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Black is not Green

MITCHELL ROLLS

*Riawunna, Centre for Aboriginal Studies, University of Tasmania,
Private Bag 6, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia.*

Mitchell.Rolls@utas.edu.au

This paper critiques the notion that Aborigines purposefully are the consummate environmentalists that many, both Aborigines and others, claim them to be. It argues that such an understanding represents a misrepresentation of Aboriginal cosmologies and ways of relating to country. It explains how the more traditional ways of relating to country still in evidence correspond with more recent theoretical developments in ecological science. Those that pose Aborigines as 'Ecological Beings' manipulate superseded understandings of ecosystems. Noting the extent of environmental change to Australia post-1788, the article concludes that posing Aborigines as eco-environmentalists ignores the structural causes of environmental change, as well as ignoring the interrelationships between epistemologies and the practices they sanction.

Keywords: *Aborigines, environmental modification, conservation, cosmology*

Iron Eyes Cody, a self-proclaimed full-blooded Cherokee, is for many North Americans their ideal of the Native American. Cody, who is actually the son of Italian greengrocers, is The Crying Indian in the still running 1971 advertisement 'Pollution: It's a Crying

Shame'. In Cody, it is felt, is someone representative of the real Indian, a people who would and did tread lightly on the earth.

The guise in which Iron Eyes Cody dressed himself in 1971 and the anti-pollution campaign's longevity is unsurprising. In part this is because the campaign tapped into broader socio-cultural currents. Specifically, it tapped into prevailing readings of nature. These readings, in part a reflection of society's changing needs and desires, are integral to whatever construction of indigenes is in vogue. When nature is regarded as a benevolent and moral force it is peopled with the Noble Savage, but when a hostile presence, 'red in tooth and claw,' its supposed children are threatening brutes.¹ Reflecting and exaggerating these currents, and responding to nature's apparent degradation, the environmental movement gathered support and momentum throughout the 1960s.² This movement stressed the supposed redemptive qualities of nature which were promulgated through imagery of pristine scenic splendour.³ Needing a model that could demonstrate harmonious non-exploitative coexistence between humankind and their environment, environmentalists peopled the splendour with their ideal of the Native American.

Late in the 1960s the North American Indian acquired yet another stereotypic image in the popular mind: the erstwhile 'savage,' the 'drunken' Indian, the 'vanishing' Indian was conferred the title of the 'ecological' (i.e., conservationist-minded) Indian. Propped up for everything that was environmentally sound, the Indian was introduced to the American public as the great high priest of the Ecology Cult.⁴

It was the 1970s that saw substantial growth in the environmental movement in Australia and its emergence as a sometimes powerful political force.⁵ The concept central to the image of nature first propounded, and that which needed protecting and conserving, was of a virgin wilderness unshaped if not untouched by human culture. Into this perception of wilderness fed the erroneous but still popular understanding of Aborigines. It was widely thought that both

structurally and ecologically they had not left a mark upon the landscape. Instead, they had left nature at its purest, of which only diminishing pockets remained. Then towards the end of the twentieth century came a significant change. To the image of Aborigines as primal environmentalists at one with the natural world, those seeking the antithetical Wild Man as cultural critic added the crucial element of agency. Aborigines were not unwitting, but knowing and deliberate conservationists.⁶

Enhancing the perception of Aborigines as ecologists was a sequence of remarkable discoveries. The known period of Aboriginal habitation in Australia was progressively and dramatically extended. Well within one generation, 10,000 years became forty, then fifty, then perhaps even more. Here was 'the world's oldest culture' inhabiting 'the oldest land,' and for those seeking evidence of the possibility of living harmoniously with the environment no better exemplars for the Ecological Being could or would be found. As Annette Hamilton comments, 'the litany of "a culture over 40,000 years old" stands for the notion of sustainable continuity against the destruction of 200 years of white settlement.'⁷ In this respect 'the Aborigine' has usurped the position formerly occupied by Native Americans. Here too, however, indigenous practices and decisions irrupt from the green costume in which they have been cloaked, and in which some have cloaked themselves.

There are countless examples demonstrating antagonism between Aborigines and environmentalists. The following two suffice by way of illustration. The first was an early and very public clash between what hitherto were considered reconciled interests. The second is a recent incident. In the early 1980s the Douglas Shire Council commenced upgrading a rough track between Cape Tribulation (to the north of Cairns) and Bloomfield River (to the south of Cooktown). An array of conservation groups representing diverse interests from all over Australia found in the Daintree/Cape Tribulation road a cause celebre. Protest action against the road took place in most major cities, and direct action in the form of human barricades of one sort or another occurred along the construction site.

The road, conservationist groups and their constituencies declaimed, must not be built, and various efforts were made to attract Aboriginal support for this stance. After some ambiguity as to where the Aboriginal people of Bloomfield actually stood on the issue, they ultimately supported the road's construction. A road that, according to conservation groups, would not only irrevocably scar the lowland rainforest landscape, but also wreak lasting and significant ecological damage.⁸

On 15th May 2002, the ABC television news carried a report that Torres Strait Islanders had speared a dugong, possibly female and possibly pregnant, in Moreton Bay.⁹ It was explained by the hunters that the killing of the dugong was part of an initiation ritual for a twenty-one year old man. A spokesperson for the Aboriginal group asserting affiliation with the area in which the dugong was hunted expressed dismay. Claiming the dugong was sacred to them, and highlighting its endangered status, he urged National Parks and Wildlife Officers to prosecute the Torres Strait Islanders involved.¹⁰ Writing in the *Cairns Post*, however, P. Misi declared that 'Torres Strait Islanders will always hunt dugong because it's our lifestyle.' Furthermore, as food 'I for one treasure ...[it] as a T- bone steak from the sea'.¹¹

