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Printed by: Arena Printing

Arena Magazine is published six times a year by Arena  
Printing and Publishing Pty Ltd, 35 Argyle Street, Fitzroy,  
3065. Tel. (03) 9416 0232

Arena Magazine welcomes manuscripts of up to 4,000 words,  
letters of up to 800 words and original artwork. We follow the  
AGPS Style Manual. Please send two copies double-spaced  
and disk if possible: Macintosh compatible, preferably  
Word 5. Send to: Arena, PO Box 18,  
Carlton North 3054. Fax: (03) 9415 1301

Arena Publications Editors:  
Geoff Sharp (General Editor), Doug White, Nonie Sharp,  
John Hinkson, Paul James, Alison Caddick, Guy Rundle.  
ISSN 1039-1010

THE AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE OF LEFT POLITICAL,  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COMMENTARY  
NO 23. JUNE-JULY 1996  
SPECIAL ISSUE: FAMILIES

## 2 EDITORIAL

4 LEAD GRAPHIC: Ian Harrison

## TRAILERS

5 John Wiseman The Howard Government: Fightback's Back.

7 Peter Lentini Russia's Troublesome Communists

10 James Goodman Ireland's Fragile Peace

12 Steve Wright Italy: At Long Last the Left

13 Doug White On Gifted Children

## 14 NEWS COMMENT

15 OPINION Brent Howard Questions For Gaita

## 17 MALONEY

## FEATURES

19 Chris Ingham What Was Nation-Building? Keating's  
Nationalism and its Successor

22 Mark Berger East Asia Rising: How Capital is using Culture

32 Ariel Salleh The Politics of Wilderness: Aborigines and Eco-  
activists

## SPECIAL SECTION: FAMILIES

38 Kevin McDonald The Uncertain Family

41 Richard Hil The Family as Scapegoat/Dumping Ground: Social  
Crisis and the Moral Subject

44 Belinda Probert The Riddle of Women's Work: Public, Private  
Spheres and Social Power

49 Alison Clark/Kevin Hart Poems

## IN REVIEW

51 Kerryn Goldsworthy Austen and Authenticity: Janemania

53 Ted Wheelwright The Global Economic Gulag

54 TEXTNOTES Damaris Palmer Dead Man Walking

56 My Favourite Margin

ILLUSTRATIONS: JOHN ABBATTE (COVER) IAN HARRISON, HEINRICH HEINZE, BERNARD  
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# POLITICS IN/OF THE WILDERNESS

THE CONCEPT OF WILDERNESS HAS BECOME A SITE OF  
CONTESTATION AND STRUGGLE BETWEEN ECO- AND  
ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS. BUT A HIGHER  
SYNTHESIS IS POSSIBLE

Social change activists – Black, Green, Red, and Mauve – have been badly shaken by the election of conservative governments across the country. But after loss comes reflection, bringing new possibilities into the open. Is it time for radical movements to re-think alliances and strategies? This article suggests that it is, and that the contentious 'W' word offers a land bridge in that political work.

Writing in *Arena Magazine* (October/November 1995), Noel Pearson, Director of the Cape York Land Council, called for a re-examination of eurocentric notions of 'heritage', 'culture' and, in particular, 'wilderness'. Australian environmentalists tend to use the latter in a non-historical way, 'non-humanising' the word in the face of indigenous peoples who may have managed country for generations. Pearson, along with former Aboriginal activist and now academic Marcia Langton, and others, rightly connects common usages of 'wilderness' with the politics of *terra nullius*.

As Pearson points out: 'The most profound aspect of the Aboriginal relationship to the lands and seas ... is that the environment is vested with spiritual meaning and significance. And this has implications for its conservation and management in the twenty-first century ... [It] places indigenous people in a unique position of personal and communal responsibility and makes them the natural custodians of these wilderness areas.' Some may want to dismiss Pearson's phrase 'natural custodians' as racist essentialism, but he is talking about culturally acquired skills here, not innate attributes.

