

How is our country?

Karen Alexander



In writing this article I am reminded of preparing for my first conscious journey through Aboriginal lands west of Uluru by searching in the library for anything on 'Aboriginal relationship to land'. It was the late seventies and the NT Land Rights Act had received considerable coverage. So I had at least an inkling of what I didn't know. There were few books in those days on indigenous cultures and those in the library were only from European anthropologists who did not even list in the index a category that covered relationship with land. It would appear that they didn't even 'see' this relationship as it was not a concept they had themselves; unlike kinship on which there were whole books. We have taken a few tiny steps in our understanding but the journey ahead is massive as we come to know and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of life in this great southern continent.

Who lives in this country?

I watch Margaret weaving. She doesn't speak English so I have to observe her fingers carefully. Observing is not a familiar skill; I am too used to asking questions. Over, under, round, across and some complicated movement in the middle where one finger seemed to go behind another and bring in one of the long pieces of the dried and dyed pandanus. Her long brown fingers move like dancers through the warp and weft of yellow, then red, yellow, then brown, yellow, then green. It's mesmerising. So much so that when she hands me the small bundle with its neat beginning of colour and long spidery leaves waiting to be woven I have no idea what to do. I just look at her and laugh and put my hands up; they say, 'Not yet, Margaret'. I'm a slow learner.



I'm in Arnhem land with others who've come to learn weaving from the women in this small Aboriginal community. There's also something extraordinarily special about being able to spend time with women elders from the oldest civilisation on earth.¹

With two days drive to get here on some very rough roads (three flat tyres and one bogged trailer), my head is no longer full of the day-to-day busyness of work, computers, mobiles, meetings, diaries, deadlines, ipods, ipads, outputs, outcomes, management and so on and on.

As a long-term campaigner for greater protection of the biodiversity of Australia's unique plants and animals (and with a sense of failure as we are going backwards rapidly), I am looking for inspiration.



Certainly our modern Australian cultures need to relate to our land, our waters and our species in very different ways or we'll lose the lot even without climate change.

We have the data and the pictures to show how extraordinary life is, and on our home turf too. Australia is one of only 17 nations that are designated 'megadiverse' and one of only two in the OECD. Between us, as megadiverse nations, we have about 70 per cent of the world's known biodiversity.²

Our contribution includes about 20,000 flowering plant species, 90 per cent of them unique to us.

We have half the world's marsupials (found nowhere else), 45 per cent of our birds are only found here, 89 per cent of reptiles and 90 per cent of our fish. As for fungi, we have somewhere between 160,000 and 250,000 species with less than ten per cent described and 90 per cent of them unique to Australia.³

In Victoria alone we have 3140 plants, 900 lichens, 750 mosses and liverworts, 111 mammals, 447 birds, 46 freshwater fish, 133 reptiles, 33 amphibians, thousands of invertebrates, fungi and algae many of which have yet to be described, 12,000 known marine plant and animal species and more than 1000 different bushland types.⁴

We have the capacity to measure how we're going and to know that our lifestyle on this earth - in the high income world - is taking us into the 'sixth mass extinction' since life began

over three billion years ago. As long ago as 1993, Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson estimated that Earth is currently losing something of the order of 30,000 species per year - which breaks down to the even more daunting statistic of some three species per hour compared to the natural extinction rate of one species every five years. There are about ten million species on earth. If we carry on as we are, we could lose half of all those ten million species.⁵

Imagine losing half the shops, or half the people, or half the roads, or half the schools, or half the banks in any community. Towns and networks simply collapse. This is equally so in our biodiverse world.

Most Australians perhaps think losing species has more to do with the Amazon, but right in our backyard we have already lost 110 species of flora and fauna in just 200 years. In Victoria 44 per cent of Victoria's native plants and 30 per cent of animals are extinct or threatened species,⁶ 78 per cent of our types of bushland are threatened, 75 per cent of our waterways degraded and 35 per cent of our wetlands totally lost.⁷ It can be argued that we didn't know what we were doing for the first 200 years, but we do now and there is no excuse we will be able to offer our grandchildren after they are extinct.

We recognised these trends long ago. *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson alerted many in the West. So we now have many pieces of legislation to deal with the long-term protection of nature: Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, Environment Protection Act, Catchment Management Acts, Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. We have many of the right words: sustainability, triple

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bottom line, biodiversity action plans, ecologically sustainable development objectives, short and long term strategies, and even a 50 year strategy for biodiversity in Victoria. Some of these have been around for decades. Yet we are still going backwards.

