

Signposts of National Maturity

Why stingless native bees and the Uluru Statement from the Heart show a readiness to truly embrace our Indigenous heritage

After two years of patient watching and waiting, enjoying their quiet industriousness, it was time to split my backyard stingless native beehive. I'd invited one of our local native bee club experts (yes we have a thriving native bee club in town, one of many popping up across Australia!), an enthusiastic retiree named Rex, around to have a look. He confirmed the brood was flush against the lid with nowhere to expand. So, having prepared the new boxes, I invited the neighbours over, gently broke the seal, and split the two boxes in two. The native bee brood cone is a beautiful spiral shape that rises up from the base in perfect symmetry to house the eggs laid by the queen. Surrounding the cone is a far messier but equally wondrous assemblage of honey pots where the honey is stored. The honey tasted different from European bee honey. It is darker, more fragrant with a slight citrus flavour, far more medicinal, and treacle-like. The concentrated richness and diminutive size of the native bee (similar size and colour to the bush fly) may explain why production is significantly lower. I'm only surmising here, I don't know the answer, and until recently there were only a handful of eccentric entomologists who might. And of course, the hundreds of Indigenous tribes living in our tropical and sub-tropical climes who have dined on their much-prized 'sugarbag' for eons.

Tasting sugarbag again transported me back to my first taste. I was working for the Northern Land Council 'Caring for Country' team and visiting the Gurruwiling Rangers at Ramangining, a small community on the edge of the Arafura Swamp in NE Arnhem Land. We had been out all day and were barrelling back to 'Ramo' along the 4wd track when Otto, the head ranger, yelled to the driver to stop. He'd run out of sugarbag and needed a top-up. Rangers are never more animated than when out on Country and need no excuse to stop, again. We all leapt out and I felt privileged to witness the ancient art of gathering sugarbag. Otto said he knew the exact location of dozens of sugarbag trees around Ramo. He stripped a sturdy, one and a half metre long green sapling of its branches and walked over to the large ironbark tree. Stingless bees create their hives in the hollows of eucalyptus trees with a minuscule entrance at the bottom and an exit hole a few metres up the trunk, both very difficult to locate unless you know what you're doing. Otto began slowly poking the sapling

stem up deeper and deeper into the entrance of the hive. In no time at all a steady flow of sugarbag began to flow out the entrance and into an old coffee tin placed below. This hive is then left alone for enough time to repair and recharge itself before the next visit.

Today, native stingless beehives (homes suited for Australia's eleven social, honey-producing species of native bee) and solitary bee 'motels' (homes for the remaining 1700 or so solitary native bee species) are popping up in backyards almost as regularly as solar panels. The country seems to be waking up to the fact that we have our own indigenous native honeybee.

Perhaps this reflects a broadening national curiosity, fascination, and dare I say, pride in our Indigenous heritage? A continuing maturation of our national psyche, moving beyond our colonial roots, increasingly comfortable and willing to embrace our unique Australianness'?

In 2016, I wrote a piece for the Guardian ⁽¹⁾ arguing the case for continued federal funding of the fledgling Aboriginal ranger and Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) programs that were successfully taking root and expanding. At the time the argument on the conservative side of politics was that these ranger jobs were not 'real jobs'. That, because they were government-funded roles managing Aboriginal land and cultural heritage, they were in some way different from other government-funded roles managing public land and heritage. Conveniently forgetting they fund national park rangers, local shire workers maintaining council reserves and heritage sites (such as our Anzac memorials), and private contractors fulfilling government contracts. I questioned whether it was more about whose development agenda was being fulfilled, whose memorials, historic events, and celebrations were being honoured and maintained, and whose land was being cared for? That until they're all of ours we remained a divided and, dare I say, racially divided country.

Five years on, I'm glad to report that these programs have greatly expanded and are supported by all sides of government, both State and Federal. Over 20% of Australia is now owned or managed by traditional owners using traditional governance and management practices to sustainably manage the land. There are over 78 IPA's and 120 ranger groups employing thousands of Aboriginal people ⁽²⁾. Many have achieved financial self-sufficiency through innovative, sustainable, landscape-scale management practices, such as their carbon farming projects used to manage the northern savannah grasslands and open forests. These

generate thousands of carbon credits and millions of dollars to support Aboriginal communities living on, and caring for, their homelands.

