

Wilderness and its inspiration

(A recording of Dr Brown's talk, which was given without a prepared speech or notes, has been transcribed by the Conference organisers for the proceedings. We apologise for any inadvertent errors of interpretation.)

by Bob Brown

Wilderness is arguably the world's fastest disappearing non-renewable resource. Wilderness is inspirational. It can be said that there is no inspiration without wilderness.

As the saying goes, "It's not about how many breaths you take; it's about how many times your breath is taken". This saying always reminds me that the greatest source of inspiration is the wild planet itself.

Whilst taking David Suzuki, now 70, from Hobart to North-Western Tasmania via the Russell Falls, we brought up the topic of the recent 70th anniversary of the death of the last recorded Tasmanian Tiger. In what might be the words of the Dalai Lama, 'perhaps the Tiger didn't die: Suzuki was born at the same time and he became an eco-Tiger around the world'.

We spoke about other basic things that don't get talked about much in the rush of television, advertising, making money and greed. I want to reiterate a story from David that applies to wilderness and the interconnectedness of everything - about the Great Forests of British Columbia, which is equivalent to the Tasmanian Forests in many ways. It has the same destructive forces, and is another great temperate wilderness at stake.

The Great Forests of the western coast of British Columbia have the greatest mass of living material per acre anywhere on the planet, and yet they're in depauperate soils. Coming down off the rocks, there's a small coastal plain, the ocean and then a huge forest. For a forest to exist there needs to be nitrogen. Terrestrial nitrogen, N₁₄, is in low quantities at this location. How is it that this massive forest exists?

When they drill tree cores to analyse the core in a laboratory, they find that these trees are not built on terrestrial nitrogen, N₁₄, but on marine nitrogen N₁₅. Why is this so?

The salmon swim up the rivers of British Columbia, and into the rivers wade the grizzly bears to eat the salmon every year. Bears love to eat on their own: the bears wander about 150 metres into the forest, and sit to eat the head and guts from the salmon. They leave the rest on the ground to return to the river in search of more salmon.

Flies are attracted to the salmon left by the bears and next day there are a pile of maggots. Migratory birds that come in from Mexico through to Alaska feed on the maggots and flies that have developed from the maggots. They then take the food, ingested, off to Alaska.

Many things contribute to this cycle amongst the bears creating waste throughout the forest, such as worms, for example. Putting it simply, it is the ocean supplying the crucial ingredient to the location of the biggest weight of forest concentrated anywhere on the planet.

Logging of the headwaters of the rivers sends silt to the spawning places of the salmon. Salmon numbers have collapsed. This fantastic, intricate, interrelated ecosystem is being destroyed.

There is a ministry for fisheries; there's a ministry for forests; for tourism; oceans; the environment;

and for native people. None of these government departments see it as any of their business to be interrelating with the others. Therefore, this extraordinarily complex network is compartmentalised; a system which we only understand at the edge, and so the forest is being destroyed.

This is an inspiring story: through examination of the unexpected, it reveals the abilities of wilderness, and indeed the limits of these abilities to regenerate.

Our minds are conditioned toward immediate self-interest in this age of materialism. What we *do know* is that not only the evolution or creation of ourselves is dependent on wilderness, but our wellbeing is also dependent on this wild planet. I have reduced this argument, for the sake of simplicity, to consideration of the curl on our ear. Our ears are designed to pick up the slightest sounds of the forest floor, not for listening to TV. Yesterday I noticed this design has been made redundant: as David Suzuki and I were walking to Russell Falls, a young woman was walking toward us on the track. She had earphones stuck in her ears. Presumably she didn't want to hear the native birds that were out in full spring song. She had forgone the need for an external ear altogether. She was powering her way on the walk, listening to some sort of thumping music to remove her brain from the natural environment. Yet her forbears going back thousands of generations used this organ to great advantage.

Those of you who saw the recent Attenborough series on TV may have observed that it was totally based on the exploiting the inspiration of wilderness. There were fabulous pictures of mountain ranges and plunging waterfalls and extraordinary wildlife on the screen. In a way, it seemed like it was all okay. It's fantastic. There it is! Maybe it's not so entertaining for us to understand this greatest resource, if we're simply anthropocentric about it, for human inspiration and uplift and excitement and beauty and adventure, is being eroded much faster than when the first conference was held in 1977. We thought it was bad then; how rapidly the world is changing!