Beyond our nation state we have inter-governmental arrangements and processes in place: 2010 is International Year of Biodiversity (IYB), declared by the United Nations as 'a celebration of life on earth'. It's also a plea for action, immediately.

The IYB coincides with the next international meeting on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Discussions on the CBD got under way at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992

Australia is a signatory to the CBD and has signed on to the target to 'the establishment and maintenance by 2010 for terrestrial and by 2012 for marine areas of comprehensive, effectively managed, and ecologically representative national and regional systems of protected areas.' A very specific target is to protect at least ten per cent of each of the world's ecological regions and a reduction in the number of threatened species.

How is Australia measuring up? We still have a long way to go. We have eight of the world's 14 ecological regions and 85 bioregions. (Bioregions are large, geographically distinct areas of land with common characteristics, such as geology, landform patterns, climate, ecological features and plant and animal communities.) In 2006 36 bioregions had less than ten per cent of their area protected.⁸

Ongoing clearing of native vegetation is still the major threat to biodiversity in Australia. If you keep clearing the bedrooms and breakfast tables of species then they can't possibly survive.

Not only does clearing impact on the survival of

species but also, along with land degradation caused by weed invasion and over-grazing for instance, contributes about 16 per cent of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. While this is occurring, clearing our forests is the pinnacle of stupidity. The tall wet forests in Tasmania and eastern Victoria are the most carbon dense forests in the world⁹ as well as being hugely biodiverse. Clearing them for woodchips and a small volume of wood products is like destroying the 500-year-old family castle and replacing it brick by brick over 500 years.

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The women get buckets and the tomahawk and head for the mangroves. I run around looking for my hat, sunscreen. Shoes? Or no shoes? They don't wear any so I don't either. Water? Where is my waterbottle? A small pack? Hanky? By this time the women are across the open samphire flats and about to be swallowed up into the mangroves. Just follow their tracks someone calls out. I try to see tracks but can't and if I take my eye off where the women have gone I'll lose that spot too. Bare feet aren't a good idea I think.

At the edge of the mangroves - they look like they go for miles - I stop and listen. Laughter. OK. Chop, chop, chop. The mud is smooth and cool between my toes. Bare feet are a good idea, provided I avoid standing on the mangrove roots that stick straight up from the mud.

Balanced on a muddy slope - there is a piece of bark under her feet - Margaret is chopping along the dead mangrove trunk that spans the waterway. It splits and we see a shiny rich red mahogany

'Clearing the tall wet forests in Tasmania and eastern Victoria for woodchips is like chipping the 500-year-old family castle and replacing it brick by brick over 500 years.'



colour woven with worms, some dark, some almost white, some half into the wood, some dangling just waiting to be taken, all 15 centimetres of them.¹⁰ Margaret breaks off a bit so I can try it. It's salty like an oyster. The buckets are filled to take back to the community. On the way back we collect bags of large shells; these are bait for fishing for catfish.

Numbers of species, threatened or not, unique or not, would certainly not be a way to talk about the environment with Margaret even if I could speak Yolngu.

I have to acknowledge numbers themselves don't grab many people at all, not even bean counters (or surely accountants would be at the forefront of advocating for protection of biodiversity). A statistic is not a story or a connection to the heart and it doesn't illustrate a relationship between me and another species. Statistics tell us that Orange-Bellied Parrots are extremely likely to become extinct in three years. This beautiful little parrot flies from southwest Tasmania where it breeds, to the coasts of Victoria and South Australia for winter food. But few Melburnians seem horrified that it will disappear. There is no connection between the 'OBP' and the suburbs.

'Even though most Australians are urban, we do demonstrate that we want a relationship with nature.'

We're running out of weaving material and set off in the troopies to cut pandanus. The women cut the sharp leaves of this palm-like plant with a machete, bundle them up in cloth, balance the bundles on their heads and bring them back to the roof rack.

Back at camp, sitting on the ground, I watch Margaret use her fingernail to cut the thorny sides off each pandanus leaf, then with one long slash of the nail she cuts the leaf in two, then four, then she splits each bit in half pulling the back of the pandanus from the front. Again the long fingers dance with the strips of leaf and as much as I try to copy her I just muck it up.

Where is my country?

Where is my country? What is my country? How do I connect to it, its rocks, its species?