The above two examples involve indigenous people participating in the destruction of iconographic flora (rainforest) and fauna (dugong) of great sensitivity to those proclaiming concern for the environment. Yet it is still commonplace for Aborigines to assert that they are and always have been conscious and deliberate caretakers of their environment, not destructive exploiters, and a people who lived and live in a non-interventionist spiritual affinity with nature. Albert Mullet, a Victorian 'Koori' and National Park ranger, believes '[t]he entire way of life was geared to treading lightly on the earth, ensuring balance in all things.'¹² James Wallace, a Wuthathi ranger, thinks similarly. 'We are, in essence,' he asserts, 'the ultimate environmentalists.' 'As the original Australians we never abused our god-given environment, whether it was on the land or in the sea.'¹³ Sharon McLean (Gungarde/Cooktown), another National Parks

ranger, declares: 'Aborigines are the ultimate environmentalists; Aborigines are one with nature.'¹⁴ In Cooktown itself - a beginning or endpoint for tourists travelling the once controversial Daintree/Cape Tribulation road - an Aboriginal installation in the form of a tiled mosaic explaining regional traditions, contact history and survival, proclaims Aborigines live 'in harmony with nature.' The same sentiments, or variants of them, are expressed in the work of all those who seek solace or some form of restorative function in elements of Aboriginal culture. Through Aboriginal cultural mechanisms or belief systems, it is argued, the environmental crises facing Australia and more generally the western world could be addressed.¹⁵ These arguments, however, and self-identification with them, are not based on sophisticated understandings of ecology. Nor are they based on an understanding of the ways in which Aborigines exploited their environment, nor on an understanding of Aboriginal cosmologies, but rather on sentiments along the lines of Aborigines being mystically at one with nature.

Furthermore, Aboriginal claims to have 'never abused our god-given environment' and assertions of living at 'one with nature' elide the enormous impact of Aboriginal fire use upon a formerly unpeopled continent, and overlook how interventionist the regime of fire management continued to be. Fire was the key tool Aborigines employed in managing and exploiting their environment. All Aborigines, including those of Tasmania, could control ignition. Fire was used to manipulate ecosystems both small and large, and whilst little is understood about the ecological effects of 'fire-stick farming',¹⁶ it is known that Aborigines deliberately crafted particular environments and sustained others. The impact of this burning was not in the first instance benign. As Stephen Pyne shows, the Aboriginal use of fire made the Australian 'environment after the arrival of *Homo* fundamentally different from that which existed prior to *Homo*'.¹⁷ The deliberate and purposeful use of fire is now widely acknowledged, and the fact of active indigenous land management practices is mobilised in arguments attesting to Aboriginal entitlement to natural resources, including land. Nevertheless, as evidenced in the claims by indigenous rangers cited

above, there remains an influential sentiment attesting to a more passive relationship between indigenes and natural resources. This sentiment also remains influential in the Green movement.¹⁸ Whilst this movement encompasses a broad constituency, and few still subscribe to notions of wilderness as being areas completely unsullied by humans, the contrivance and appeal of a landscape minimally disturbed by human agency is retained.

The imposition of, and Aboriginal self-identification with, the idea attesting that Aborigines possess special knowledge allowing ecologically sensitive management of resources is one heavily indebted to popular western environmentalism. It is also indebted to western theories as to how the environment should be managed. The roll-call of well-publicised concerns such as introduced species (known as pests and/or feral animals and/or weeds under this ecological model) and land degradation (as so readily observed in erosion and loss of biodiversity) is ever present in this discourse. So too is the notion of conservation, where conservation is taken to mean that to prevent further damage to the environment interventionist management practices need to be enacted. For example, the stabilisation of river banks, prevention of overstocking and the elimination of pests and weeds, and so on. Aborigines, it is claimed, and many Aborigines claim this also, recognise the changes brought to the land and seas, regard these changes as being damaging, recognise their derivation in alien land use and management practices, and are desirous of implementing programmes aimed at restoring the imagined former pre-colonial balance. Excepting recognition of changes to the landscape, all the other assertions have much more in common with particular western ways of seeing and understanding the landscape, than indigenous Australian ways of understanding. When Aboriginal people assert privileged knowledge based on an innate affiliation with something broad-brushed as nature, or worse, Mother Earth, and then proceed to make claims such as those just listed, what is being demonstrated is the extent of acculturation to mainstream environmentalism.¹⁹ A problem with this is that in so long as non-Aboriginal ideologies, practices and/or beliefs are demonised as being responsible for

bringing the changes provoking environmental concern, and Aboriginal ideologies practices and beliefs are put forward as the panacea, then the fact that Aboriginal ways of relating to and understanding the environment now constitute part of the problem²⁰ is ignored.

Furthermore, there appears to be a profound misunderstanding or ignorance as to how Aboriginal cosmologies actually accommodate (and accommodated) the surrounding environs. There is also a corresponding ossification of Aboriginal cultures which refuses to countenance the processes and influences of change and acculturation. These two matters, one of ignorance and one of refusal, wear at each other, creating holes in the fabric of the propositions underlying the two claims and their variants. The first claim, broadly speaking, is that Aborigines, as a people blessed with an environmental consciousness that ensures an ecologically sensitive management of resources, will always implement and practice resource management regimes that are faithful to this creed. The second claim, again broadly speaking, is that Aboriginal cultures have not suffered any changes that would be antithetical to their capacity for competent resource and environmental management. Informing these notions is a failure to understand that 'cultural landscapes belong to particular places and times.'²¹ The notions are also informed by an understanding of environment and ecology that is under increasing pressure to yield. This last point will be returned to.