Pearson describes the delicate new coalition between tra-

ditional peoples of Cape York, the ACF and Wilderness Society, and hopes that through the recently-formed Cape York Indigenous Environment Foundation, Black and Green politics will enter an era of 'mutual learning' and co-operation. However, corporate mining and logging interests are already out to neutralise, if not smash, this nascent coalition, a key tactic being to encourage racial tensions over the concept of 'wilderness'.

This appetite for divisiveness crops up in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 October 1995) reportage of Marcia Langton's Sydney Institute lecture under the headline 'Academic Hits at Green Movement's Tarzans'. Curiously, the piece was positioned immediately above a ten-inch-square BHP promo entitled 'How do the People of Ok Tedi Benefit from the Mine? Answers for Our Global Future'. Clearly, if ecology and indigenous politics are to support each other and expose the underbelly of transnational greed, we will need to find ways to de-legitimate and deconstruct the culture of a neo-colonial West.

This is where I wonder about the hidden potential of the 'W' word. In the early 1980s, after a time at the Franklin Dam campaign, I was puzzled by two contradictory meanings of 'wilderness' – liberating and reactionary ones. As I wrote then: 'For the conformist, wilderness gives opportunity to be delinquent, and for the delinquent a chance to protect and conserve. In an aggressive and war obsessed culture, wilderness carries the dream of gentleness and peace. To a materialistic, corrupt and polluted society, it brings purification and spiritual transcendence. In a callous, life aborting society, a river tells the phases of a human life. For a sexually repressed society, wilderness



recharges the senses, and where emotion is denied, it speaks what is unfelt.' (*Australian Society*, no. 7)

Yet if the NO DAMS struggle was a liberation of all that, the connotation of wilderness as 'other' and 'out there', also pulled the campaign in the opposite direction. A second and reactionary meaning of wilderness works to preserve white men's everyday world from encroachment – and challenge – by the unknown. And so it turned out that eurocentric Tasmanian Wilderness Society stalwarts were not yet ready to meet the indigenous truths of Van Diemens Land and Australia's cultural genocide. My own article, too, was environmentally racist, and failed to talk about wilderness as 'livelihood' in relation to indigenous peoples.

Conserved wilderness is the other face of rampant, urban, industrial growth. No surprise that bearded TWS boys ran heavy-fuel-consumption four-wheel-drives from inner city terrace homes to strategy meetings. Their narrow preservationist attitudes sidelined the global injustice of a high-consumption lifestyle where Third World forests are used as 'carbon sinks' or traditional fishing grounds are closed off at the behest of a leisure class. It is surely time to be upfront about race, gender and class in ecopolitics. These days, socialists, ecofeminists, and postcolonial critics all have something to say about the economic naivety of much wilderness politics carried on by an international environmental establishment.

#### **Wilderness and terra nullius**

Popular western ideas about 'the wild' go back to the Judaeo-Christian tradition and get reinforced in the classic eighteenth-century, liberal-rationalist separation of humans versus nature; civilised versus savage. These premises drive the capitalist economic project of manufacturing nature according to human design. It is telling that for indigenous peoples sacred wilderness is imbued with cultural presence, whereas for white men wilderness is sacred precisely because it represents their absence. The nature/culture split in eurocentric thought is fuelled by self-loathing.

No surprise that the word 'wilderness' has a chequered past in the ongoing colonisation of Australia. Historian Langton observes that those who use it 'treat our land as if our people were not there'. Wilderness reiterates the logic of *terra nullius*. Rather than respect the integral connection between Aboriginal survival and biodiversity, wilderness politics creates 'natural objects' to be viewed for entertainment or, more recently, protected as 'resource banks'.

Some indigenous people want the word 'wilderness' outlawed altogether, in favour of 'country', 'sea', or 'cultural landscapes'. But I will dare to argue that Black and Green activists together can make good use of the wilderness idea, by rejecting white men's projection of it as 'out there' and separate from ourselves. Moreover, working out just how to do that is important political work. For unless we develop a political analysis that heals the artificial split between humans versus nature, civilised versus native – and the self-denial on which it thrives – all our efforts will simply be gobbled up by the ideology of growth and control.

