangerous or undesirable beings can also be used to control those beings. Luise Hercus reports that the Goannas living at the Yatalknga well in the western Simpson Desert travelled to Walimpa waterhole for a ceremony. They performed their traditional dances night after night. The ceremony place was the home of the huge female Ancestral Meat-Ant 'a large black ant with a big flat head like a grindstone and a thin meat-ant body'. Every night the Meat-Ant seized a group of Goannas, taking them into her camp, cooking and eating them, until there were none left. The song can be turned against the meat ants themselves, and used to clear a place of their presence:

99 See D. Biernoff 1978, 'Safe and dangerous places', in L. Hiatt (ed), *Australian Aboriginal concepts*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

The Ant-Monster

To bring them to an end, as they come here dancing,
to bring them to an end,
To bring them to an end, as they come here dancing,
to bring them to an end.

To perish for ever, as they come here dancing,
to perish for ever,

To perish for ever, as they come here dancing,
to perish for ever.

To become as the ground, as they come here dancing,
to become as the ground,

To become as the ground, as they come here dancing,
to become as the ground.[100]

Dangerous places must not be damaged. The fact that they exist all over Australia has, for those who respect these matters, the social effect of ensuring that strangers whose intentions are honest will consult with owners rather than go stumbling around blind, bumping into things. It follows that those who do not consult can be held to have dishonest intentions.

Seasons of the Place

The climates of Australia vary greatly, and the only thing that is certain over much of Australia is the massive unpredictability. Knowledge of the changes in seasons is land-based and is owned. Finely detailed, such knowledge rests on the relationships between the living things within a particular area. People of the middle Victoria River, for example, know that when the march flies are biting, fresh water crocodiles are laying their eggs. They do not need to go to the places where crocodiles are laying their eggs in order to check up on their progress; march flies 'tell' them when this happening. Further south, however, people know that the crocodiles are laying their eggs because the *Jangarla* tree (*Sesbania formosa*) is flowering.

This kind of knowledge, local, accurate, and pertinent to people's concerns and interests, is found everywhere in Aboriginal Australia. It is transmitted from one generation to the next in the course of people's daily lives. Thus, for example, the Yuin people of Wallaga Lake (New South Wales) know from their earliest

100 Recorded, documented and translated by Louise Hercus; in M. Duwell and R, Dixon (eds), 1994, op. cit., Queensland University Press, St Lucia, p. 104-5.

moments that 'when the old woman puts on her possum skin rug, rain will come'. The teaching refers to the clouds that gather on Gulaga (Mt Dromedary) ~ the mountain that is a woman and that belongs to the local Yuin women. When the clouds close in on the top, rain is coming.

Such knowledge is also coded in and taught through songs. Some are beautiful little pieces which convey one piece of information but which evoke a whole season and a set of places, people and activities. In the Gulf of Carpentaria, for example, the approaching wet season is marked by the migratory Torres Strait Island pigeon. In Jack Baju's song, the bird is being heard but has not yet been sighted:

Torres Strait Island Pigeon

Where is she?
The Torres Strait Island Pigeon,
She was away,
now she has returned,
And is calling,
From island to island.[101]

Another of Jack Baju's songs tells of the 'morning glory' cloud formations which signal the arrival of flying foxes and birds who live on the flowering plants. In Yanyuwa ecological thought, the clouds bring the flying foxes and birds:

Morning Glories

You two!
Look to the north,
The Morning Glories,
Carry within them,
The migratory flying animals.[102]

Detailed knowledge of rains, floods, heat, and drought, involves understanding the transitions from season to season and the behaviour of a myriad living things as they announce or respond to the transitions.

The Tiwi of North Australia recognise numerous seasonal transitions, among which are the following which begin with the wet season and carry through to the following wet:

101 Translated and presented by John Bradley, J. Baju, ibid., p. 51.

102 ibid., p. 55.

1. clap sticks
2. flowers ~ telling the flowering times of special plants
3. tall grass
4. knock-em-downs [winds]
5. fire
6. cold
7. fog
8. dry creek bed
10. hot feet
11. thunder
12. breeding mangrove worm
13. muddy possum tracks [103]

In all regions Aboriginal people celebrate the world as they know and love it. One of the few surviving traditional song poems of Tasmania tells of the joy of spring. Fanny Cochrane Smith recorded and translated this song:

It's spring time,
The birds is whistling!
The spring is come,
The clouds are all sunny,
The fuschia is out at the top,
The birds are whistling,
Everything is dancing,
Because it's springtime,
Everything is dancing,
Because it's springtime.[104]

In addition to understanding the seasons, people seek also to exert some influence. Control over rain ~ to bring it on or to send it away ~ is an important part of people's knowledge all over the continent. In many regions people use crystals (often called rain stones) to manage rain, flood and drought. Perhaps not surprisingly, rain Dreamings are especially prominent in the desert, and rainmaking is a highly valued art throughout the arid regions.

Like the dangerous power of some Dreamings, the power to bring floods or withhold rain can be used in warfare. Accordingly, specific details of particular

103 P. Stevenson nd The Seasons and Seasonal Markers of the Tiwi people of North Australia, mss.

104 M. Longman 1960 'Songs of the Tasmanian Aborigines as Recorded by Mrs Fanny Cochrane Smith', *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania*, 94, 79-86.

practices are usually thought not to be proper for public dissemination, although the knowledge of the existence of such knowledge is no secret. Rex Marshall of the Thungututi/Gumbaingeri group in northern New South Wales wrote about his mother:

Budgellin Bey

Dark clouds are gathering a way up in the sky
the storm is coming very quickly
And Ma keeps a track of it with a watchful eye
Holding her axe in her hands, two feet firmly on the ground
At last she gets ready to make her stand
Against the wild wind and rain blowing around
According to her custom she must cut the storm clouds
While waving the axe and chanting out loud
A lore that was handed down to her tribe
This custom she has carried out with such pride
With a final shout of Budgellin bey
The wild storm is blown away.[105]

105 R. Marshall 1988, in *Inside Black Australia; an Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, K. Gilbert (ed), p. 85, Penguin Books, Ringwood.