'Caring for' and 'looking after country' is how many Aborigines describe the relationship they have with their land. And many of those that do, particularly in central, northern and remote regions, believe they retain the knowledge that enables them to 'care for country' in a traditional way. This means, however, that rather than envisaging country as it was and attempting to 'care' for it in such a way that would promote an environment as free as possible of alien influences, country is accepted as it is. Partly this is because in vibrant and responsive oral cultures 'the new ... becomes over time that which always existed.'²² It is also partly to do with how country,

and more specifically, ecology, is understood. Within the more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal cosmologies, changes to the environment are seamlessly incorporated into a broader culturally specific understanding of ecology. As a consequence, a range of issues that cause consternation and alarm to environmentalists cause no such perturbations to many Aborigines, and if they do so, it is for different reasons. In disregard of this fact, it is western notions of conservation that we find underlying arguments employing Aborigines as consummate environmentalists.

The discrepancy between 'the Aborigines are conservationist' claims - whether made by Aborigines or others - and more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal practices and cosmology can be readily illustrated. A case in point is a detailed report charting 'Attitudes and Perceptions amongst Aboriginal People of Central Australia' to land management.²³ It found, for example, that introduced feral animals are not perceived as constituting a problem by many Aboriginal groups. This includes those animals responsible for causing considerable change to ecosystems. Significantly, nor are these animals regarded as not belonging to country. Whereas it is recognised that feral animals might once have come from elsewhere, their status has changed to one of belonging. When groups in Central Australia were asked about feral pests such as horses, camels, donkeys, rabbits and foxes, they pointed to the demonstrable fact that as 'these animals were living on country ...[and had] successfully survived and bred there,' they too, like native flora and fauna, 'belong to country.'²⁴ In this way several animals widely regarded as pests have become integral to Aboriginal cosmology. Some Central Australian groups maintain a pussy cat Dreaming.²⁵ The Pintupi, amongst others, consider cats to be food, not pests.²⁶ Fusing Christian instruction - Jesus rode on a donkey - and Aboriginal beliefs, some groups have donkey Dreamings. Other desert groups maintain camel Dreamings. Similarly, in her *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New*, Labumore (Elsie Roughsey) tells of the seamless inclusion of the pastoral industry into the ancestral legends of the Lardil (Mornington Island). She writes of witnessing the subjects of some of these legends, the Cave People, who in

resplendent dress and with stockwhips and cattle dog, were mustering their own herd of bullocks on horseback.²⁷ The literalness of such observations, and the veracity of the legends themselves, is repeatedly attested to.²⁸ In Central Amhem Land there is a widespread belief that the buffalo is a manifestation of one of the most significant mythological beings of the region, the Rainbow Serpent.²⁹ Whilst settler-Australian conceptions of the buffalo have changed (and continue to do so) since the animal's introduction in the early nineteenth century, free-ranging buffalo are considered a feral population and rigorous management and eradication practices are based on that conception.³⁰

Whilst many feral (amongst other introduced) animals do not have a Dreaming - nor for that matter do all native flora and fauna, a point consistently overlooked - this is not regarded as a reason why anything should be eliminated from country. In fact the presence of feral animals provides evidence of the productivity and therefore health of country. Eliminating them would be nonsensical and against good management practices. In fact, rather than killing feral animals, some feel that National Park rangers should instead be 'looking after' them.³¹ As Bruce Rose summarises in his report,

The reasons for feral animal control programs are very unclear for many people. Most of the people spoken to do not feel that feral animals damage country or interfere with native animals. By far the majority of those spoken to do not see any reason to distinguish between feral animals and native animals in terms of the effect they have on the country.³²

Yet feral animals do have an effect on the country, but where this effect is apparent, other factors are privileged as causal. Significantly, in terms of environmental impact, there is no distinction between feral and native animals. The fouling of waterholes and cloven-hoofed damage to fragile topsoils leading to windblown erosion, dust storms and loss of fertility is more usually attributed to a lack of rain than to the impact of feral animals, who,

like native flora and fauna, are now considered an integral part of a natural system.³³

As already apparent, land degradation too is regarded as a natural occurrence, not something demanding of interventionist management practices bent on either stabilisation or rehabilitation. In fact the notion of degradation is not readily accepted. Instead, observed changes to the land and its ecology are naturalised. This does not mean the extent of change is unrecognised or misunderstood. To the contrary, the breadth and depth of environmental knowledge Aborigines have gained is well documented, and there is no doubt that they are acute observers of the environment in which they live and have lived.³⁴ Change brought about by pest species and/or overgrazing is witnessed, but rather than blaming, say, overgrazing, factors such as too little rain are suggested, or that the traditional owners have been absent from country and hence not 'looking after' it. In this latter respect land 'degradation is seen as the result of non-use rather than overuse.'³⁵