Given the psychological baggage that the term 'wilderness' carries, it is no surprise that it ruptures the equanim-

ity of ecological activists from time to time. This was evident most recently at the September 1995 EcoPolitics IX gathering in Darwin, a conference on Indigenous Management of Environmental Resources hosted by the Larrakia people and superbly organised by Ros Sultan from ACF.

But while postmoderns make sure our language is 'politically correct', there is an equal need to see how struggles for environment and for indigenous autonomy fit into the global capitalist system and its latest wave of colonisation. Not only wilderness politics, but Aboriginal peoples' struggles too, need to be understood in economic context. The push/pull of class differences in any community cannot be underestimated.

#### **Corporate-speak and neo-colonialism**

If any criticism is to be made of the best EcoPolitics Conference yet, it would be that this broader historical frame was left to participants to construct for themselves. The panel on commercial use of wildlife, for example, came across as if white men's economics is the only kind of economics. A look at how indigenous economic systems might be viable in their own right and how western peoples might learn from them would overcome this tacitly racist assumption. Without romanticising the case, but in very practical terms, hunter-gatherers would have to be affluent societies par excellence. They are self-sufficient and thus genuinely autonomous. They have a stable interchange with their habitat; use low impact technologies; work few hours a day; and give energies to social bonds, ceremony and art.

Ecologists taking a lesson from Aboriginal cultures might discover how to devise low demand, low impact economies where sustainability and social equity can go together. Closing the gap between rich and poor nations will depend on the high tech West scaling down its taken-for-granted levels of resource use, but that alternative is yet to take hold. The ghost of corporate-speak is everywhere it seems, even in discussions of indigenous self-determination.

The transnational business elite 'came out' as Green in 1992 under the name of the Business Council for Sustainable Development. Its manifesto is Stephan Schmidheiny's *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment* published by MIT. The BCSD sponsored UN co-ordination of the Rio Earth Summit and Agenda 21. It also ensured that industry interests were built into the Global Warming and Biodiversity Conventions, locking these to international free trade instruments such as GATT, now World Trade Organisation.

Capital's latest wave of economic colonisation hangs on genetic engineering, and hence bio-prospecting the rich diversity of indigenous lands. This moves along in four steps – Resource Assessment, Intellectual Property Rights, Regional Agreements and Conflict Resolution. There is no doubt that both urban and indigenous regional associations can facilitate the penetration of local communities by this TNC agenda. In Australia, an enthusiastic new Municipal Conservation Association, bristling with UNCED rhetoric and ESD principles, may already have



given itself over to the program.

In the World Bank and IMF, the language of 'development aid' is now superseded by 'economic co-operation', or where stronger inducement to play ball with daddy is wanted, 'structural adjustment' is the word. At an ideological level, the power of 'green business' has dispersed itself through Right-wing think tanks, phoney environmental front groups, and 'appropriate' cultural activities. Thus Hydro Quebec, which displaced thousands of indigenous peoples from the Hudson Bay area, set up a university Chair of Environmental Ethics - then filled it with a specialist in Leonardo da Vinci! Such cynical PR stunts need to be recognised for the mischief that they are. Closer to home, it is believed that Ranger uranium seeks to fund Aboriginal Studies at the Northern Territory University. If this were to happen, then given links between Ranger and France's environmentally racist nuclear program, South Pacific indigenous loyalties could be seriously damaged.

Australia is rife with corporate inducements to indigenous peoples right now. CRA has offered \$60 million to the Carpentaria Land Council as compensation for the Waanyi, owners of the proposed Century zinc mine site. To this point, Waanyi leaders have bravely resisted the deal makers. But elsewhere the Federal Government through Landcare, is hastening GIS-based resource assessment of mineral, biological and cultural resources on traditional country. As presented in the October edition of *Land Rights News*, the notion is that this will enhance Aboriginal livelihood by enabling land management in such a way that genetic and mineral resources can be extracted while 'ecological balance' is maintained.