6

Caring for Country

'Burn grass' takes place after the wet season when the grass starts drying off. This takes place every year. The country tells you when and where to burn. To carry out this task you must know your country. You wouldn't, you just would not attempt to burn someone else's country. One of the reasons for burning is saving country. If we don't burn our country every year, we are not looking after our country.

April Bright [106]

THROUGHOUT THE whole of Australia Aboriginal people have relied on two major land management resources. The first and foremost is their intimate, detailed long-term knowledge of their local terrains. The second is fire.

Firestick farming

Rhys Jones, a prehistorian with a gift for words, calls the management of ecosystems through fire 'fire-stick farming'.[107] It is an excellent term for conveying the idea that Aboriginal people consciously and deliberately use fire to promote the well-being of particular types of ecosystems. Within the past two decades there has been a rapid escalation in scientific analysis of Aboriginal fire management regimes, and it is now the case that there is a forceful literature oriented toward the subject. In this chapter I draw on some of the most recent science-based research as well as upon indigenous accounts of burning. In my view, the congruence of two knowledge systems in the field of fire offers models for how ecological knowledge more generally can be managed on this continent, and for how indigenous and settler Australians can share in the work of life.

The term firestick farming is important in the political sphere because the

106 A. Bright, op. cit., p. 59. 'Caring for Country' is the focus of several important studies, notably the journal *Habitat Australia,* 19, 13, 1991, and E. Young, et al 1991, *Caring for Country: Aborigines and Land Management,* Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Canberra.

107 R. Jones 1969 'Fire-stick Farming', *Australian Natural History,* 16, 7, 224-8.

founding concept of *terra nullius* ~unowned land~rested on the proposition that Aborigines were not investing their labour in the land. In Elkin's classic phrase, they were parasites on nature: 'the Aborigines are absolutely dependent on what nature produces without any practical assistance on their part'.[108] What Rhys Jones and others have demonstrated beyond doubt is that Aboriginal people were (in some areas still are) investing in the productivity of their land.

Amongst some people a popular view has developed that Aboriginal burning destroyed an earlier rainforest which was supposed to have been widespread across North Australia, leading to the creation of what appears to be an impoverished savanna. Recent studies by the biogeographer David Bowman and others have proved conclusively that there were no large tracts of rainforest across North Australia during the millennia of human habitation.[109] Although rainforests have gained an image of glamorous and desirable ecosystems, savannas are actually extremely species-rich ecosystems.[110] To the extent that Aboriginal burning is responsible for the maintenance of a diversity of ecosystems, it is also responsible for the maintenance of the biodiversity of Australia.[111]

Consider some of the various uses of fire:

- for cooking
- for boiling water
- for warmth
- for light
- in ceremony (mortuary and other rituals)
- knocking down trees for firewood
- cleaning up an area prior to camping
- healing ~ to create warmth and steam, using medicinal plants (also gender restricted rituals)
- to cure pituri (native tobacco)
- to make the ashes used with chewing tobacco
- in warfare
- as part of the process of leaching toxins out of certain foods to make them edible
- to drive away dangerous supernatural figures

108 A.Elkin 1954 [1938] *The Australian Aborigines; How to Understand Them,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, p. 15. H. Allen 1983 *19th C. Faunal Change in Western NSW and N-W Victoria,* Working Papers in Anthropology, Archaeology, Linguistics, Maori Studies, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, p. 54 cites Meggitt making a similar statement.

109 R. Braithewaite 1995 'A healthy savanna, endangered mammals and Aboriginal burning,' in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 91-102, Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin, p. 91; also D. Bowman, op. cit., p. 104.

110 R. Braithewaite, ibid., p. 95-6.

111 D. Bowman, op. cit., p. 106.

- to erase the traces of life so that dead people will not want to return
- for hardening spear points and digging stick points
- to anneal stone to make it better for working into tools
- to alter the chemical structure of haematite, transforming yellow ochre to red ochre
- communication ~ signalling peoples' presence in an area
- in hunting:
  - ~ to drive animals into nets, or to drive them through a narrow gap where they can be speared, or to drive them into a pocket or other such area where they can't get out;
  - ~ to drive burrowing animals underground, and burn off the ground cover so that the animals can be easily dug out;
  - ~ to attract animals to a place where they can be caught;
- as a system of land management.

All over Australia, when Aboriginal people speak English, they describe their burning practices as 'cleaning up the country'. There is a well defined aesthetic ~ country which has been burned is country which looks cared for and clean. It is good country because, unlike Daly Pulkara's 'wild, just the wild', you can see that people are taking care of it.

Many Australian plants require fire, either in order to flower, or for their seeds to germinate. Likewise, many animals also depend on or respond well to the effects of fire. To be sure, catastrophic firestorms do not promote the life of ecosystems. Aboriginal burning practices are based on patch-burning with low intensity fires over a number of years to create a mosaic of habitats.

Paul Stevenson provides the most succinct summation fire-stick farming, or as he prefers, 'extensive range management with fire as a major tool':

> The use of fire involves the manipulation of fire frequency, intensity and timing to generate a dynamic mosaic of ecosystems based on a spectrum of pyrophytic vegetation communities, each community (as opposed to species) requiring or being resistant to a limited range of fire frequencies, intensities and firing times.[112]

Many species of animals that are endangered are in that state because of habitat loss, and cessation of Aboriginal burning is one major cause.[113] The extinction

112 P. Stevenson 1985 op. cit., p. 313.

113 See T. Griffiths 1995 'We like our lizards frilled not grilled! The short-term effects of fire on frillneck lizards in the Top End', in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 87-90, Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin; P. Stanton 1995 'A tropical Queensland perspective', in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 71-6, Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin.

of a number of species can be linked to the cessation of Aboriginal people's burning.[114] As one person explained:

> ***Big fires come when that country is sick from nobody looking after with proper burning.***[115]

On a very pragmatic level, cleaning the country involves getting rid of long grass and grass seeds which impede travel. It means being able to see the animal tracks, and thus to hunt better. It means being able to see snakes and snake tracks so as to avoid them. Fire can be used to spread out the harvest of certain bush tucker over a long period of time. April Bright explained:

> ***Patterns of burning mean that certain areas are burnt at different times. This is important to the food chain. Smoke brings on flowering. For example, areas that are burnt early provide early hunting and foraging for both man and animal life. We follow the burns. For example, with the fruiting of, for instance, the apple trees and the plum trees. Those that have been burnt earlier, their fruiting comes on earlier, and as the fruit is on its way out in one place, the next patch of 'burn' will then produce plums and apples that can be picked.***[116]

There are several important points here:

1. Burning has to be done regularly if it is to have the desired effect. Regular burning decreases the amount of available fuel, and thus produces low intensity fires. They do not destroy every living thing, and they are far more susceptible to control.
2. Burning is done to promote the growth of food plants. Dick Kimber, who has worked extensively with Pintupi and Warlpiri people, gives examples, as does Latz, of a successional burn of spinifex, which is of limited use to humans. After it is burnt, people harvest the small mammals that burrow under the spinifex. They then leave the area until after the next rains, when there will be edible plants like *Solanum* growing in this former spinifex area.[117]
3. Burning promotes the growth of fresh young plants which are good grazing for herbivores like kangaroos. In providing desirable food for kangaroos, people improve their own access to kangaroos. Kathy Deveraux, April Bright's sister, explained to me that rather than chasing animals all over their country, they seek whenever possible to bring the animals to them.[118]

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114 This point is well documented; see for example, Latz, op. cit., p. 80, and CSIRO 1989 Policy Proposals for the Future of Australia's Rangelands, CSIRO National Rangelands Program, Canberra.

115 B. Rose, op. cit., p. 89.

116 A. Bright, op. cit., p. 62.

117 R. Kimber 1983 'Black Lightning: Aborigines and Fire in Central Australia and the Western Desert', *Archaeology in Oceania,* 18, 38-45; see also R. Gould 1971 'Uses and Effects of Fire among the Western Desert Aborigines of Australia', *Mankind,* 6, 14-24; see also Latz 1995, op. cit.

118 Personal communication.

Darrell Lewis's study of hawk hunting hides shows the same logic at work in conjunction with a particular technology. In the Victoria River District Aboriginal people used to build small stone enclosures with roofs of branches and grass. One or two men would sit in the hide while others set the surrounding bush on fire. Using a small bird as bait, the hunters in the hide enticed the circling hawks to dive for the bait, and then grabbed them and broke their necks.[119]

Burning benefits other animals, not only because new growth is up to five times richer in nutrients than old growth,[120] but also because they, too, forage in the newly burnt areas. To quote April Bright again:

> ***'Burn grass time' gives us good hunting. It brings animals such as wallabies, kangaroos and turkeys on the new fresh feed of green grasses and plants. But it does not only provide for us but also for animals, birds, reptiles and insects. After the 'burn' you will see hundreds of white cockatoos digging for grass roots. It's quite funny because they are no longer snow white but have blackened heads, and undercarriages black from the soot. The birds fly to the smoke to snatch up insects. Wallabies, kangaroos, bandicoots, birds, rats, mice, reptiles and insects all access these areas for food. If it wasn't burnt they would not be able to penetrate the dense and long speargrass and other grasses for these sources of food.***[121]

Controlled burning has among its aims that it will not wreak havoc on animal life. Joe Yunupingu explained:

> ***I care of the fire. The fire burnt only traditional way. Because we look after the animals, birds and land. The land is real important for us. Our lands. If we want to go make a fire, to burn, every year not to fire, every year. Take about two, three year for the right time got to be burnt. Got to look for animal. Kill animal, few, not much. We look after the animals, eat them not to waste it ... That's the law for the Yolngu people.***[122]

The knowledgeable use of fire depends on detailed knowledge of soils, land forms, surface and underground water, and types of vegetation, as well as time of year, time of day, and type of wind. April Bright, in her detailed discussion of fire,

119 D. Lewis, 1988, 'Hawk hunting hides in the Victoria River District', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 74-8. Lewis also discusses some of the comparative literature from other parts of the continent.

120 R. Braithwaite, op. cit., p. 96.

121 A. Bright, op. cit., p. 61.

122 J. Yunupingu 1995 'Fire in Arnhem Land' in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia*, D Rose (ed), pp 65-6, Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin, p. 65.

speaks of big winds and slow winds, hot burns and cool burns. She notes that different combinations are appropriate for different land forms and different times of year.

In addition, there are always areas which are not burnt. As discussed, in many parts of Australia the area around a sacred site is kept free of fire and serves the function of refuge for plant and animal species. Protection of particular areas requires, of course, careful burning in the vicinity. Other areas which are not burnt include many forested areas, particularly rainforests, and those areas in the north which are often described as jungle. These areas are vital resource areas for foods (such as yams) and medicines, and are essential habitats for a range of other animals.

A number of fire-sensitive species have been protected by Aboriginal burning. Dick Kimber discusses the fact that Aboriginal people in Central Australia deliberately refrained from burning the dense stands of mulga which is fire sensitive and could be destroyed by repeated burnings. Sadly, it is now being destroyed by a combination of lack of Aboriginal fire regimes and the presence of voracious rabbits.[123]

Mulga is a valuable resource in and of itself. Kimber appears to be referring to the widespread and immensely valuable *Acacia aneura*. The pods containing ripe seeds are collected, and the seeds are separated through threshing and rubbing. The seeds are yandied to separate them from the remaining bits of pod, and then parched in hot sand and ashes. They are winnowed and yandied again, and then moistened with water and ground into an edible and nutritious paste. In addition, there is a type of insect gall which is found on these trees at certain times which is edible. Mulga is a hard wood, and is used to make spear-throwers, barbs for spears, and spear heads, as well as spears, boomerangs, and digging sticks. And, on top of that, it makes excellent fire wood.[124]

Some mulgas are the homes for honey ants who dig themselves in under the roots, and some are home for grubs who burrow into the roots. Some mulgas are called honeydew because of the sweet juice which collects on them, and others have a type of sugarleaf ~ a sweet substance produced by sap sucking insects. Sugar and honey can be sucked directly from the plants, or they can be dissolved in water to make a sweet drink.[125]

In sum, far from being parasites who put no management into ecological systems, Aboriginal people were (in a few areas still are) active land managers. Their management strategies sustained a complex mosaic of ecosystems across the Australian continent within which the diversity of living things could flourish.