A good example is the Gurruwiling Rangers who, along with another 7 clan-based ranger groups, are now independently managed under the umbrella of their community-owned Arafura Rangers Aboriginal Corporation. They run a range of community, not-for-profit social enterprises such as the recently opened, start-of-the-art crocodile hatchery in Ramingining ⁽³⁾. Sustainable economic development of the north on Traditional Owner terms.

I could point to other examples of this deepening appreciation of our Indigenous heritage. Such as the Ngangkari Aboriginal healers who are now working alongside and complimenting western medical approaches in mainstream health clinics. Using a range of traditional healing techniques focussing on the realignment of the human spirit ⁽⁴⁾. Or the growing number of Aboriginal Controlled Health organisations providing a blend of health services to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Examples of deep, genuine community-led truth-telling, reconciliation, and healing such as what is happening at the Myall Creek massacre site ⁽⁵⁾. This initiative is managed by the Friends of Myall Creek who are governed by an elected committee, half Aboriginal, half other, where the Aboriginal voice has the final word. They hold an annual commemoration ceremony over the June long weekend where all are invited to hear and share each other's stories. A memorial walk was established in 2000, an Aboriginal garden and amphitheatre in 2021, and a world-class cultural and education centre is to come. They also support other communities in finding their voices.

The Friends of Myall Creek, and others like them, are showing that Australians are willing to truly acknowledge and own the darker side of our colonial legacy, to acknowledge the ongoing intergenerational trauma (suffered by both sides) and heal together.

I've found myself travelling past the Myall Creek Memorial site during my commute from Grafton to Narrabri for the past 18 months. The first time I stumbled across the signpost I was completely taken by surprise as I realised this was the site of one of the most infamous massacres in our genocidal, colonial history. It was infamous, not because of the scale or

savagery of the slaughter, in which over 28 men, women, and children of the Wirrayaraay people, a tribal clan of the Gamilaraay nation, were killed. It was no more violent or extreme than any of the other 270 plus documented massacres over our 140-year occupation period ⁽⁶⁾. It was infamous because it was the first time the European perpetrators faced retribution for their actions in a court of law, and the only time some were hung.

As you travel down into the cleared, pasture-filled valley from the north you notice the Myall Creek Station homestead dominating the landscape on the left. A large, two-storey residence which has the resonance of a southern cotton plantation homestead, cotton pickers bent low over the crop the only aspect lacking. There is still an empty, haunted feel to the land, similar to what I remember feeling when travelling through parts of the cleared basalt plains of western Victoria or when approaching an old seminary or orphanage.

The memorial itself is signposted about a kilometre past Myall Creek at the top of its southern ridge. I felt a compulsion to stop, to step foot on the soil, spend time reading about the history laid out along the trail, soak up the turbulence of the times. I was thankful for the opportunity to pay my respects to those that were murdered, and their ancestors left to carry the burden. To be humbled by humanity's ability to forgive and move forward with unity and purpose. Over the eighteen months, I've enjoyed watching the further development of the site, the yarning circle, visitor facilities, and growing native food plants in the Aboriginal garden. It has been heartening to see the increasing numbers of cars in the car park, especially over the school holiday periods. Even during Covid lockdown restrictions!

I grew up in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne during the 1970's and 80's. I was surrounded by Aboriginal people yet didn't knowingly meet any till my late twenties when I went actively looking for a way to help support their voice being heard during the native title act debates in the 1990's.

I've since been on my personal journey of learning about our Indigenous peoples and heritage and have seen significant advances in my lifetime. Not least of which is hearing more and more Aboriginal voices telling their own stories, being more visible in their communities and mainstream society. Having greater agency over their lives. I would like to see this trend continue, for my grandchildren's generation to meet and hear the Aboriginal voices in their local communities, no matter where they live in Australia. To visit and learn

about sites of cultural significance through the invitation of their local Aboriginal communities.