Not only is this biotic nonsense, but culturally, digital mapping of 'uncharted areas' comes full circle back to *terra nullius* in the rush to assimilate indigenous knowledges under technocratic discourse. More, in the new verbal armoury of economic globalisation, 'resource assessment' is followed by the promise of 'intellectual property rights' and 'royalties' through 'regional agreements'. And where recalcitrant tribals reject the 'partnership' game, 'capacity building' for 'conflict resolution' is offered.

#### **Class, race, gender and species others**

If the eurocentric eye gazes across wilderness land as unpolluted, pure and untouched, equally, it romanticises indigenous identity. Langton decries this 'essentialised' thinking - the 'noble savage' or images found on tourist posters. Domination over nature and native cultures has been fundamental to imperialism. But nineteenth-century adulation of the virtuous noble savage was a symptom of white men's spiritual emptiness and hideously hypocritical. The pastoral idyll of the outback home was sustained only at cost to Aboriginal people treated as 'vermin'.

Structurally speaking, white women experience a similar

dynamic at work in the dominant folkways. First, femininity is essentialised or objectified. Hence, the noble image of the virgin Madonna is worshipped for her purity, succour and gentleness, the very virtues that masculine culture does not let men show. Then, as female objects, women are dominated by confinement to institutions like marriage, where they work unpaid at men's convenience. At the same time, the hypocritical love idyll is exposed by the treatment of non-domesticated women as filthy 'animal' whores.

The account of Aboriginal commodification delivered by Langton at EcoPolitics IX is unparalleled. The era of Durack and Drysdale coincides with administered reserves set up to soothe the pillow of the dying race, while twentieth-century entrepreneurs ransack native land for motifs, from Antill's Corroboree to tea towels. Blacks a.d koalas are displayed as nice evolutionary oddities. The story 'Picaninny Walkabout' sells over 100,000

copies and Mick Dundee takes the lone, white, male, outback hero to Hollywood. By 1992 Oz high-culture interior decor is showing off with dot-painted textiles in New York galleries. Northern Land Council Director Daryl Pearce adds that in this context, ecotourism becomes an 'extraction' of experiences, an 'unsustainable industry where nobody analyses the social impacts'.

Langton rightly identifies these commercial developments with a kind of fascism and the cancellation of self definition by indigenous Australians. But in her drive to challenge essentialist images of Aboriginality, she unwittingly essentialises non-Aboriginal people and environmentalists. Her witty assertion that the ecology movement is 'a barometer of colonial anxiety', overlooks a world of difference between how the Business Roundtable thinks and how most eco-

activists think. Further, as can be seen from class positions taken at EcoPolitics IX, Black activists, too, pull in various directions along a Left/Right political continuum, just as Greens and feminists do.

There are indeed some complacent, affluent, self-serving and sexist environmentalists in the IUCN, the leisure-oriented US Wilderness Movement and the North Queensland minority who dubbed themselves Sanctuary Protectors. But there are also healthy and thoughtful Green-Black efforts. Individuals within ACF, TWS, FOE, Greenpeace, WHEN, Greening Australia and WWF are working with Aboriginal people to refine Land Rights policy, pay the rent, get better provisions on hunting, fishing, and parks. Despite Langton's colourful portrait, most eco-activists do not use the complex word 'wilderness' as a code for genocide, are not Volkish biological reductionists, and have their own criticisms of sappy New Ageism. There are plenty of local examples of this eco-socialist/eco-feminist practice in the pages of *Chain Reaction* magazine, and a US-based Black-Green alliance speaks out in

at an ideological level,  
'green business' has dispersed through Right think tanks, phoney environmental front groups, and 'appropriate' cultural activities.



Richard Hofrichter's collection *Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*.

### Accepting the wild in ourselves

Nevertheless the observation that wilderness is inherent to the imperial project still holds. Wilderness 'husbanding' of 'virgin lands' through national parks further extends the conquest, displacing indigenous skills and livelihood. TNCs at the Rio Earth Summit pushed openly for more global 'enclosures' and for privatisation of parks. But white men's rhetoric of wilderness 'management' is self-contradictory, and speaks the bad faith of liberal rationalist principles designed to gloss over instrumental mastery and ultimately dismemberment of life.