Furthermore, contrary to popular attributions, the practice of 'looking after' country in a traditional setting did and does not privilege the conservationists' explicit objectives of conserving habitat and biodiversity. In fact the goal of these objectives are neither well understood nor accepted by many of the more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal groups. The practice of 'looking after' country is instead concerned with satisfying a range of other obligations and performing a number of pre-determined actions, all of which have variable consequences for the environment in terms of conservation. As Lesley Head argues, '[f]or Aboriginal people traditional land use is that undertaken with the appropriate social authorisations, according to law; the technology involved is a secondary issue, and the actual impacts that are the outcome are variable.'³⁶ Healthy country, therefore, is not country subordinated to the goal of maintaining habitats nor biodiversity, but one where, amongst a range of other practices, 'human stewards are undertaking appropriate actions such as burning and ceremonial activity.'³⁷ Irrespective of what is achieved by these activities, neither has as

their primary objective the maintenance of biodiversity. Nor is biodiversity an accidental and consequential corollary of burning and ceremony. Nor for that matter, is preservation of habitat. Thus the apparent harmonious and non-exploitative relationship that Aborigines enjoyed with their physical surrounds should not be simplistically read as evidence of their being conservation-minded. Erich Kolig argues how, 'objectively seen, the concern of Aborigines in pre-European times was certainly not to preserve the natural environment for posterity to enjoy.'³⁸ Contrariwise, there is evidence suggesting Aborigines were on occasion indiscriminate harvesters of resources. They were not concerned about depleting a resource through quantities taken.³⁹ Rather, they were 'unintended' conservationists in that technological and population limitations guarded against over-exploitation.⁴⁰ These limitations, in conjunction with detailed local knowledge, ensured what is now considered responsible resource management. This was not a product of the application of practices specifically intended to conserve resources. Furthermore, for many Aboriginal groups replenishment of species is managed through increase rituals. These rituals render '[p]ractical concern with conservation superfluous' for humankind's relationship to flora and fauna is 'predicated on [the] ability to critically intervene and increase *ad libitum* the numbers of any diminished species.'⁴¹ A key belief in the ability to replenish species at will negates a key argument exploited by protagonists, that being that Aborigines purposefully implement conservation measures designed specifically to preserve threatened and/or vulnerable species.

Aboriginal cosmology, therefore, mitigates against the argument and/or self-assertion that Aborigines are guided by an environmental consciousness as such a consciousness is popularly understood. This is significant because many Aborigines, and those that champion an Aboriginal relationship to country, argue it is traditional knowledge and the fact that Aborigines 'care for country' that is responsible for Aborigines being conservationist-minded. Clearly this is wrong. Something other than, in some instances more than, traditional knowledge is influencing such self-assertions and attributions. An

acculturated eco-environmentalist idealism is being re-hewn as innate, quintessential Aboriginal knowledge.

The notion of living in harmony with nature not only romanticises and mystifies the people said to enjoy such a condition, it also romanticises the natural world itself. Just as the structural-functionalist school of anthropology approached cultures as bounded, static entities that leaked their essence when pierced by alien influences, popular environmental narratives and much Green rhetoric approach ecologies similarly. Mainstream Green-based or influenced critiques of modern societies and their impact on the environment often configure the natural world as being an holistic, stable entity in self-perpetuating equilibrium. Change, almost always explained in pejorative terms as an imposition, is held to disrupt natural balance.

Notwithstanding that the post-1960s environmentalist movement formed part of a broader critique of rationality and empiricism in which modern society's transformation of the natural environment was adjudged 'enlightenment gone wrong',⁴² ecological science did provide models, and lend credibility to, Green critiques. Not only did ecological science posit that ecosystems existed, but also that they were naturally occurring and self-regulating entities. David Demeritt notes how ecological science's 'vocabulary of ecosystem and equilibrium ... lent itself to holistic readings by those outside the discipline.'⁴³ However, partly due to closer observation and partly due to a better understanding of natural processes, the notion of bounded, balanced, self-regulating and perpetuating natural systems was found to be wanting. A major problem was/is that of integrating different spatial and temporal scales within the one system. Apparently homogenous environments in one spatial and temporal scale, appear as something else altogether in another. A forest for example

at one spatial scale, is, at another, a mosaic of many different environments. Similarly, palaeoecologists interested in very long term vegetation dynamics describe a constant flux of

different species and communities where those working at shorter time scales see only stability and equilibrium.⁴⁴

Despite these advances in ecological science, the idea of stability and equilibrium remain central to many appeals championing the green credentials of indigenes.

Another problem is that whilst now generally accepted - even if the implications are not understood or acknowledged - that almost all landscapes are a consequence of anthropogenic modification, the idea of a boutique natural realm free of meddlesome humankind persists. Where humans - such as Aborigines - are included, they appear in the guise of eco-environmentalists whose intimate bioregional knowledge enables them to tread lightly on the earth. The ubiquitous National Park advisory to 'take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints,' is still held to be in keeping with Aboriginal ways of relating to the earth. Though the environment might be cultural in that it has been anthropogenically modified, the ideas of balance, harmony, preservation and conservation continue to be brought forward as fundamental principles of indigenous cosmologies.

Not only is this an inaccurate reading of traditional indigenous cosmologies - whether strategic, naive or wilfully ignorant - it also mobilises a particular and now superseded reading of ecosystems. Both theoretical and practical advances in ecological science demonstrate the descriptive inaccuracies to the model of bounded, balanced ecosystems thrown forever out of alignment by disturbance. For example, the idea of an enduring ecological stability, formerly a given and employed as a litmus test of environmental health, has been ruptured by the need to be inclusive of flux and responsiveness. It is now recognised that the natural world, both as cultural landscape and imagined wilderness, exhibits processes of disturbance, chaos and succession. Furthermore, such ecological volatility does not necessarily bespeak of environmental ill health, nor anthropogenic destruction.⁴⁵ The actuality, insofar as we can know it, is more complex and nuanced than this. Of consequence to my argument

here is the problem that ecological volatility as natural process poses for those seeking to mark certain cultures with, and spare others from, the stain of environmental vandalism. The task of distinguishing between natural and anthropogenic environmental disturbance is far from straightforward.