123 P. Latz 1995, op. cit., p. 81.

124 R. Kimber, op. cit.; P. Latz, op. cit., and Institute for Aboriginal Development, 1985, *Punyu; Yankunytjatjara Plant Use*, Angus & Robertson Publishers, Sydney.

125 Institute for Aboriginal Development, op. cit., p. 20.

Symbols and Sociality

The centrality of fire in Aboriginal life cannot be overestimated. Every European explorer from Tasmania to North Australia saw smoke and fire wherever they went. For Aboriginal people, these smokes and fires told them that everything was good ~ that people and country were doing the right thing.[126] In addition to land management, fire and smoke are central to virtually every aspect of daily life, and to every life passage. Birth, initiations, dispute resolutions, and funerals all require fire and smoke. Rights to use fire in particular contexts are allocated among kin and defended in the same way that rights to songs, designs, and other forms of knowledge are defended. According to John Bradley:

> It is important to note that burning country is not just fire, smoke and blackened vegetation. Firing country involves people who have ways of interpreting their place within the environment where they live, on the country they call home. Their relationship with fire at its most basic is as a tool, but fire is also related to events associated with the past and the future, events which to the outsider may not be considered that important, but to the indigenous community are very important. Fire, then, can be seen to be a part of an ecology of internal relations; no event occurs which stands alone. An event such as the lighting of country is a synthesis of relationships to other events. Fire is but one event which is related to many others.[127]

Wayne Thorpe uses fire in teaching Koori children about their cultural heritage. He intersperses story and teaching with a recurring song:

Listen to the fire and you will be hearing your dreams,
Listen to the fire and you will know what I mean.
Listen to the fire in the warmth of the glow,
And stories from long, long ago.[128]

Nobody's Perfect!

What Albert Did

What a careless way to burn off the thick spinifex!
The fire crept on, smoked like mad
And came right round in a circle.[129]

126 J. Bradley 1995, op. cit., p. 30.

127 ibid., 31.

128 W. Thorpe 1991 'These things give meaning to life,' in *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria; Stories in the Oral Tradition,* A. Jackomos & D. Fowell (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 50.

129 Poem in Ngarluma language by Robert Churnside, in C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas, op. cit., p. 2. von Brandenstein notes: 'As so often with the main figures in Aboriginal poetry, Albert is not mentioned at all in the song', p. 56.

Albert might have tried to kid himself that he was alone out there, but the country knows. People say that country is aware, it knows what's going on, it knows who's there, and it knows if they have a right to be there. Other animals also watch, laugh at our mistakes, and take notice of our better actions. So too do all the people who have passed away who are still there in their own country, taking care of it.

The ambivalent quality of fire ~ its power for destruction as well as regeneration ~ is ever present for many Aboriginal people. They also know that people of European origins understand fire quite differently. Aboriginal people have brought fire within the domain of human control, working with it rather than against it. Settlers, in contrast, have sought to control fire primarily by suppressing it, and then fighting it when it refuses to remain suppressed.

The Warumpi band's song 'Fire' tells of some of these ambivalences and different understandings:

Fire

Is fire good? Is fire bad?

Because it destroys the home and the country?
But sometimes this may be good
Grandfather, grandmother, mother and father
have always used and been dependent on fire
For them it is very important

White people are concerned about bushfires and
are quick to work together to put them out.[130]

Increasingly it is impossible for most Aboriginal people to manage country with fire in the fine detail of their ancestors. People speak nostalgically of the days when fires were always on the horizon, and when they signalled that one's kin and neighbours were taking care of their country.

Oh, all of the islands, they would once be burning, from north, south and east and west, they would be burning, the smoke would be rising upwards for days, oh it was good, you could see the smoke rising from here and also from Borroloola, you knew where all the families were, it was really good, in the times when the old people were alive.

Ida Ninganga [131]

130 Warumpi Band, 1985, on the album *Big Name, No Blankets*, (Sung in Luritja and Gumatj) Parole records (translation included in album notes).

131 Quoted in J. Bradley 1995, op. cit. p. 26.

Spirits and Dead Bodies

Variously known as spirits, dead bodies, the old people, or the ancestors, the people who belonged to country in life continue to belong to it in death. Many Aboriginal people in all parts of Australia speak to the old people when they go bush. Calling out, or singing out, is characteristically multi-faceted ~ people call to country, to Dreamings, to other living things, and to the old people. To call out is to indicate one's own right to be there: one knows to whom to call. It also indicates a respectful approach based on kinship; only strangers would come tiptoeing or sneaking around making no noise. It may also be an appeal to those who listen to make food available for the people who come foraging. It may be an opportunity to introduce new people to the country: strangers, youngsters who have not been there before, and spouses who have newly married into the group are all likely to be introduced.

In more formal contexts the spirits in the country are addressed in other ways. Song, for example, especially the sacred songs, constitute a language which the dead can hear. People say that when they sing the dead listen, and people expect that after they are dead they will still hear the living singing, and be able to join in communion with the living and with life itself.