By definition 'the wild' must be what escapes 'control'. By this, I mean control in the instrumental and exploitative sense that white people use. For when Pearson speaks of his people as 'custodians' of country, caring rather than management is implied. It is surely important for Greens, and for Black self-determination, to see that this radical distinction does not get lost in the political mist.

Just as 'wilderness' has contradictory meanings, so does 'woman' – that other projection of masculine self-loathing. But if a 'virgin' is the 'reserved object' of men's desires, the original meaning of 'virgin' is a woman of strong and self-reliant spirit. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva point out in *Ecofeminism*, it is no surprise that the global push for resource management is matched by a parallel imperative to appropriate women's reproductive processes, by *in vitro* techniques as if real live women were 'not really there'. The trial use of dangerous contraceptives on Third World women's bodies also expresses this *terra nullius* logic, as do product patents based on the hormone relaxin mined/extracted from women's wombs.

High-tech living can only fake self-determination. Consider the so-called 'autonomy' of a young white woman whose sexuality is effectively leased to a contraceptive pharmaceutical company. Consider also, the young Gungalidda woman as described by Wadjularbinna in her interview with Cam Walker (*Chain Reaction* no. 71). She chooses her moon, meditates on the land with her man, goes deep into herself to see if it is right for her to conceive. Who is really free here? Who is really civilised?

An episode of Australian history put wilderness and *terra nullius* together, but that does not make this meaning of wilderness 'fixed' for all time. To think that way, would be to essentialise and kill off the very concept by which the human remnants of an impoverished western culture reach for the intractable and subversive. If you or I totalise the *terra nullius* association of wilderness, we internalise the master's racism. Not to mention playing into the hands of extractive industries like mining or bio-prospecting who would love to see wilderness go by the board.

Another current claim is that wild country has never existed because indigenous peoples have inhabited and modified every inch of the earth. Thinking about Antarctica, I wonder if this is true? But more important, is the species-ist or human chauvinist logic behind the claim. For the suggestion is that other species, rocks and streams, do not have value in their own right, but only because people have 'put labour' into them. Hence, there would be no such thing as 'wild' foods, only cultured ones. This makes good sense in the current international fight over gene patenting, farmers' rights and indigenous royalties. In today's economic climate, commercial development of wildlife by tribal groups displaced and ravaged by 'development', may be one of the few livelihood options they have. But the deeper implication is that animals cultivated commercially for their skins have no value in their own right, only white man's 'market value'.

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In the longer run, to base 'value' on human labour and markets in this way, is to buy into the founding political economic assumptions of modern capital, where only what is 'improved' – the commodity – has worth. The alternative eco-centric view is to see nature as having 'intrinsic value', so replacing the human-centred ethic with one honouring all species. But it is easy for middle-class Australians with well-paid jobs to take the high moral ground on 'animal rights' or 'wood chipping', isn't it?

On the other hand, it is also hard; for they must speak out at the risk of sounding classist and racist. Yet, conservation of habitat has to be more fundamental than particular 'improved items'. If ecological life-support systems as a whole are allowed to break down, then even these foods will wither away, so threatening the security of all races

on earth. In the last analysis, eco-centrism is human common sense. There is no dualism of humans versus nature. All life is interlinked and all has intrinsic value.

In this eco-centric view, land is never vacant as in *terra nullius*, but an intractable 'subject' in its own right. A similar notion is often found in indigenous Customary Law. Many Black and Green activists feel that it is appropriate for humans to live in awe of earth's own subjectivity. Some identify with its subversiveness. In this sense, 'wilderness' speaks of potentials to re-discover in ourselves. Moreover, with the push by pharmaceutical corporations into 'gene splicing' and the 're-design and patenting of animal parts', the 'wild' is lost for ever.