The new ideas about natural disturbance, succession and the relatively ephemeral composition of contemporary ecosystems deprive environmentalists of the scientific grounds to construct hard and fast distinctions between human and natural disturbance on the landscape and thus between natural and disturbed landscapes and geographies.⁴⁶

Ironically, the more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal cosmologies bring Aboriginal perceptions of ecosystems much closer to that of contemporary ecological science than those perceptions underpinning many Green critiques. This is because Aboriginal cosmologies allow for an understanding of environments that is inclusive of disturbance, succession and alien influence: the buffalo as Rainbow Serpent,⁴⁷ for example, and the Lardil's inclusion of the pastoral industry in their ancestral legends.⁴⁸ Mainstream environmental groups and many of their followers still overwhelmingly hold to an idea of formerly balanced and contained ecosystems being thrown into a state of chaos and crisis by introduced and therefore 'unnatural' disturbance. As with a former understanding of cultures, ecosystems too are thought to leak their natural essence when exposed to alien influence. Their ecological integrity is held to have been compromised.

Nevertheless, whatever understanding one brings to the environment there is no doubting that since 1788 the Australian landscape has undergone dramatic change. Some forty percent of the country is grazed by stock, and a similar percentage is marked by erosion. We have suffered a higher rate of faunal extinction than any other continent. Invasive exotic species are prevalent⁴⁹ and continue to arrive. The activities of humans post-1788 are visible almost everywhere. The biologist Tim Low points out how as a consequence

of these changes '[m]ost animals now live in humanised landscapes. A typical animal now lives in a paddock or a logged forest, whether it wants to or not.'⁵⁰ Not all changes introduced by the waves of émigrés are so readily apparent or intrusive. In his *A Million Wild Acres* Eric Rolls shows how Australia's largest native cypress pine forest - the Pilliga - is a comparatively recent artefact of European origin.⁵¹ And the above transformations have taken place upon environments that were already an Aboriginal artefact.⁵² Even when animals do not live in areas shaped by the activities of post-1788 émigrés, the landscape in which they move will almost certainly be, to a greater or lesser extent, a human artefact. If one includes pre-colonial Aboriginal land-management practices - 'fire-stick farming', for example - there are very few exceptions to this beyond the seas and other water bodies.

Troublingly for many environmentalists, much flora and fauna native to Australia appears to enjoy and thrive in humanised landscapes. Just as troubling for them is that native flora and fauna does not always prefer native habitat, nor does it always prefer so-called natural or native bush tucker. There is no doubting that the Pilliga forest now supports a greater abundance of native species than what was there previous to the forest's remarkable growth.⁵³ The clearing of land for pasture, grazing and farming, the provision of many permanent watering points throughout the country (dams and so on), the sowing and establishment of pastures, even the feeding habits of ruminants, have all combined to produce habitats conducive to kangaroos. Whilst some of these marsupials are now extinct due to post-1788 landscape changes, others such as the red kangaroo and the eastern grey have increased in number dramatically. Birds too thrive on farm and other dams, which have had the effect of significantly increasing the range of many species.⁵⁴ Some introduced invasive weeds, such as the much loathed lantana, now provide essential shelter and food to many native species, including wallabies, reptiles, butterflies and birds.⁵⁵ A number of unexpected birds have found refuge in capital cities. The powerful owl, described in 1968 by David Fleay as 'highly nervous, exceptionally shy and wary,' with its habitat confined to 'the dense gullies of a timbered

mountain ...' and as not being particularly adaptable,⁵⁶ now resides in inner city Sydney and Melbourne.⁵⁷ Endangered plants such as the velvety peppergrass has found refuge along roadsides, in lawns and beneath radiata pines, all situations generally considered by many to have little if any conservation value.⁵⁸

Native flora and fauna, like all other organisms, are opportunistic. If able to exploit to its advantage humanised landscapes they do so. It is not unusual for a native species to be dependant upon human intervention in the landscape, be it those species dependant upon Aboriginal mosaic burning, kangaroos benefiting from dams, or the various species that find food, shelter and protection in and around Australia's sewage farms, cemeteries, road verges, and alongside railway tracks. Similarly, cattle and sheep now graze in selected National Parks and conservation zones in order to preserve habitat essential for rare flora.⁵⁹ In other words, introduced fauna is now a management tool employed for the conservation of threatened native flora.