Old people are part of the life of the country; their involvement keeps the country productive, and also assists living people (their descendants) in their own use of the country. In some areas and under some circumstances, people offer food (cooked or raw) to the country, or to the spirits in the country. John Bradley reports, for example, that Yanyuwa people acknowledge the actions and emotions of the old people in their burning of country:

> For the Yanyuwa the burning of country is an important way of demonstrating a continuity with the people who have died, their ancestors, or li-wankala, 'the old people'. The spirits of these people are said still to inhabit the landscape; they still hunt, sing, dance and are said even to still burn the country. Indeed it is spoken by the contemporary old people that before the coming of the white people, the spirits of the deceased kin would set fire to the country themselves for hunting, and up until quite recently, country that was burnt was left for several days so the spirits of the deceased could hunt first.[132]

Spirits guard the country and the people, and when they are angry they can become dangerous:

> The spirits of the deceased are considered 'cheeky', they are cantankerous, and can respond to the living in ways which are not always benign. Country

132 J Bradley, 1995, op. cit., pp 27-8.

> that has not been burnt for a long time is described as being 'shut up'. Visually this can be seen by the increase in the understorey vegetation, and on the islands by the increase of choking vine thickets. The Yanyuwa say it is the 'old people' who close up the country. They close up the country because they are angered by the living people who have been remiss in their responsibility towards the firing of the country.[133]

People of Fortune

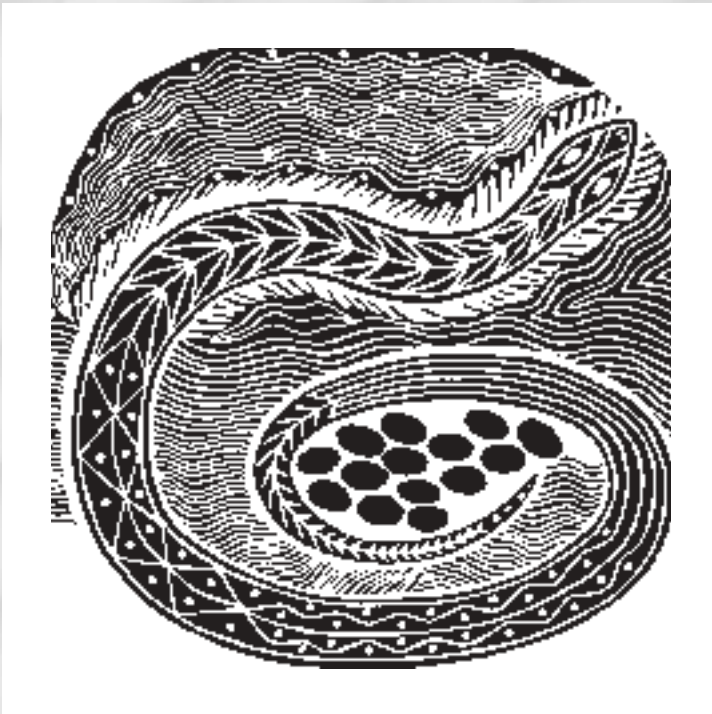
In the early years of settlement Mrs Elizabeth Macarthur wrote that she found her new country pleasing to the eye:

> The greater part of the country is like an English park, and the trees give it the appearance of a wilderness or shrubbery, commonly attached to the habitations of people of fortune ...'[134].

Aboriginal people had created these nourishing terrains through their knowledge of the country, their firestick farming, their organisation of sanctuaries, and their rituals of well-being. Their lands were their 'fortunes', and their fortunes were their own ~ in Law and in practice. Elizabeth Macarthur was not wrong. She was, indeed, seeing a place which was the home of people of fortune.

133 ibid..

134 Quoted in Seddon, 1976 'The evolution of perceptual attitudes' in *Man and Landscape in Australia; Towards an ecological vision,* Australian National Commission for Unesco, G. Seddon & M. Davis, eds, pp 9-18, AGPS, Canberra, p. 10



7

Damage and Waste

THE EXPLORER Major Mitchell described Aboriginal people's managerial use of fire:

> Fire, grass, kangaroos, and human inhabitants, seem all dependent on each other for existence in Australia, for any one of these being wanting, the others could no longer continue ... But for this simple process, the Australian woods had probably contained as thick a jungle as those of New Zealand or America, instead of the open forests in which the white men now find grass for their cattle ... [135]

Aboriginal people managed their countries to sustain productivity, and that productivity became the foundation of European settlement. The explorer Grey described the Murchison-Hutt-Greenough coastal area of Western Australia which he visited in the 1830s in which swamps producing an edible species of rush were regularly burned to improve productivity, and which were centres of high population density:

> these superior huts, well-marked roads, deeply sunk wells and extensive warran [yam] grounds all spoke of a large and comparatively speaking resident population.[136]

In general, settler ideology did not recognise Aboriginal land management, and did not recognise landscapes as the product of Aboriginal knowledge and labour. Settlers in their first years harvested the productivity which was the fruit of

135 Quoted in E. Rolls, 1981, *A Million Wild Acres,* Penguin Books, Ringwood, p. 249. This chapter is meant to provide a brief overview. There is a quantity of excellent and detailed studies which include B. Beale & P. Fray 1990 *The Vanishing Continent; Australia's degraded environment,* Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney; G. Bolton 1981 *Spoils and Spoilers; Australians make their environment 1788-1980,* George Allen & Unwin, Sydney; T. Flannery 1995 *The future eaters,* Reed Books, Australia; W. Lines 1991 *Taming the Great South Land; A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia,* Allan & Unwin, Sydney; A. Marshall (ed) 1966 The Great Extermination; *A guide to Anglo-Australian Cupidity, Wickedness & Waste,* Heinemann, London.

136 Gray 1841, quoted in S. Hallam 1975 *Fire and Hearth; a study of Aboriginal usage and European usurpation in south-western Australia,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p. 12.

Aboriginal people's labour. The appropriation was unknowing and unthinking, and it was short term.

Dame Mary Gilmore was exceptional in her understanding of the process:

> In Australia, in America (North and South), the invader lived, as never before or since, on the teeming life of the forests, the rivers, and the air of the country. It was nature's prolific breeding, he would have said had he been asked. Indeed, unreasoning creature that he was, he did say it. He never realised that less than fifty years later, with a population much more sparse than that of either the Indian or the aboriginal he displaced, fish were no longer caught in profusion, and meats had to be taken from the farm and the home-paddock.[137]

As the land lost its Aboriginal productivity, settlers with an eye to the future moved on in search of new fields and greater profits. They left behind battered ecosystems which would never regain their first fertility, but would gradually stabilise as drought forced the remaining settlers to withdraw their stock or fallow their fields.

