

Contentious perspectives on weeds: nettle, dock, dandelion and wild fennel – environmental weeds or environmental belonging?

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Abstract

In an essay on the practice of exotic mushroom foraging by the Polish community, Max Kwiatkowski argues for a deeper understanding of what he terms 'ethnoscape', the ethnic-specific interaction with landscape, its values and cultural returns. The act of foraging has been exercised by indigenous and non-indigenous people alike, the latter usually focusing on non-indigenous flora.

With this paper I will present the need to acknowledge the social imperative of environmental belonging, a necessary aspect to consider when fostering care and kinship in these times of disconnection and alienation. I argue that the process of simplistic labelling of spontaneous exotic species – as good or bad – needs to address the reality of the Australian social and ecological make-up. Tim Low in his book *Feral Future* presents the Australian landscape, as defined in the media and politics, as a cultural construct, a subjective interpretation, and used in a too-generic sense to outline a unified national identity. As I speak, people from various cultures gather for road trips to the edges of cities to pursue a practice of environmental belonging: foraging for weeds.

Perspectives on weeds

I would like to start this article with a cartoon (Figure 1)², simplifying the complexities of today's sentiments towards nature shared by many.

Already scientists have agreed that we are now living in a new timeframe, almost universally accepted under the term anthropocene, which regards the influence of human behaviour on the Earth's atmosphere in recent centuries as so significant as to constitute a new geologic era.



Figure 1. A gardener looking down at the world, a flower has just been wedged in the crust.

With this preamble I would like to present my research and output. I am an artist, a recent migrant and a father. Like all of you readers, I am concerned about the way we live our lives, the impact we are having on other species, and the fact that we are irreversibly altering the life cycles of so many other species for no other reason than self-gain.

As an artist and cultural worker I have been employed by various agencies to work with the community in order to provide a forum where various voices can surface, together with providing access to facilities so that those stories are acknowledged and recorded. In collaboration with the databases of various individuals, I have created guided and self-guided tours of urban and semi-urban environments. I have produced short documentaries and cooking shows, I have coded computer games for mobile platforms and written blogs, planted gardens, run workshops, presented papers in academic forums and, most of all, collected stories.

One common theme in all of the above is a relationship to nature, from a multi-cultural point of view. As an artist I document and analyse the possibilities and restrictions faced by various ethnic groups in Australia that are practising imported and ancestral relationships with the environment here.

As an example I will start with Kosta, a character known by a great many people in the Lilyfield area of Sydney, nestled along Whites Creek, one of the tributaries of Sydney harbour. Kosta is a big, joyful, extremely social Greek-Australian man, very well known by the local council and water catchment authorities for his kerb gardens, and has been planting tomatoes, fig trees and banana circles along the creek from forever. He sets up garden clubs and lobbying groups to be *the* change, rather than just talk about it: to minimize the needs from the environment, maximize the use of resources and, most of all, create a sharing and post-economic community.

He regularly gets in to trouble with rangers for planting what he's not meant to. The landscape designers for the valley have a bird corridor in mind, filled with native trees to attract wildlife. The locals have an orchard and vegetable garden in mind, which would subsidize their diets and hence ease the pressure created by industrial (monocultural) farming.

When a couple of years back I sought advice from him about an imminent discussion on weeds with John Thorpe, for ABC's *Bush Telegraph* (2009), he gave me a piece of wisdom that I still carry dear: 'Stick to your guns'.

So here I am, and here are my bullets!

Heather Goodall is Professor of History at the University of Technology of Sydney. She recently lead a research project looking at how cultural diversity shapes people's understanding and use of the Georges River and nearby open spaces in Sydney's south west: 'The Parklands, Culture and Communities project' (Goodall 2008).

The research focused on the experiences of local communities such as Vietnamese Australians, Arabic-speaking Australian communities from the Middle East and North Africa, indigenous people, both traditional owners of the area and those who have come from rural areas, and Anglo-Australians. The aim of the project was to produce a set of recommendations to help park managers from NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and local government to run parks so that they are inclusive and welcoming places for a broad range of people.

Interesting anecdotes could be pulled out of this research, mostly in relation to misunderstandings and cross cultural incompatibilities: a general attitude of 'best practice' is just not adequate, as different people should have the right to use open public space to suit their cultural needs. As an example, I'd like to mention the inability of park managers to accommodate night-time use of parks. Conflict arose when a growing Muslim population started to use the facilities during their

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² The Keen Gardener, artwork by Diego Bonetto, Creative Commons, www.diegobonetto.com

Ramadan celebrations. Famously, the community comes out in large families to eat and celebrate after dark, but park management would not allow use of the communal facilities because of restricted access after hours: no one was allowed in after sunset.

Which brings me to the title of this paper, 'Nettle, dock, dandelion and wild fennel: environmental weeds or environmental belonging?' I grew up in a country where, come spring, people would go out and collect dandelions and wild fennel as a seasonal treat. Here in Australia I am denied the right to teach my daughters what a dandelion or wild fennel looks like in the wild; I am obliged by law to suppress and prevent them from seeding. This is happening in a continent where most of biodiversity has been affected irreversibly by human intervention. This is also happening in a continent where most of the environmental knowledge is lost, forever. With the loss of aboriginal languages and culture through two centuries of European settlement, we now have a social make-up in this continent that has minimal direct interaction with the environment.