There can be no return to an imagined pre-1788 landscape, and any attempt to do so would undoubtedly exacerbate the rate of native flora and fauna extinction. Native flora and fauna now survive in and depend on new cultural landscapes. Consequentially conservation measures do not simply mean removing post-1788 émigrés from the landscape and erasing any changes they have made. It is also apparent that the changes wrought upon the landscape post-1788 mean that despite whatever expertise Aborigines had and have in the management of land, including the management of fire regimes, their expertise does not straightforwardly transfer to sound management practices under the new conditions. For example, it is often asserted by Aborigines and others that Aborigines retain the knowledge that enables them to hunt food sources without over-exploiting them.⁶⁰ There is no real evidence to support this assertion. To cite an earlier example, whilst there is little doubt that commercial fishing operations pose more of a threat to the dugong than Aboriginal hunting by whatever means and for whatever purposes,⁶¹ we simply do not know any more the level of sustainability for any number of

species being hunted and gathered by Aborigines using contemporary methods.⁶² This point was made very clearly by the Aboriginal spokesperson angry that Torres Strait Islanders had killed a dugong in his country. He called for the implementation of a thoroughly developed management programme and for the determination of levels of sustainability.⁶³

Unfortunately, the popular stereotype of Aborigines being exemplars of an environmental consciousness, and the heartfelt expressions of Aborigines self-identifying with this peculiarly western notion, is widely accepted as a truth requiring no substantiation. Despite the manifest inaccuracies, we see and hear in much discourse, popular and other, the imputation that if only settler-Australians adopted the same attitude as Aborigines towards the land and its resources an environmentally responsible lifestyle and (ultimately) political economy would result. This is a fallacy. Whilst Aboriginal apperceptions of the environment 'may render perceptible something authentic in nature'⁶⁴ which otherwise would have remained obscured, and there is no doubting their profound understanding of local environments built through age-old accretions of intimate observations and interactions, Aborigines are not natural conservationists, nor were they ever. Theirs is not a life of harmony with nature and unity with all living things. There is an abundance of refuting evidence. As Lee Sackett argues, 'Aborigines can be painted as exemplars only through selectively accepting abetting evidence and opinions while studiously ignoring contrary data and judgments.'⁶⁵ Ignoring this data in order to create a people as a tool through which to critique the West's record of ecological mismanagement, or as strategic or naïve oppositional self-affirmation, locks Aborigines into yet another construction of who they are or once were. The complex, differing and changing ways of Aboriginal interaction with the environment are subjugated to an imposed and/or *appropriated* Eurocentric model of what conservation and responsible environmental management means. This is not to criticise those Aborigines who, on the basis of introduced cognitive changes, articulate an environmental consciousness however modified through the processes of adoption

and adaptation. It is to argue that such a consciousness does not have its derivation in the cognition immanent to traditional cosmologies.

The inaccurate portrayal of Aborigines as conscious primal ecological beings not only operates to the detriment of Aborigines but also to the detriment of the environment. This is because the idea that Aborigines are eco-environmentalists ignores the structural causes - both within Aboriginal and settler-Australian society - of environmental change. The interrelationships between epistemologies, the practices they sanction and environmental effect - both directly and indirectly - are of significance. So too is an understanding of 'the relationship between nature and society in the production of knowledge.'⁶⁶ Understanding these relationships is crucial to developing a comprehensive understanding of causality underlying foreseen and unforeseen, intended and unintended, environmental impacts.⁶⁷ An explication of these relationships might also reveal 'the kind of nature we hope to make,'⁶⁸ and provide a better framework for more informed and less ideologically driven negotiations towards that end. Obviously then, it is here, rather than in imagined Aboriginal cultures, societies and identities, that something resembling conservationist management practices might be determined. Or at least practices that could possibly assist in constructing the sort of natures we desire.

NOTES

1. Peter L. Thorsley, 'The Wild Man's Revenge', in Edward Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak (eds), *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 284. See also Hayden White, 'The Forms of Wilderness: Archaeology of an Idea', in Dudley and Novak, p. 27.
2. Peter Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002).
3. This style is exemplified by the 'wilderness' photographer Peter Dombrowski's shot, *Rock Island Bend*, which was used to persuasive effect in the early 1980s advertising campaigns against the damming of the Gordon and Franklin rivers in Tasmania.

4. Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 157. See also Strickland in Martin, p. 160.
5. Amanda Lohrey, 'Ground-Swell: the Rise of the Greens', *Quarterly Essay*, No.8 (2002), pp. 1-86.
6. Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: the Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 263. See also Thorslev, p. 285. See Griffiths, pp. 255-77 for an informative discussion of the differing perceptions of wilderness, the sometimes antagonistic struggle between those seeking to preserve cultural and natural heritage, and how Aborigines are caught in this debate. See also Marcia Langton, 'Art, Wilderness and Terra Nullius', in Ros Sultan, Paul Josif, Chips Mackinolty and Judy Mackinolty (eds), *Ecopolitics IX: Conference Papers and Resolutions* (Casuarina: Northern Land Council, 1996), pp. 11, 16-24 and *passim* for discussion on notions of wilderness as employed by many environmentalists, and Aboriginal management of national parks and land stewardship in general. See also Nicholas Gill, 'The Ambiguities of Wilderness', in Elaine Stratford (ed.), *Australian Cultural Geographies* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 48-68 for further discussion on conflicting views about the nature and history of 'wilderness' and National Parks.
7. Annette Hamilton, 'Fear and Desire: Aborigines, Asians and the National Imaginary', *Australian Cultural History*, No. 9 (1990), p.22.
8. Christopher Anderson, 'Aborigines and Conservationism: The Daintree-Bloomfield Road', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 24, No. 3, August (1989), pp. 214-27.
9. Moreton Bay abuts Brisbane in southern Queensland, far removed from the Torres Strait at Queensland's northern tip.
10. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Television News, Cairns at 1900, 15 May (2002).
11. P. Misi, 'Dugong T-bone', *The Cairns Post*, Letters-to-the-Editor, 23 May (2002), p. 9.
12. Albert Mullet, 'No People, no Spirit, no Land', in Jim Birkhead, Terry De Lacy and Laurajane Smith (eds), *Aboriginal Involvement in Parks and Protected Areas: Papers Presented at a Conference Organised by the Johnstone Centre of Parks, Recreation and Heritage at Charles Sturt*

University, Albury, New South Wales 22-24 July 1991 (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992), p. 45.