Are these signs we are truly embracing and valuing our Indigenous heritage? Could a national maturation explain why the Uluru Statement from the Heart has resonated so deeply and stays fresh in our hearts and minds? For it has refused to die, in much the same way as the need for a formal apology to the stolen generation refused to die and reached its inevitable conclusion.

Poll after poll since 2017 has confirmed this ongoing favourable public support since the Statement was presented on 26th May 2017 to the government-appointed Referendum Council for consideration by parliament. Most recently, the 2021 Australian Constitutional Values Survey by CQUniversity and Griffith University conducted in February shows over 60% of Australians remain in favour of a First Nations Voice to parliament in some form ⁽⁷⁾.

Australians recognise the fundamental truth and wisdom within the Statement, are humbled by its generosity, and feel, personally, the need for an honest and open dialogue as a pathway to true national healing and maturation. We've witnessed the powerful outcomes of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and are monitoring with interest the outcomes of the Canadian equivalent. How New Zealanders have embraced and integrated their Maori heritage beyond token acknowledgement and artistic symbolism, and have shared real power through their treaties.

Our current generation of Aboriginal leaders has provided us with a similar opportunity, a unique gift. Not only to help heal our national psyche but to place our country on a more sustainable future. An opportunity to understand and integrate their Aboriginal worldview.

We are lucky in Australia. We have a rich, thriving Aboriginal heritage with communities who have long known their health and wellbeing are intrinsically interconnected with their natural world. A study in Australia into Aboriginal spirituality and health outcomes conducted in 2009 found respondents overwhelmingly spoke of a need to go to Country to find one's deep spirit, to feel comfortable within yourself. If these physical and spiritual connections decline, so do their health and wellbeing ⁽⁸⁾.

The Malak Malak people of the Daly River region generously share their ancient practice of Dadirri to help on this journey ⁽⁹⁾. It is the practice of deep inner listening and quiet still awareness, which connects us and nurtures our spiritual well-being. This connection to, and inner contemplation of, the natural world may hold some clues for reducing the increasing sense of isolation and anxiety taking hold in the western world. Another opportunity to embrace the wisdom of our Indigenous peoples, to slow down and bear witness to the natural wonders surrounding us as a reassuring reminder we are not alone in this world.

Despite this progress and these positive signposts, it will not be an easy journey for it will challenge many of our deeply held myths, worldviews, neoliberal democratic values, and power bases. It may well re-ignite the culture wars of the Howard era. There is still deep resentments and opposition to any moves made to rename towns or remove monuments which honour past public figures accused of committing genocidal acts. Even to refer to genocidal acts in school classrooms and curricula. Any reckoning of the soul requires strength of character, wisdom, and courage. True tests of maturity.

And yet, these difficult journeys may well be worth taking, providing pathways toward national and personal solace, through connecting with our natural and Indigenous worlds.

Our futures may well depend on it.

References

- (1) Are Indigenous Rangers engaged in real jobs? The answer is simple. [online] The Guardian Australia, 22 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/22/are-indigenous-rangers-engaged-in-real-jobs-the-answer-is-simple>
- (2) Country Needs People. [online], 10th October 2021, <https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au>
- (3) New ASRAC Crocodile Hatchery. [online], 29th July 2021, <http://asrac.org.au/news/new-asrac-crocodile-hatchery> .
- (4) Aboriginal Healers: complementary medicine finds its place. 28th March 2018. (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-28/aboriginal-healers-complementary-medicine-finds-its-place/9586972>).

- (5) Friends of Myall Creek website. [online], 10th October 2021, <https://myallcreek.org/about-us/>.
- (6) Allam, L. and Evershed, N., 2019. The Killing Times: The Massacres Of Aboriginal People Australia Must Confront. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/04/the-killing-times-the-massacres-of-aboriginal-people-australia-must-confront>
- (7) Most Australians support First Nations voice to parliament. The Conversation, 9th April 2021, <https://theconversation.com/most-australians-support-first-nations-voice-to-parliament-survey-157964>.
- (8) Spirituality and Aboriginal People's Social and Emotional Wellbeing: A Review. Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, December 2009, <https://www.winnunga.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Spirituality-Review-2009.pdf>
- (9) Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness. [online] Miriam Rose Foundation Website, 15th September 2021, <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>.