Alarming changes are documented in every part of Australia. Bunbury, a traveller and settler, spoke of the what was happening in Tasmania. He was writing in 1836:

> ... in consequence of the transportation of the Natives to Flinders Island, and the consequent absence of extensive periodical fires, the bush has grown up thick to a most inconvenient degree, spoiled the sheep runs and open pastures and afforded harbourage to snakes and other reptiles which are becoming yearly more numerous.

Bunbury seems to have been a most unusual man, for he continued:

> It is true that we might ourselves burn the bush but we could never do it with the same judgement and good effect as the Natives, who keep the fire within due bounds, only burning those parts they wish when the scrub becomes too thick or when they have any other object to gain by it. Upon the burnt ground they can easily track the Opossums, Kangaroo Rats, Bandicoots, Iguanas, snakes etc. which can elude them in thick scrub ~ which moreover is very painful to walk through.[138]

Where people took up land for grazing, the results were rapid. Within ten years or so the hoofs of introduced cattle and sheep had vastly altered the soils and plants. Eric Rolls describes it this way: ' ... thousands of years of grass and soil

137 Gilmore, op. cit., p. 118.

138 Bunbury 1836, quoted in S. Hallam 1975, op. cit., pp. 47-8.

changed for ever in a few years. The spongy soil grew hard, run-off accelerated and different grasses dominated'.[139]

Agriculture was accompanied by clear felling. As early as 1803 Governor King issued a proclamation forbidding the felling of trees along the banks of rivers and watercourses. He was convinced that indiscriminate clearing allowed the banks to erode and floods to become more intense, washing away 'many acres of ground'.[140] Like many efforts to protect the land, this one was ignored.

Settlers laid waste to land as they worked it; their land use practices meant that they were always hungry for more land. Wastage, although it was rarely total, fuelled the frontier. Settlers crossed mountains, rivers, and near waterless plains hoping to make good. They took with them their disregard for life-support systems. Peter Latz has had the opportunity to study the process in Central Australia, and he does not mince his words:

> The Arrernte people ... have important sacred sites where lots of Dreamings meet up with each other. These places were like ... the biggest, the most wonderful cathedral in Australia. And, of course, they were also the best places for recolonisation. There's a place called Running Waters, the best waterhole in central Australia, which was an absolute sanctuary. The waterhole runs for about four miles. Pelicans breed in it. It is now utterly stuffed! It was the very first place that white people came in and unwittingly put all their cattle. In other words, it's as if the whites came up here, found the cathedral and then went and shat on the altar![141]

For Aboriginal people, wastage, deprivation, dependence, and starvation were closely intertwined. In New South Wales and Victoria, for example, one of the staple foods for Aboriginal people was the yam daisy *(Microseris scapigera);* in many Aboriginal languages it was known as *murrnong.* It grew in great abundance and in a variety of habitats; it was edible all year round, although most palatable in the spring; it was easy to dig up and prepare; it was nourishing ~ a person could live on it for weeks at a time. With the introduction of cattle and sheep, the plant quickly became rare. Once found in the 'millions' it is now difficult to locate. Cattle ate the leaves, and sheep were even more destructive. According to a European observer of the process, 'for the most part [sheep] lived on them for the first year, after which the root began gradually to get scarce'. An Aboriginal man named Moonin-Moonin, is reported to have stated in 1839:

139 E. Rolls, op. cit., p. 84.

140 G. Bolton op. cit., p. 37.

141 P. Latz 1995, op. cit., p. 84.

> ***there were no* param *or* tarook *[daisy yams] at Port Phillip ... too many* jumbuck *(sheep) and* bulgana *(bullocks, cattle) plenty eat it* myrnyong *~ all gone* myrnyong.**[142]

As with the habitats, so with the inhabitants. Chester Eagle wrote of his childhood in the Riverina district of New South Wales:

> I remember no Aborigines in my childhood. No one spoke of their disappearance, and no knowledge of the land as they understood it had been subsumed into the farming community of which my parents formed a part ... 'Blackfellow country' meant useless places fit only, by implication, for useless people ... [143]

Many Aboriginal people know exactly what he is talking about. John Baya of Arnhem Land put it this way:

> ***Where are we going to go? Where are we going to get a place to live, to stay? Where? In the air or where, because farmers coming on the land; fisheries are coming on the sea? Where can we find a place now for Aboriginal people? Where? We can't live on the air. Where are you pushing us? ... This is our land. This is our homeland.***[144]

In Australia extinctions have been occurring more rapidly than scientists can document species. Many more species will almost certainly die out before they have even become known to white Australians. All up, over two thousand species of plants are known to be extinct or on the verge of extinction. Dozens of species of animals are thought to be extinct, and close to two hundred are endangered or vulnerable. It is not possible to make any statement about insects for there is simply not enough information.[145]

In addition to loss of life, there is also drastic loss in life support systems. According to Eric Rolls, 'the whole country is degraded and disorganised'.[146] Julian Cribb, writing in *The Weekend Australian,* also put the case forcibly: 'Half of Australia's arid land and nearly half its productive wheat-sheep country is in the grip of a slow death'. Three quarters of the Australian continent is rangelands. Of the portions of these areas that are used by white people, fifty-five percent is

142 B. Gott 1983 'Myrnong - Microseris scapigera: a study of a staple food of Victorian Aborigines *Australian Aboriginal Studies*', 2, 2-19. The quotes are from p. 12.

143 C. Eagle 1985 *Mapping the Paddocks,* McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Fitzroy, Vic. p. 59.

144 'Submission to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner regarding control of entry onto seas adjoining Aboriginal Land in the Milingimbi, Crocodile Islands and Clyde River Area'. 30 May 1980, Written by Mark Dreyfus (NLC) assisted by Matthew Dhulumburrk.

145 Gould League of Victoria nd *The Edge of Extinction.* Gould League, Prahran. pp. 3; 53; see also A. Marshall (ed) op. cit.