I read a report during the week that 100 million Chinese citizens will travel overseas for their holidays this year alone. We all do it, and they have every right to do it as well. As soon as I heard that figure, I thought of the great problem and impacts upon wilderness. The pressure of human visitation can destroy the very essence of wilderness which involves remoteness, pristine-ness and silence.

Yet perhaps we can get silence from elsewhere? Somebody went into the wild Styx forest of Tasmania and measured the decibels and then went into a plantation, growing under the Tasmanian sustainable forestry program, and found that the noise level fell to almost zero.

It is common sense that we can't recreate wilderness; the essence we bond with is not reproducible, but David Attenborough's program brings it into our living room. The audience for this program was extraordinary – the ABC rated higher than some of the commercial stations. In some ways, it's a very worrying cheat, because it is saying, 'It's alright everybody, the wild country, the spectacle, here it is', and then go pour another red and switch over to another program. In fact, what we are watching is archival footage for a century down the line if humanity is still around at that time.

A fortnight ago, reported in the *Guardian* weekly, Stephen Hawking asked this question on his blog: "Do you think humanity will still be around in 100 years?" He received 3500 responses from optimistic through to totally pessimistic about humanity's ability to survive the next 100 years. The responses indicate what I feel - that we are at a tipping point where we are unleashing these powers of nature, or at least we've got a hold of them. These forces of potential destruction that we have put built into everything from splitting the atom, to fiddling with genes, and into nanotechnology, for example, seem awesome indeed.

At the end of all this, Stephen put up what he thought. He began by saying, "I don't know... but have you noticed we haven't been visited by any aliens?" He has a well thought-out theory that evolution on Earth would be roughly convergent with the evolution on planet Zot out there in some other galaxy. He argues that when you get to our situation in evolution, where intelligence comes to a point in finding out what this all about, and therefore getting a hold of the ability to change it, the whole thing implodes. There are no aliens because whatever parallels with humanity out there, civilisations simply get to our stage and don't last the next 100 years.

Now that might make some of us optimistic; but it is a thought. When I look across the Senate I find examples of the theory. We have Senator Abetz the Minister for Forest and Conservation, well isn't that a combination? Most people live a lie in one way or another but why put it into your title! But there it is. What Hawking says is that we are in a period where we have an extraordinary ability to take from the whole living fabric of the planet and convert it to exciting science for ourselves. Where though, is the ethic, where is the prudence, where is the probity that goes with that?

I am in a political party, and according to polls, 80% of people support embryonic stem cell experimentation. Last time it was in the Parliament a few years ago, my colleague Kerry voted yes and I voted no. I've talked to scientists in the past few weeks, including those on the Prime Ministerial Board, and they said to me: 'you voted for abortion rights for women, and how can you be worried about embryonic stem cell experimentation?' I think the two issues are completely different.

I'm like Hawking, I'm extraordinarily worried about humanity's ability to tamper with the human genome and to utilise it in the name of fixing things like Parkinson's disease for example, for which I may very well have the gene myself. The fact that Ronald Reagan had Parkinson's and might have been fixed had there been stem cell experimentation - I don't necessarily put on the positive side of the ledger in my deliberation...I'm still thinking about it.

You can see potential to fix people who have drawn the short straw in life. That's been the case with all in human society and all creatures on the planet. What about the other side of it? We have passed a law saying that you can't clone human beings. Do you know what came out of my discussion with scientists? The scientists ask, 'What's the difference between cloning and identical twins?' When it comes down to it, the scientists are not too worried about cloning human beings, which is quite extraordinary. When we start changing our diversity, because we think we know better than Mother Nature about what our gene diversity can be, we take ourselves in a very different direction.

We want better intelligence, more muscles, better curves, longer life, or to run faster. But look at Stephen Hawking: we'll have to do something to fiddle the genes so that we get Stephen out of the wheelchair. Really are we, as a society, in a situation that we should be involved in such engineering? I suspect not. I suspect we're a long, long way from it, and it worries me greatly.