With one parent from the USA and before that Switzerland and Germany, and another born in Melbourne (but with parents who thought of England as home even though they were third generation Australian), I'm fairly typical of a lot of Australians. Fifty per cent of us have one parent born overseas or are born overseas ourselves. One foot here and a toe somewhere else.

Margaret, on the other hand, if I need to put



numbers on it, goes back 2400 generations. Makes three seem a bit small.

Even though most Australians are urban, we do demonstrate that we want a relationship with nature. We grow plants indoors, put flowers in vases, and gardening and fishing are our favourite recreational activities. All say 'I want to feel connected.'

Grey nomads connect not just with one another round the two-burner gas stove but with the bush – they don't spend their time touring suburban campgrounds. Suburbanites have also shown, via films such as *The Man from Snowy River*, an affinity with, even a very public and emotional connection to a cattleman's life round the fire under clear alpine skies. As one could have a simple life round the fire in a brick veneer – much easier than camping – there would appear to be some strong need for connection to that landscape, something special about an old way of life that is outdoors.

Our writers too, from the early years of invasion, have spun the landscape through their work both as a setting and moulding of the characters. From Watkins Tench in the first four years of Port Jackson to many writers today: Tim Winton and Alex Miller spring to mind.

Painters have shown us the intricacies, colours

and textures of our hugely varied landscapes: Nolan, Drysdale, Boyd, Olsen, Preston and Williams for instance, and over recent decades indigenous painters have helped us to see our landscapes in different ways.



The new strips of pandanus, tied in a bunch at one end, hang over the rafters drying before being dyed. We went searching for colour today but found yams first up (no wonder 'how long' questions are irrelevant). The yams are like kipfler potatoes with dark skins. Margaret is very pleased.

The red dye comes from a bulb that has a skinny ordinary-green coloured leaf that is not easy to pick from the other small plants. I notice Margaret bends over and runs the leaves of potential bulbs between her fingers. I do too and discover the red bulb plant has a much rougher leaf. I'm learning. When the outer skin of the bulb is peeled off a brilliant red shows.

The yellow is harder to extract and we dig with a tomahawk into the sandy soil along a tuberous yellow root. It's better unbroken so care is taken to follow the twists and turns. Green comes from a tree with leaves that are certainly not ordinary-green.

We wash our hands using bright green leaves that lather when mixed with water. Back at camp Margaret cooks her yams. I can see that they are good tucker.

But are we connected to our biodiversity? Grey nomads in cars, cattle in the alps, have major impacts on the environment. One uses a lot of non-renewable fuel and the other involves cattle that were a disaster for the alpine environment accord-

ing to ecologists (would you want a cow in your garden?).

Replacing the roof on the weaving shelter is much easier than going to Bunnings for corrugated iron and paying a plumber: go to a tall straight stringybark tree, cut round the tree near the base and round the top as high as you can from the top of a ladder, then split the bark from the bottom cut to the top one and lever bark off from around the tree, take back to camp and strip off the fibrous bark, lay on ground to flatten it; next day place on roof.

Observing the intricacies of how Margaret might relate to the natural environment is not a matter for a visit of five days. Even if I was a good observer, being able to see something in another culture that is not in one's own is impossible without learning the language.

I ask John our Yolngu interpreter to tell me about how Margaret would see the trees, rocks, animals and the bush around them. It is one of identity, he says: 'I am that tree'; 'I am that rock'. This is a very unfamiliar notion to me. We give names to trees, bushes, animals. In my own backyard I have mountain ash, *Eucalyptus regnans*, but I can't begin to describe my relationship with those trees. I can describe some of their attributes: very tall, in fact the tallest flowering plant in the world, leaves up to 16 cm long, glossy green, buds 7-15 per cluster, club-shaped. I can describe its beauty to me: the sparkle of wet leaves in the afternoon light. Or its uses: *Eucalyptus regnans* has timber that when dried is suitable for house flooring. But what is the answer to the question: How do I relate to this tree?

Towards the end of the five days I've cottoned on to at least two weaving techniques and made a mat



and a small bowl that Margaret says is 'good'. I say she is a 'good teacher'. And we laugh.

But weaving is not the most important thing I've learnt on this trip. I've learnt that being here with Margaret may be the beginning of friendship. It has something to do with place, to do with an old culture and its vastly different worldviews and to do with relationship with land and its inhabitants – human and others.