I am not talking about farmers with cattle or sheep, or orchardists with apples and mangoes or the newly discovered economic value of olive trees. Those activities are a sector of our economy that tends to use the land until there is little natural vitality remaining, e.g. the wood chipping industry or cotton industry. I am talking about the old person who takes the grandchildren down the creek and show the young listener how to collect, store and prepare that particular plant which will fix the sore knee. I'm talking about an overall sentiment of belonging and placement. How many of us know how to alleviate a headache without resorting to panadol? And yet this very practice is happening in Australia, in the most unexpected of all places: amongst the newest of the residents.

Let me now provide another example involving mushrooms. Mushroom picking is a popular seasonal activity for many European cultures. I can speak from my Italian background experience, but also know of other cultural groups such as Macedonian, Russian, ex-Yugoslavian and Polish that have a well-engrained connection with this activity. There is a fantastic essay by Max Kwiatkowsky (2004) about mushroom collecting and the cultural relationship of the Polish community with the Belanglo State Forest, a one and a half hour drive south of Sydney. Kwiatkowsky, who is a Human Geographer at the University of Sydney, uses the practice of mushroom collecting as example of non-Anglo-Celtic interpretation of landscape, and how this is something quite unseen or unacknowledged by mainstream media/

culture/policy makers. As he states in his conclusion:

'The Belanglo Pine Plantation example counters the commonly held assumption of ethnic spaces being primarily an urban phenomenon. Patently, ethnic minority groups, whether Poles, Macedonian, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Greeks or others, do get out and about just like all other Australians, at least occasionally leaving the cities for recreational purposes. It's just that the places they like to visit, and the way they view and use such places, may significantly differ from the Anglo-Celtic norm.'

Not everybody goes bush camping in the barbecue-fishing rod-and-boat-ramp style. In an exponentially cosmopolitan society like Australia, different kinds of culturally-driven interactions with the environment should be fostered as rightful symbioses. Many scientists today talk about the fragility of ecosystems, and the fact that there is no perfect single solution to address this. The dynamics are so inter-related that even removing a seemingly unimportant player could have disastrous flow-on effects. In many ways simple legislation of species as useful or not useful is risky and, some might argue, any definite ruling would be an ineffective piece of legislation.

It is common knowledge that the *Noxious Weeds Act 1993* does not seem to be entirely supported by scientific data, but rather by economic data alone in many cases. The majority of plants legislated against are done so for economic reasons, as they interfere with agricultural systems based on monoculture. As Doug Larson put it, 'a weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows.'

That alone would cast a bad light on the hypocrisy of the legislation's aims, but criticism also comes from other areas, like cultural studies or geography, where academics introduce the concept of eonationalism. Papers from the likes of Doctor Lesley Instone (2010), University of Newcastle, argue that 'foundational narratives, based on a questionable and colonial notion of what is "natural", redraw and unwittingly rigidify the lines of the native/alien debate in Australia by structuring environmental narratives within Eurocentric discourses of a pristine, purified and timeless pre-colonial nature, and create new geographies of whiteness in putatively post-colonial settings.'

I will also quote Kenneth Olwig (2003), who, in an article for the journal *Landscape Research*, outlines the fact that 'discourses concerning the threat of alien species to national landscapes have a

curious tendency to bleed into discourses concerning the threat of alien races and cultures to the native people and cultures of these same nations.'

When it comes to Australian specificity I argue that we are not immune from the noose created by post-colonial guilt coupled with environmental guilt. As an artist I delve into such themes, producing countless audience interactions in the form of guided, self-guided, audio and virtual tours of urban and semi-urban environments. I employ botanical species to metaphorically dispute the understanding of multiculturalism within the context of the Australian population, the plurality of cultures, and genetic background and stories. Within a socio-ecological argument I acknowledge the various differences of costumes/customs which exist in our culturally diverse environment, and highlight the traditional connections with introduced species.

At the moment I am readying myself for a two year project at the Casula Powerhouse Art Centre on the Georges River in Sydney's South West, collaborating with the local Migrant Resource Centre in one of the most culturally diverse regions of Sydney. Focusing on the parkland surrounding the institution and the adjacent nature corridor, a series of educational panels will be disseminated along a route, highlighting foraging customs as they are practised today. Preliminary talks have already given an idea of the wealth of untapped knowledge relating to wild olives, nettle, wild fennel, blackberry nightshade and camphor; all declared weeds!

It is the intention of the project to collect stories and relationships: the hidden and untold connections. Via such projects, it is the aim of Liverpool Council to facilitate an extensive process of community consultation that would allow for a widening of the recreation and leisure experiences provided by the Council, addressing the need of the community for variety, and fostering local identity. In an exponentially cosmopolitan society like Australia, different kinds of culturally driven interactions with the environment should be fostered, as rightful symbioses.

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