I go back to wilderness as the reference point. Here is the ultimate laboratory. Wilderness is the place from which all life on the planet as we know it came, and which found itself in a balance with the planet, with very slow turnover and change. I think if we want to interfere and accelerate in that process, we're in real trouble. What we have done is accelerate the destruction of the very thing that gives us life and gives us inspiration.

One of the great joys of being a 'Green' politician, or an environmental activist or author, or scientist, is that being a defender of wilderness is a reciprocal business. I find that I cannot work in the Senate for too long if I haven't been out in the bush for a night, or for a stroll at the beach or a sit by the river. There is an interchange between us and nature, a magic which is quite simply priceless. As Olegas

Truchanas pointed out, it has led to great symphonies, great poetry, and great works of art. It does lead to life on Earth, and indeed to TV ratings going up, because it is so much a part of who we are. The classic, easy to say thing is that we put pictures of wilderness up on our walls, not pictures of bulldozers and chainsaws. You could write a book on why that is the case and you still couldn't come down to it: the answer is wilderness.

We put window boxes of flowers in front of our houses in cities. We don't put wrecked cars, or remnants of washing machines or even computer parts. Why is that? It's because besides our physical make-up: there this extraordinary bond in us.

I heard a discussion on souls and minds during the week: someone from Melbourne was saying again that we're only a receptacle and a response box. The ole' skin and box theory. Well I've spent a frightening couple of years thinking that had to be true, once upon a time. I now believe that individually and collectively there is more to it than that, and wilderness is right in the centre of that debate: The wild planet. "What would the world be, once bereft of wet and of wilderness?", as Gerard Manley Hopkins had it.

Are we doing anything other than marking time? People understand why wilderness systems are a priority, and why it's important to humanity, not only to us as individuals but to humanity's future. How can we look forward to a future in which all of human-kind has no reference point factor to the cradle of our origins, to our own being? We can't do that; we can't leave future generations bereft of that reference.

For example, in Tasmania, I hosted Mark Latham's visit to the Styx Forest in 2004. Mr Latham had breakfast the day before with Premier Paul Lennon and the head of Gunns, John Gay. That breakfast changed him - they'd got to him. Mr Latham was really worried about what he was committed to; the national press were waiting as we were headed out to the Styx. The change from when I'd seen him in Parliament House and said, 'Come on down to the Styx' was extraordinary. It was as if he was ill.

We stood under Gandalf's Staff, 84.5 metres high and therefore able to be cut. A tree 85 metres is safe; 84.5m and it's woodchips to Japan under the Tasmanian logging system. We stood under this gargantuan tree. Mark Latham has a look at it and is taken around it, and journalists waiting there ask, "Mr Latham what do you think of this tree?" He turned and said, "It's a big tree". We walked a few hundred metres through the lush rainforest understorey with *Dixonia Antarctica* on that beautiful morning to the Cave Tree. It's another extraordinary tree. You could fit a church choir or a whole football team inside the base of this tree. There have been bats and glow-worms living in the tree. We sat in the tree for while, with the media contingent waiting outside. When he came out, this future Prime Minister of Australia, who had been given his redirection the day before by the exploiters of wilderness, was asked by the media, "Well what do you thing of this tree Mr Latham"? And he said, "It's a big tree with a hole in it". What does this mean? Well, it means that now that Mark Latham visited this forest, those 20-60 hectares of forest is now safe.

John Howard also has no idea about wilderness. Like many others, he is probably more frightened of it than knowledgeable about it, but he understood, particularly with Mark Latham talking about it and having been there, and their polling showed, that forests had political traction. So on the North Coast of NSW he said, "I'm going to save Tasmania's old growth forests". Now that turned out to be a fib after the election: it was something like fifty thousand hectares.

But, the result of the politics in the run to that election is that the combination of what people in this country really think - those 84% of people who want Tasmanian old growth forests to be protected -

resulted in the protection of the largest temperate rainforest in Australia, the Tarkine Wilderness. They can still mine in the area, it isn't totally safe, but it was protected from the anticipated start of the logging of the deep red Myrtles and the erosion of the rainforest. I flew over it the other day with a wealthy Sydney resident who bought five very vital blocks of Crown lease land in a remnant natural corridor between the Tarkine Wilderness and Cradle Mountain. You fly over miles and miles of industrial plantation forestry and destroyed native forest, including a huge amount of rainforest, and of course, the wildlife with it.