146 E. Rolls 1990 'The Billion Trees of Man', *The Independent Monthly,* June, pp. 7-12.

degraded. Thirteen per cent is so badly damaged it may never recover.[147] Fire suppression is the major cause of problems in huge areas of semi-arid rangelands.[148] Periodic plagues of rabbits (introduced to the continent with the first fleet) invaded the rangelands, eating all the vegetation and leaving the soils exposed to wind and rain. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep, particularly during periods of drought, exacerbated problems; in areas where rabbits never flourished, cattle seem to have been equally effective in denuding the country.[149] Part of the problem of overstocking was pure greed, part was insufficient knowledge, and part was government policy. In many areas the government reckoned carrying capacity on the basis of good rather than drought years. Leaseholders were required to keep their properties fully stocked.

Much of the one quarter of Australia that is not rangelands is being intensively farmed. Salinity, in many places, and acidity in others, are devastating the land. Rolls says that 'there are 200,000 hectares of the Murray-Murrumbidgee area [New South Wales] where the water table has risen to danger level and no matter what is done this will increase to 300,000 hectares over the next five years. Ultimately 75 per cent of the land will be affected'.[150]

Eric Rolls reports that in Western Australia salinity damage is as extensive as in New South Wales: 'Extension officers are wary of mentioning ... figures. They fear it will frighten people too much'.[151]

Aboriginal people know their own countries intimately, and they see complex and serious processes at work. Strehlow stated the case with fervour:

> Central Australia for the first time was subjected to ruthless materialistic exploitation, in order that the greed of its new 'civilized' tenants and absentee landholders might be quickly satisfied. Its animals were shot at, often purely as 'sport', and its trees and grasses were ravaged by short-sighted overstocking. Moving masses of rabbits ring-barked the young trees and nibbled at the roots of the perennial fodder plants. Many of the aboriginal sacred sites were plundered and violated, and many of the original dark inhabitants were turned into aimless, but unfortunately permanent, refugees in the first violent onslaught of conquest. 'Our country has been turned into a desert by the senseless whites', many of the older Aranda used to tell me thirty years ago, as they pointed to a land sadly reduced from its former state of fertility by years of unprecedented drought and overstocking, and by millions of introduced

147 *The Weekend Australian,* November 12-13 1988, p. 45.

148 CSIRO 1990 op. cit., p. 20.

149 E. Rolls 1969 *They All Ran Wild; the animals and plants that plague Australia,* Angus & Robertson Publishers, Sydney. Although not up to date, this book gives a striking understanding of feral animals in Australia.

150 E. Rolls 1990, op. cit., p. 9.

151 ibid, p. 10.

> rabbits. They commented bitterly on the swift destruction of the natural food plants and the almost complete extinction of many of the formerly abundant species of marsupials, and said sadly ~ 'The old men who knew how to summon the rain clouds, how to create the animals, and how to keep the country green, are dead now; and our land is dying too'.[152]

The same story repeats across the continent, an evil wake to a ship of death. Losses are immense for humans, plants, and animals, and for life support systems. Sylvia Hallam describes the aftermath of settlement in the area of which Grey had spoken so enthusiastically in Western Australia:

> ... the Europeans would use only a part of the resources and range of the Aboriginal group, though in doing so they would disrupt the systematic exploitation of the entire area; ... the region would therefore support far fewer Europeans on its own primary produce than it had Aborigines; ... certain parts from which the Aborigines had been displaced would remain unused (or not used to the full) by the Europeans; ... in other areas the long-term stresses on the environment would be far greater under the new specialised and concentrated usage than under the old diversified exploitation.[153]

Yanyuwa people of the Gulf of Carpentaria put it this way:

> ***The white people came into the area many years ago, our ancestors called them spirits because they were white in colour. The white people came mustering cattle. They erected paddocks and yards all over the country. We Yanyuwa people and Garawa people learnt how to ride horses and muster cattle.***
>
> ***But the cattle they can make the country bad, they muddy the water in the lagoons so that we cannot drink it because it stinks, and we do not hunt because we can no longer find goannas and long necked turtles. This country of importance has a new name now and white people have changed it so it is now called 'Manangoora Pastoral Lease'. But we Yanyuwa people, we cannot forget about this country, we are continually thinking about it, this country that was truly for our ancestors, we are thinking about them all the time.***[154]

152 T. Strehlow 1978 [1964] *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monototemism in a Polytotemic Community,* AASR Special Studies in Religions, Bedford Park, SA, p. 49.

153 S. Hallam, op. cit., p. 76.

154 Quoted in J. Bradley, 1988, op. cit., p. 47.

Once a multiplicity of nourishing terrains, there is now a multiplicity of devastations. And yet, the relationship between indigenous people and country persists. It is not a contract but a covenant, and no matter what the damage, people care.

Archie Roach's song of the children speaks to sorrow, to loss, and to the enduring commitment to return:

Took the Children Away

This story's right, the story's true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep
Said to us come take our hand
Sent us off to mission land
Taught us to read, to write and pray,
Then took the children away.
Took the Children away
The Children away
Snatched from their mother's breast
Said it was for the best
Took them away ...

One sweet day all the children came back
The children came back
The children came back
Back where their hearts grow strong
Back where they all belong
The children came back
Said the children came back
The children came back
Back where they understand
Back to their mother's land
The children came back.[155]

155 A. Roach 'Took the Children Away' from the Charcoal Lane album, Aurora.

8

Human and Ecological Rights A Conclusion

Yes, I'm tall dark and mean, and every place I've been
The white man calls me Jack.
It's no crime, I'm not ashamed
I was born with my skin so black.
When it comes to riding rough horses,
Or working cattle, I'll mix with the best,
In the land where the crow flies backwards
And the pelican builds his nest ...

The white man took this country from me;
He's been fighting for it ever since.
These governments and protesters they're arguing,
And every day they're starting a brawl;
And if there's going to be a nuclear war
What's going to happen to us all?

Dougie Young [156]

IN Dougie Young's song writing days, nuclear war was the global survival issue that brought people together. Today ecological issues have replaced nuclear war as the crucial global survival issue of the twenty-first century.

Recent studies indicate that Australians are the most ecologically conscious people in the world. Settler Australians' concerns for the future of the continent are best understood to have a dual aspect. The first is in the context of our increasing awareness of how badly wrong things are going here. The second is the context of identity and the process of trying to understand how we fit into this world.[157]

156 In M. Breen, op cit, p. 40.

157 Tony Press of the Australian Nature Conservation Agency discusses the issue of identity in Press 1995 'Fire, people, landscapes and wilderness' in *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 19-24, Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin.

