

PERSONAL PROFILE

LEILA HUEBNER

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Born in 1938, I grew up in East Kew, Melbourne, effectively as a lone child, when the local dairy, horse studs, cattle grazing and magnificent lagoons were interspersed in a still largely rural landscape cusped within the Yarra River Valley. I inhabited this rustic arcadia, using walking and swimming, fishing and the pushbike to explore these vestiges of this long-past era. My observations at times found a space in Crosbie Morrison's section 'For Boys and Girls' in '*Wildlife – Australian Nature Magazine*'. Earning 5 shillings (5/-) for an entry, it was a great way to allay the 1/- monthly cost to purchase the magazine. *Wildlife* became the foundation for a later library burgeoning with many publications; early on, mostly 'picture-books' about the natural world, before advancing onto more serious aspects involving conservation issues, ecological management and sustainability issues.

Plants were my umbilicus to avidly learning about nature with the Yarra River as my constant communicant, even after farms and orchards succumbed to golf-courses and then, much later, to the Eastern Freeway. I grieved intensely for the destruction of Willsmere Park and all its aquatic birds, myriad fishes, macro-invertebrates and aquatic plants - a postcard-perfect diorama of an earlier, pristine landscape. As the years rolled on, after finishing Matriculation at MacRobertson's Girls High School, I landed an administration position in the mandated territory of Papua-New Guinea and worked in several departments, including Agriculture and at Kila-kila Veterinary Station. There I met a genial entomologist, Professor Osbourne (he later returned to Adelaide University), who launched me into the art of collecting and systematically recording butterflies and insects.

Following my marriage in Port Moresby to a German national, Horst, we returned with a baby son to Melbourne where we both worked for 6 years to achieve our dream of developing a farm. This was realised in 1963 with the successful application for a 316-acre allotment carved out of the then State Forest. Our Crown Land Purchase Lease allocation was just in time: Environment Minister, Bill Borthwick, under Bolte's second government, set up the Land Conservation Council through the new Land Conservation Act, 1970, and suspended any further allocation of public land until a thorough review of all the 13 Study Areas was completed. Our area, South West Victoria, was the first to be assessed. I carried out a plant survey (which I still have filed) of the block before we turned this open woodland-grassland and Stringy forest allotment into a farm. The ABC documentary in the TV series, 'Landline' recorded our early pioneering endeavours.

Throughout the years, I have suffered family tragedies, which have taught me through real experience the many social aspects of understanding human nature, cultural mores involving the medical culture, political discourse, and the need for critical thinking in appreciating the significance of being taught sustainability within education, economic and social polemics.

I have been involved in many local issues and committees. The Nelson Coastcare Inc. group I convened in October 2011, and hold the position of project co-ordinator. I have also recently convened a Nelson History group which complements the Coastcare aspects of capacity-building the community's knowledge of Nelson's unique limestone karst region in both environmental and social history.

In the early 1970's, whilst a member of the Mount Gambier Field Naturalists, I met up with an amateur botanist, Cliff Beauglehole, he convincing me to become his honorary secretary for the next decade. This involved preparing a bi-monthly newsletter for the resurrected Western Victorian Conservation Committee, which had been originally created in the mid-1960's by Cliff, Fred Davies, Claude Austin and others campaigning in the response to the threat of the Little Desert, the Kentbruck Heathlands and Lower Glenelg becoming farms and pine plantation ('Black

Jack' McDonald, Bolte's Minister for Lands, was adamant that his vision for growth would not be impeded by protesters – but precipitated a huge, combined backlash from angered conservationists of all stripes, resulting in losing his Balmoral seat).

Cliff Beaglehole was an extraordinary man. Endowed with a formidable capacity to remember and recall plant names, with a wealth of knowledge of their taxonomy, his collections in herbaria are second only to Frederick Mueller in quantity of sheer numbers. Not only was he expert in knowing plants, but his capacity to understand interactions in nature were insightful. He engaged in cave excavations for megafuunal bones, collected bird specimens for the Melbourne museum, collected sea-weeds and grasses, trapped marsupials for science and aided entomologists collect insects, notably bees and wasps. He could have been properly described as the original Australian ecologist. Throughout the last two decades of his life he had a singular aim: to warn people and authorities about the invasions of new weeds. And he thoroughly lectured me on the subject. He became my mentor in understanding weeds with their attendant risks to plant and biological communities as well as to undertake plant surveys. In reflection, all of Cliff's repeated warnings 30 years and more ago have become only too real today. Through his dedicated teaching, I am only too acutely aware of the risks weeds pose for the environment and by economic extension, society. In respect to his memory, I believe it behoves me to carry on his concerns and voice these at every opportunity.

I will be the primary author of a poster at the 19th Australasian Weeds Conference, which will outline Nelson Coastcare's campaign to have serious weeds to become listed which are not presently on any declared listing. The example of the highly invasive and difficult to eradicate Italian buckthorn, prolifically spreading throughout Nelson's environs and beyond, will be used to emphasise the present problem of authorities unable to appropriately engage in realistically managing such aggressive woody weeds.

I thank CAWS for giving me the opportunity to present this personal profile.