So at the end of that, in 2005, an area wilderness has been effectively protected because of Mark Latham's visit. Although the campaigns of the conservation organisations and locals are extremely important, the Tarkine was saved because people everywhere understand that they don't want nature to be destroyed. They may know little about this area, but they are *inspired* by it. It's just wonderful to go into the Tarkine now. This morning's *Mercury* reports that the local council is looking at a program for capitalising on the Tarkine and its wilderness. The local newspaper, the *Burnie Advocate*, which is not pro-conservation, is promoting studies to enable it to become part of the Tasmanian World Heritage Area. In Tasmania, the mindset is going the way of wilderness. This is against a big conglomerate like Gunns Ltd that believes Tasmania has too many protected species, and that it's okay to kill off a few more of them.

I was at the airport one time and John Gay's wife came up to scold me about 'bad mouthing' her husband in public and the distress this caused. I said to her, "I'd like you to come out and see a Tasmanian community where people have had their lifestyle degraded, their beautiful views destroyed, and are frightened about their kids getting on school buses because the log trucks are thundering by. Their water has been contaminated, their real-estate values are down. They are horrified and their whole lives are being degraded by the activities of your husband and his company". She turned and walked away. John Gay was actually sitting right across the room watching all of this. I don't know why he didn't come and speak to me himself.

I tell this story because there is this extraordinary anger and bitterness that comes into such people: just after the state elections Mrs Gay is fulminating against the 'green trouble makers' because somebody pulled her up in the street and said, "You're a tree killer". Someone else left a dead possum on the lawn. I'm always rung up about these things and I make clear that I don't agree with these pranks.

Mrs Gay appeared in the newspaper over this story with a fur collar on - a dead animal around her neck. Yet she was complaining about the one on her lawn. That's the beauty of it, and the inspiration of wilderness. Those that are fighting for wilderness, end up with a better sense of humour in life than those who are destroying it.

This week, four new measures came into parliament. One was to increase expenditure for Parliamentary Members' printing allowance to \$13 million so that on average, 25 glossy pieces of paper can be placed in your letterbox wherever you are in Australia in the next 12 months by government members. A 7% hike in pay for Parliamentarians when the rest of the populace is on a 3% increase in salary and wages. Superannuation top-up going from 9% to 15% for the new MPs and old MPs remain on 6%, although the rest of the population is on 9%. \$30,000 severance pay if you get disendorsed by your party or if you fail at an election. This is just after they passed legislation essentially saying that 'if you get sacked, too bad'. Unfair dismissals are part of the new nature of this country's workplaces.

Christine Milne brought in a motion during the week to recognise the 70th anniversary of the death of

the last Tasmanian Tiger and the need to protect biodiversity in this country. The government voted against that - went for the first four, but voted against Milne's motion. It shows the power of the money over the power of the wilds, at the moment. The question is, do we get disheartened about this? Not as far as I'm concerned.

I just spent a day talking with David Suzuki, I left him at Mole Creek where he's going to help in the wilderness by lifting some feral fish out of the Mersey River to help in its recovery.

Going back to David's story about the bear, that story about British-Columbia and our situation in Australia: there are extraordinary pressures on the planet, but there are wins that occur as well. I think there are going to be more wins.

We will see a rise again of a new politic in this century and it will be a global politic. The question this century is going to be between those that are defending the globe, and those who are marauding the globe. There is going to be a new political division. It comes down to Steven Hawking's question: Are we going to have restraint or are we going to rip into it and end up like those aliens who never come?

We're all on the side of restraint. It's a beautiful place to be in. This planet is extraordinarily inspiring. It's a concept to be passing that on to human beings. Those of us who are defending wilderness are defending the survival of humanity. John Howard and company would argue that they're the people who are on the side of advancing society. They're not. They're the aliens. We're the Earth-lovers. We are the people that recognise this planet as being our mother who has to be looked after.

Thank you.