The notion of caring for country is quintessentially Aboriginal. Nowhere in the world is there a body of knowledge built up so consistently over so many millennia. Nowhere are there so many living people who continue to sustain that knowledge and engage in associated land management practices.

It follows that nowhere in the world are there greater possibilities for the regeneration of ecosystems, and for the development of a truly coherent relationship between human and ecological rights. 'Caring for country' has the potential to become an ethos of the settlers as well as the Aboriginal inhabitants of this continent. Indeed, land care initiatives can be understood as a positive step in this direction.

The urgency of ecological/human issues develops from our dramatic awareness of the dreadful conflict between human needs and ecological needs. When the human use of living systems is damaging and wasteful, then conflict must develop between the colonising push for perpetual growth and the ecological imperative summed up in the simple statement of fact: those who destroy their country destroy themselves. There is thus a special urgency to the project of identifying types of land management practices and philosophies: those which promote life and those which promote death.

I am urging settler and indigenous Australians to work and learn together, so it is important to signal that there are some differences in philosophy which will make mutual understanding and land management difficult even with the best of intentions. As an example, concepts of wilderness can promote the view that some landscapes are best locked away from human use, or perhaps made available only to be looked at or to be gently walked through. In contrast, when Aboriginal people speak of country being happy or sad, healthy or not so good, they are speaking from a deeply interactive perspective. Bruce Rose reports from Central Australia:

> Many people related that land only remained healthy when there were Aboriginal people around to take care of it. When there is nobody looking after the land it becomes 'sick'. Degradation is seen as the result of non-use rather than over use, through lack of Aboriginal traditional management.[158]

A related issue concerns extinctions: while extinction is a concept which means a great deal to many settler Australians, it appears to have little direct meaning to many indigenous Australians. It is not that people have not noticed that animals and plants are missing; many have seen this and been struck with worry and grief. But instead of concluding that an extinction has occurred, they tend to draw other inferences. Bruce Rose recorded the following interpretations from Central Australian Aborigines:

158 B. Rose, op. cit., p. 47.

The possum and the bilby and all those others went away because they always move around the country.

In olden times there were lots of those animals, but they have gone, maybe to Brisbane, maybe to Sydney.

The animals have been gone a long time, those whitefellas took them away.

Sometimes those whitefellas bring them back to show us, but they dead ones, they got them in box, they got them now too I reckon, they took them away from our country.

When we left this country the animals were here but when we came back there were only camels.

Some animals finish up because no fire to make green grass.

Those animals went away down the Dreaming trails, they still there at the end.[159]

In short, people are saying that even though an animal is missing, it must still exist somewhere. In the Victoria River District, people who discussed these matters with me spoke of some animals 'being only spirit now'. I understood them to be saying that the possibility for life still existed, even though the physical evidence of that life was no longer available. Many people hold to the view that the earth endures, that damage and loss are not final, and that there is still hope for a living future. My friend Daly Pulkara put it this way:

This earth has an Aboriginal culture inside.[160]

From these types of statements we must conclude that a holistic world view, which situates life forms as part of living systems, will conceptualise loss in complex and non-absolute ways, and will place confidence in the earth's capacity to recover from damage. If the regeneration of ecosystems is to involve Aboriginal people, as I believe it must, it will of necessity depend on sharing understandings in complex and non-absolute ways. Everybody will benefit.

The concept of a living world depends on communication: it requires that one listen as well as speak; it requires an attitude of attentiveness and a degree of respect. I would say that the concept of a truly living world requires a shift in thinking for many settlers.

159 B. Rose, op. cit., p. 89

160 Personal communication; see also Rose 1992, op. cit., p. 229.

Only rare individuals in the past, and today still a minority of people, have taken seriously the knowledge of indigenous people. In so doing, some have learned to listen to what Aboriginal people say about country. More daringly, perhaps, some have learned to listen to what country says about itself. Dr David Bowman, a respected scientist, speaking in a reflective mood, had this to say about science and scientists:

> For me [science] is a rational dialogue with mystery: our lives are so cluttered by technology that we forget how little we know of our origin and our destiny. Similarly ecological science can be thought of as a way of 'talking to country'. Over the last ten years I have been privileged to interact with North Australian landscapes ... Through science I have learnt some of the landscape's story. I have heard a landscape crying out for management. Therefore I feel obliged to communicate that message ... The decisions we make today not only affect the continued existence of long lineages of life forms, but in a sense those decisions directly affect us. Why else does extinction bother us so much? [161]

The late David Burrumarra believed that human and ecological rights are most properly embedded each within the other. That is, one cannot speak in a holistic way about human rights without speaking also of ecological rights, and vice versa. He outlined the three main principles which he taught to young people, and he defined them as the 'real human rights':

Do the ceremony properly for your homeland and for yourself.

Understand the land and everything on it so you can manage it properly.

When you are a bungawa [leader] you will stand up and do the business properly for your homeland and Australia. [162]

When we learn how to make each of these human/ecological rights a genuine possibility for every Australian, we will be well on the road to caring for country.

161 D. Bowman 1995 op. cit., p. 108.

162 David Burrumarra in I. MacIntosh, op. cit., p. 78

About the Illustrator

I was born in Wilcannia on the Paaka *or Darling River on 5 October 1947. This makes me a* Paakintji wiimpatja, *or one of the Paakantji group of people who lived along the river from Bourke down to Wentworth.*

My grandmother, Grannie Moisey brought me up and she started teaching me to carve emu eggs and make wooden artefacts when I was about eight years old. Grannie was about 106 when she died and was born sometime around 1870. She knew all about our Paakantji language and culture and taught me to make things in our way. Our people use a lot of beautiful wavy lines and geometric patterns with only a few dots. I travelled all over the country with her and she taught me a lot about our Dreamtime stories and all the special places where important things happened to our people. My art is influenced by these stories and the special places.

Badger Bates

Illustrations

All illustrations are lino cuts by Badger Bates.

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