13. Cited in Birkhead, De Lacy and Smith, pp. 29-30.
14. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 32. This is not the sentiment expressed by all indigenous contributors to this volume. Some showed an understanding of the complexity of ecological arguments, and made no claim to being the ultimate environmentalists, and recognised the need for collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous knowledges with respect to National Parks and broader environmental management (see Birkhead, De Lacy and Smith).
15. See James Cowan, *Two Men Dreaming: a Memoir, a Journey* (Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 1995); Robert Lawlor, *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1991); David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformations in Australia* (North Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1995) pp. 150-76 and *passim*. For a critical reading of Cowan see Mitchell Rolls, 'James Cowan and the White Quest for the Black Self', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 1 (2001), pp. 2-20; of Lawlor see Mitchell Rolls, 'Robert Lawlor Tells a "White" Lie', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 66 (2000), pp. 211-18, 284-86; of Tacey see Mitchell Rolls, 'The Jungian Quest for the Aborigine Within: a Close Reading of David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*', *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25 (1998), pp. 171-87 and Mitchell Rolls, 'A Reply to David Tacey's "What are we Afraid of?: Intellectualism, Aboriginality, and the Sacred"', *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, Vol. 26 (1999/2000), pp. 149-52.
16. Some 30 million hectares of northern Australia is burnt annually. Some of this burning is undertaken by Aborigines, some by pastoralists, and some by National Parks, amongst others. In order to better understand the relationship between burning and its effects on biodiversity, and in an attempt to ascertain the suitability of various fire regimes in particular environments, the CSIRO undertook an eight-year survey in Kakadu National Park. One finding of the survey was that the annual burning of some areas was leading to a reduction in biodiversity. See A.N. Andersen, G.D. Cook and R.J. Williams, 'Fire in Tropical Savannas: The Kapalga Experiment', *Ecological Studies*, Vol. 169 (2003), pp. 1-208.
17. Stephen J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), p. 82. See Pyne, pp. 71-150, for a considered synthesis of Aboriginal fire use and its impact upon Australian biota.

18. A range of terms is employed to describe different currents within the environment movement, and there is considerable dispute over what exactly each of them mean and/or which current they refer to. Many within the movement, however, use terms such as 'green' and 'environmentalist' interchangeably, indicating perhaps a broad field of shared concerns over such things as environmental degradation and habitat destruction (see Hay, p. 1). In this paper I follow suit and use the terms for the most part as synonyms. The term eco-environmentalist I use to describe those with a presumed understanding of ecology coupled with environmentalist (or green) concerns. See Hay, pp. 1-4 for discussion on the various terms used by and attributed to the green movement.
19. For an overview of arguments critical of the environmental credentials of appeals to Mother Earth and the more theoretically developed notions of Earth as our Mother see Hay, pp. 79-81.
20. I'm not suggesting here that environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity is a problem (even though I believe this to be the case). I'm simply stating claims are made that these changes do constitute problems and therefore need addressing.
21. Lesley Head, 'Australian Aborigines and a Changing Environment - Views of the Past and Implications for the Future', in Birkhead, De Lacy and Smith, p. 53.
22. Jim Birkhead, "Traditional Aboriginal Land Management Practices" at CSU - The Cultural Politics of a Curriculum Innovation', in Birkhead, De Lacy and Smith, p. 302.
23. Bruce Rose, *Land Management Issues: Attitudes and Perceptions Amongst Aboriginal People of Central Australia* (Alice Springs: Central Land Council, 1995).
24. *Ibid.*, p. 109. See also Elizabeth Povinelli, *Labor's Lot: The Power, History, and Culture of Aboriginal Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 128.
25. It was long thought that in Central and Northern Australia the feral cat might have pre-dated European settlement. This possibility, however, has recently been discounted. DNA testing shows that all feral cats in Australia have the same origin. They are all descended from British-introduced cats. The regional differences in coat colour are an example of rapid environmental adaptation. See Gary Steer and Alice Ford (Directors), 'Ten Million Wild Cats', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Television, (Film Australia), Broadcast 24 October, 2002.

26. *Ibid.*
27. Elsie Roughsey, *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* (Fitzroy: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1984), pp. 134-35.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 110, 123, 133, 134, 139, 141, 179, 203.
29. David M.J.S. Bowman and Cathy J. Robinson, 'The Getting of the Nganabarru: Observations and Reflections on Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting in Northern Australia', *Australian Geographer*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2002), p. 200; Jon C. Altman, 'Hunting Buffalo in North-Central Arnhem Land: a Case of Rapid Adaptation among Aborigines', *Oceania*, No. 52 (1982), pp. 274-85.
30. Bowman and Robinson, pp. 198-99.
31. Rose, pp. 110, 114; see also Bowman and Robinson, pp. 202-03.
32. Rose, p. 108.
33. See *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 43-55.
34. See for example J.R.W. Reid, J. Anne Kerle and S.R. Morton, *Uluru Fauna: The Distribution and Abundance of Vertebrate Fauna of Uluru (Ayers Rock-Mount Olga) National Park* (Canberra: Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1993), pp. 79-132.
35. Rose, pp. 47, 43-54; see also Allan Burbidge in Tim Low, *The New Nature: Winners and Losers in Wild Australia* (Camberwell: Viking/Penguin Books, 2002), p. 56.
36. Lesley Head, *Second Nature: the History and Implications of Australia as Aboriginal Landscape* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 225.
37. Deborah Bird Rose in *Ibid.*, p. 230; see also Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), pp. 63-72.
38. Erich Kolig, *The Noonkanbah Story* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987), p. 120.