Predictably, DNA research on Afro-American youths by the US National Institute of Health is even trying to 'turn off' the supposed biological 'sources' of delinquency in the ghetto. But far from 'imposing order over chaos', eurocentric scientists partaking in the compulsion to 'control nature' create man-made havoc by cutting across ecological bonds established over thousands of years. Who knows what putting fish genes into tomatoes will do to



human heart cells or what ice minus bacteria will do to storm clouds?

#### **From Green to Black to Red to Mauve – and back**

The Judaeo-Christian mindset imagines nature as a 'great chain of being' in which a hierarchy of dominations extends from white men and their God at the top through white women, black men, black women, children, animal species, plants, air, water and rocks. Capitalism and the Whig revolution gave middle-class masculinity sovereign rights, but the liberal pluralist tradition got stuck after that. Socialism has so far failed to get working-class men a fair piece of the pie. Feminism, postcolonial struggles, ecology, each in turn challenges the 'natural hierarchy' of class privilege. But each link in the chain of dispossession squabbles with the others like anxious, unloved siblings.

So Black and Green, or Red and Mauve, sometimes lock in a battle for political recognition, arguing their case in the discourse of sovereignty and rights. The 'divide and rule' which follows – as we saw at EcoPolitics IX – simply reinforces the master's control even while, at the same time, corporate colonisation through bio-prospecting, drives a scalpel through the old paternal promise of domestic protection. For indigenous peoples and women, the semantics of self-determination is annulled by the thrust of white men's science beneath their very skins. Equal pay, contract law and land ownership walk a barren field, when blood, sweat and tears are mined, patented and sold.

Most Greens, ecofeminists, and Australian indigenous people, agree that eurocentric culture fails on three counts: it is spiritually sick, economically unjust and environmentally unsustainable. Wilderness in measured doses – usually on Sundays – has been a salve to the West's malaise, but like sexuality and conflict, it must be contained. The flaccid, unfocused faces of the men in grey suits and their policy advisers, tell it all. The Big Men are very lost: but if the 'W' word can expose the Achilles heel of a bankrupt civilisation, then let's work on that point of least resistance. Green, Black, Red and Mauve politics might start by building a mutually supportive alliance with the white men's movement to emancipate from deforming gender roles and structures.

We do not challenge the monoculture of corporate sav-

ages by denying 'diversity' and 'wildness'. To dub all talk of indigenous 'difference' as 'primitivising', is to take on board the nineteenth-century evolutionist mentality with its ladder of 'progress', rather than to respect the diversity of people's ways. It is to shun 'women's business' in favour of 'white men's business'. At EcoPolitics IX, ATSIC Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson put it this way: 'just because Aboriginal people have no division between Culture and Nature, does not mean we are closer to Nature' in the eurocentric sense of inferior. Struggles for biodiversity and cultural diversity are one and the same.

Australian indigenous cultures offer rational models of how that linkage has been realised by a people in their history. To say this is neither nostalgia nor a perverse claim that indigenous environmental practices are 'better' than western scientific ones. All cultures make mistakes. Neither is it to suggest that Aboriginal peoples should necessarily want to live as their ancestors have – though some may, and some whites may like to join them. All cultures change. But in times like these, *when the lifestyle of a few causes global poverty and ecological devastation, there is an urgent need to reappraise economic alternatives to industrialisation; to re-frame our political tenets, and to start taking small everyday steps away from the folklore of self-loathing and its pitiful gadgetry.*

Eurocentric concepts, such as management and control and paternalistic beliefs that western technologies are essential to the good life, are the most insidious form of invasion. After all, what is white men's 'progress' but a time and energy consuming process of dismantling living things and turning them into dead matter? The only lasting product of 'economic growth' is waste. Yes, let's put 'wilderness' under the spotlight, but let's put racist concepts like 'development' there with it. As opposed to the coloniser's *terra nullius*, there is a liberating meaning of wilderness as something inalienable with intrinsic value, something beyond the myopia of capitalist deals and commodities. Let's use it to halt the Manchesterisation of country!

Ariel Salleh is an environmental activist whose book *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, Zed, London, is due out later this year.