Margaret and the women have a very detailed knowledge of and a strong identity with place. I have no idea of the extent of this but just in five days they've found good tucker, materials and dyes for household and art products and for house-building. This is a way of seeing that is not the heroic battle against nature and weather. No doubt, though I understood none, there are a plethora of stories that illustrate the knowledge.

But five days is a very cursory visit and especially regarding a culture that has been in this land for 300 times longer than we have (oops, there are the numbers again). However, slow learners can still learn something, so here are my tentative beginnings.

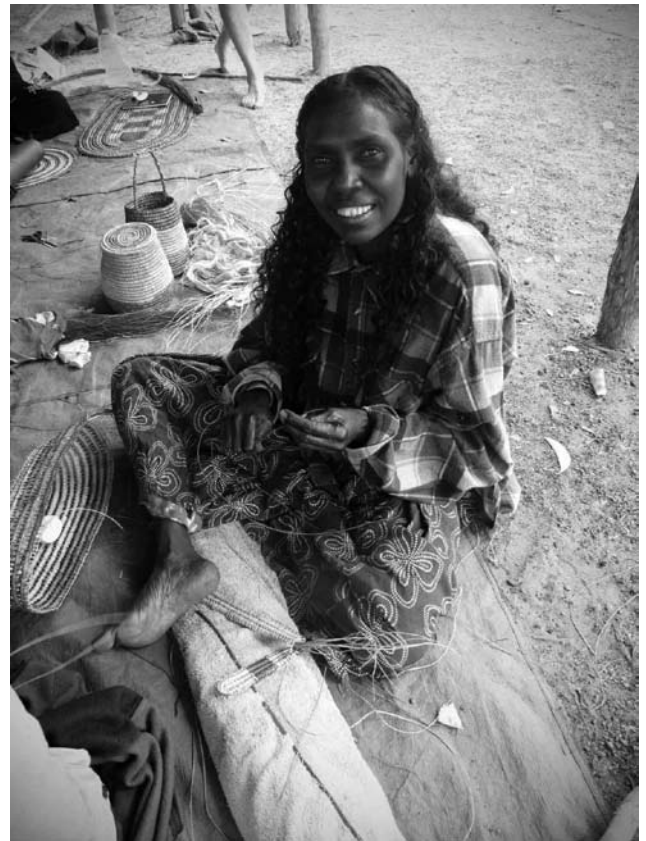
How do I live in country?

Source food locally. A confirmation of the slow food and 'food miles' movements. Pandanus materials for ongoing weaving could be replaced with our local flax lilies. I must admit I'm not so sure about the bark roof.

Be frugal. There's a natural restraint on over indulging when you have to cut, carry, scrape, dye, flatten things yourself. Given our huge ecological footprint this learning is fundamental (mine is 2.5 planets needed if everyone lived like me and I know my footprint is lower than average).

Develop a strong sense of local place. I'm living on land my grandfather farmed and near the forests that I explored as a child. I have a sense of place – these tall forests in the hills east of Melbourne is the country I feel most at ease in – but how to develop it further? At present I can't say 'I am that tree' but I can get to know the creatures in my area, not just their names but the timings of their courtships, of migrations, the seasons of their flowering and how our day-to-day activities fit around these things. We have yams here too and maybe I'll grow more for eating as well as potatoes.

Our sense of place is now much extended through, for instance, travel, the arts and the internet. Relationships now spread across the country. Right now I know that the dumping of rain in south-west Queensland is delivering water to Lake Eyre and the desert will be flowering, birds will be breeding like mad. I can even see



the water flowing into our desert through photos from space.¹¹

Do more planting. Simple acts of weeding and replanting contribute to my Australian community identifying with, rather than battling against, this landscape and its non-human inhabitants. Working with local groups we can celebrate survival from last year's plantings, rejoice in wildlife's return and develop a very strong sense of place. The hard work of putting back can lead to a passion for protection!

The plantings also put back the carbon that was there in the vegetation and soil before we cleared the land. Are we on to a winner here?

By a stroke of luck, it may also be that 'the market' can help us pay for our plantings as well as achieve our sense of place because the trees in the plantings can also be sold as 'carbon offsets' for someone's emissions (yours, for instance, when you tick the box with your airline company). This wind-fall of paying for plantings gives greater hope that the investment needed for large scale restoration of biodiversity will actually occur.

Signs of hope

Work is already under way in large restoration projects in Australia. These projects aim to protect and enhance the bushland that is still present and to provide 'biolinks' – very large wildlife corridors and/or large stepping-stones of native bush – so that as the climate changes species can move.