39. Lee Sackett, 'Promoting Primitivism: Conservationist Depictions of Aboriginal Australians', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1991), p. 238; T.G.H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947), pp. 49-50.
40. Kolig, pp. 121-22; Lesley Head, 'Conservation and Aboriginal Land Rights: When Green is not Black', *Australian Natural History*, No. 23, (1990), p. 452.
41. Kolig, p. 122; see also Robert Tonkinson, *The Mardudjara Aborigines: Living the Dream in Australia's Desert* (Orlando: Bolt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 31.
42. Matthew Gandy, 'Crumbling Land: the Postmodernity Debate and the Analysis of Environmental Problems', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1996), p. 26.
43. David Demeritt, 'Ecology, Objectivity and Critique in Writings on Nature and Human Societies', *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1994), p. 24.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5; see also Griffiths, p. 258.
46. Demeritt, p. 26. The mining industry, forever opportunistic, was quick to mobilise these arguments in defence of their interests. See Doug McEachern, 'Mining Meaning from the Rhetoric of Nature - Australian Mining Companies and their Attitudes to the Environment at Home and Abroad', *Policy, Organisation and Society*, Vol. 10 Winter (1995), p. 59.
47. Altman, pp. 274-85.
48. Roughsey. Many pastoralists too have an intimate and profound ecological knowledge of their properties, and also display a more tolerant and inclusive view of environmental change. It would be inaccurate to describe these views as mere investments in self-interest. They stem from a social construction of space wrought from, amongst other things, observation, environmental knowledge and more intimately, the pastoralists' 'personal landscapes of work' (Nick Gill, 'The Contested Domain of Pastoralism: Landscape, Work and Outsiders in Central Australia', in Deborah Bird Rose and Anne Clarke (eds.), *Tracking Knowledge in North Australian Landscapes: Studies in Indigenous and Settler Ecological Knowledge*

Systems (Canberra and Darwin: North Australia Research Unit and Australia National University, 1997), p. 59, and *passim*). Interestingly, whilst what some describe as the ravages of over-stocking, some pastoralists, like many Aborigines in Central Australia, see lack of rain as the culprit (Gill, p. 61). And in a way that has parallels with the Aboriginal understanding of feral animals providing evidence of the health and productivity of country, some pastoralists also point to the animals' continued presence as an indicator of the sustainability of their practices, as opposed to focusing on the condition of the land (Gill, p. 62).

49. See Eric Rolls, *They All Ran Wild: the Story of Pests on the Land in Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969).
50. Low, p. 47; see also pp. 105, 105-22.
51. Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres: 200 Years of Man and an Australian Forest* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1981).
52. Josephine Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime: the Story of Prehistoric Australia and its People* (Sydney: William Collins, 1983), p. 159.
53. See Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres*.
54. Low, p. 87.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
56. David Fleay, *Nightwatchmen of Bush and Plain: Australian Owls and Owl-Like Birds* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1968), pp. 58, 60, 58.
57. Low, p. 109. Fleay (p. 59) was aware of a powerful owl observed perching in Melbourne's Botanical Gardens, but thought it 'probably an escapee from the Zoological Park.'
58. See Low, pp. 20, 25-8, 51, 100, 117, 288, 296, 301.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 290-30.
60. In late 1994 the outspoken Aboriginal activist Murrandoo Yanner speared two crocodiles for domestic consumption. Yanner was prosecuted under Queensland's *Fauna Conservation Act* 1974 (Qld) for taking and killing a protected species without a licence. Yanner appealed on the basis that he had traditional rights to hunt protected species in areas in which Native Title is held, and that rather than fauna being the property of the Crown in

such areas, it was the property of Native Title Holders. This case eventually found its way to the High Court, where in a 5-2 judgment, the High Court upheld a magistrate's earlier decision to dismiss the charge of illegally taking fauna against Yanner. See Sean Brennan, 'High Court Upholds Bush Tucker Rights', *Research Note* 11 (1999-2000), (Canberra: Parliament of Australia), pp. 1-3. The decision caused some concern that endangered fauna could be over-exploited in areas where Native Title is held. In response a spokesperson for the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service declared that '... in all tribal groups there are limits to what you can take and how much you can take.' Stefanie Balogh, Kevin Meade, 'Native Title Laws Safe: Beattie', *The Australian*, (1999), 8 October, p. 2. Currently in Tasmania, where no Native Title is held, Aborigines can take abalone without an amateur fishing licence, however, they are bound by the same quota and size limits that apply to licence holders. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner for Tasmania, Rodney Dillon, has been prosecuted for having too many abalone in his possession. Dillon is fighting the charge on the basis that the quota system constitutes a denial of Aboriginal culture.

61. Helene Marsh, in Phillip Toyne and Ross Johnston, 'Reconciliation, or the New Dispossession', *Habitat Australia*, Vol. 19, No. 3 June (1991), p. 9.
62. Head, 'Australian Aborigines', p. 53.
63. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
64. Holmes Rolston III, 'Science-Based Traditional Ethics', in I. Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel (eds.), *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge and International Response* (London: Belhaven Press, 1990), p. 70.
65. Sackett, p. 240; see also Anderson, p. 226.
66. Gandy, p. 31.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 36, and *passim* (pp. 23-40).
68. Demeritt, p. 28.