Gondwana Link¹² is a 1500 kilometre project in south-west Western Australia driven by Bush Heritage Australia, The Wilderness Society and Greening Australia. It has already protected 11,900 hectares of land and revegetated over 1800 hectares.

Habitat 141¹³ is a 700 kilometre project from the ocean to the outback in western Victoria, eastern SA and up to Broken Hill in western NSW. With its mix of government, non-government partners and business, it is very complex, but its overall goals are the same as Gondwana Link – protect the bush that is there and reconnect it so that species can move.

One of Australia's largest conservation corridors is being established along the Great Eastern Ranges through the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative.¹⁴

The Great Eastern Ranges are home to many of Australia's treasured areas of World Heritage, national parks, alpine areas, forests, woodlands and rainforests. They store carbon in their vast forests, breathing out oxygen we breathe in. They contribute to our prosperity by sustaining agriculture, tourism and industry. They are a refuge for our richest biodiversity, containing 66 per cent of the threatened species in New South Wales. They are the source of our clean water, catching and filtering the rain that feeds into our rivers and dams, providing drinking water for our cities. They are part of us!

These are exciting visions and give a sense of hope that our backyard won't turn into a dustbowl in 50 years.



Margaret finishes my bowl for me. Again the pattern of her dancing fingers is not retained in my head. I'll unpick it when I get home to see what she has done just the way I'll unpick my experience to see what I can learn. I have no doubt I'll want to come back to learn from Margaret, my 'good teacher'. Being a slow learner has its advantages.

Endnotes

- 1 Information about the Māpuru community in north-east Arnhem Land and the women and their weaving is at: www.arnhemweavers.com.au. Courses are run in the dry season and are booked out quickly.
- 2 Williams, J., 2001, *Australia State of the Environment Report 2001*. CSIRO for the Department of the Environment and Heritage at www.environment.gov.au/soe/2001/publications/theme-reports/biodiversity/biodiversity.
- 3 Beeton RJS (Bob), Buckley Kristal I, Jones Gary J, Morgan Denise, Reichelt Russell E, Trewin Dennis (2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee), *Australia State of the Environment 2006 Independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Heritage* at www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/publications/drs/indicator/92/index.html.
- 4 Commission for Environmental Sustainability Victoria, 2008. *Victoria State of the Environment Report 2008* at www.ces.vic.gov.au/CES/wcmn301.nsf/childdocs.
- 5 www.actionbioscience.org/newfrontiers/eldredge2.html and en.wikinews.org/wiki/Largest_mass_extinction_in_65_million_years_underway,_scientists_say.
- 6 Traill and Porter, 2001, *Nature Conservation Review Victoria 2001*, Victorian National Parks Association.
- 7 Victorian Catchment Management Council. 2002. *The Health of Our Catchments: A Victorian Report Card*, p. 32.
- 8 Australian Government. March 2009. *Australia's Fourth National Report to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity* at www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/cbd.
- 9 Mackey, B. et al. 2008 'A green carbon account of Australia's south-eastern Eucalypt forests, and policy implications' at eprss.anu.edu.au/green_carbon_citation.html.
- 10 Latjin in Yolngu (or mangrove worm, Teredo species) are a bivalve that is found in dead and decaying mangrove wood; other species also eat hulls of boats. The action of the shells moving together excavates a hole through the wood, and the wood shavings accumulate in the stomach which becomes a distended, worm-like bag.
- 11 See www.lakeeyreyc.com/Status/latest.html.
- 12 See www.gondwanalink.org.au; www.Habitat141.org.au.
- 13 See www.Habitat141.org.au.
- 14 See <http://www.greateasternranges.org.au>.

Karen Alexander was the keynote speaker at the 2010 EarthSong Symposium Celebrating Biodiversity. She has a long history in the environment movement, starting as an overwhelmed volunteer in the campaign to save Lake Pedder, coordinating in the campaign to stop the damming of the Franklin River and eventually arriving at her role today with the Victoria Naturally Alliance (nine environment groups) on the health of nature in Victoria. She loves being in very wild places with her partner, David, her camera and pen.

With David and friends, she is regenerating 24 acres in the Dandenongs that were cleared and farmed by her developer grandfather. Karen likes to think that this symbolises a broad change in our relationship with this land. And very importantly these days she's Granny Karen to four gorgeous kids.