

Eucalyptus-flavoured ecofeminism and other ecocentric adventures

Michelle Maloney

About the author

Michelle is the Co-Founder and National Convenor of the Australian Earth Laws Alliance and is the Australian representative on the Executive Committee of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. She holds a PhD in Law from Griffith University.

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Becoming ecocentric

One hot, sticky, mosquito-filled day in my early 20s, I visited a gathering of marvellous environmental activists crowded into an old timber house just outside Cairns, in Far North Queensland, to discuss strategies to stop a development on Hinchinbrook Passage that would destroy areas of seagrass which provided rich grazing for Australia's precious dugong population. While chatting with a small group of older women long connected to the campaign, the topic of where I grew up was raised. When I told them "Central Western Queensland", each member of the group literally gaped at me and one woman, wearing a perky purple beret, blurted out "You grew up *out there*? Who nurtured you?"

I begin with this little vignette to emphasize that for me, while loving the natural world is imprinted into my DNA, it was also the people who nurtured me, and in turn nurtured my love of the natural world, that have played a huge role in my ecocentric adventures.

Mum, Dad and Uncle David

I grew up in a small, hot country town on the edge of the outback, quite a while before the internet existed and gave people the virtual interconnectedness we take for granted today. We lived 800 km inland from the coast and the nearest small city, an hour's drive in any direction to another tiny town and several light years away from the world of middle class environmentalism and perky purple berets.

The geography, landscape and biodiversity of this semi-arid upbringing created the foundations, the roots, of my Earth-centred life. The smell of my childhood was pungent gidgee trees and the more pleasant aroma of eucalypts; the setting for family picnics was the dry sandy river bed of the Alice River

while white cockatoos and corellas called out in the shady trees overhead; and my extreme love of rain comes from growing up in a place that hardly ever saw the stuff. Our town's primary water supply came from deep within the earth – ancient ground water, from the Great Artesian Basin. Mobs of eastern grey and red kangaroos were an ever-present sight; so too were non-flying flocks of giant shaggy grey emus. Sunsets were big, red and splashed across an open horizon that stretched out endlessly, sometimes monotonously, for a young woman with grand aspirations to travel the world.

My mother and father were simply fantastic parents, and both are responsible for my core values, which centre on ecocentrism and social justice. My mother was – and I'm pleased to say still is – a formidable woman: her environmentalism and radical feminism was born not from theories or university education, but from something deep in her own being and wisdom. And what was more impressive was that her values ran pretty much against the grain of 'normal life' out where we grew up. I have vivid memories of watching her challenge anyone who wanted to cut down trees, or kill a snake, in a time and place when doing both wasn't just acceptable, it was encouraged. She spoke her mind and had an unwavering belief that all plant and animal life, regardless of its value to us, should be protected. My father was equally wonderful and was (and still is) what I now call "a rampant plant-botherer." He could spend hours picking through the bush, walking about looking at plants, seeds and blossoms. And he was forever trying to propagate strange new seeds that he barely understood. He drove a lot for his work, and would often arrive home at the end of



A group of emus.

the day, or the end of the week, with an echidna, a lizard, a frog or even a harmless python that he had stopped to catch, then safely tucked into a towel, so he that could show his family the wondrous little creature and then take it back to its home. His love of nature, combined with his strong Irish Catholic upbringing, meant that ecocentrism was forged together with empathy for ‘the underdog’ (whether that ‘underdog’ was animal or human) and so he emanated an uncomplicated strain of compassion that I’ll always be grateful for.

The third and final member of the family that had a deep and important effect on my life was Uncle David. But he wasn’t an uncle at all – I’m referring to the fabulous David Attenborough of course. It’s actually difficult to explain to younger people today, what life was like before the extreme media flood we now experience on a daily basis. Rather than have to sift through copious amounts of information for any grain of

truth, we hungrily sought out news and adventures from other places. I grew up with one, non-commercial TV channel (ABC) that shut down before midnight, and a radio station that closed down at 7.00 PM. Once a week, pretty much every week I can remember, there’d be a David Attenborough documentary on TV and the whole family would sit together and watch it. Sir David’s shows enabled a little kid from the Aussie bush to experience the endless parade of biodiversity and witness the wonder of the planet’s ecosystems, second hand, from a timber Queenslander on the edge of a small country town. And I’ll be eternally grateful to him for that.

University and the Ghungalu First Nations peoples

Despite growing up with a profound and joyful love of all plants and animals, there was one element of my current ecocentric life that was absent throughout my childhood and teen years – and that

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was any sort of understanding about the culture of First Nations peoples in Australia, or the history and devastating impact of British colonization on them. In my town, indigenous and non-indigenous people grew up as friends and neighbours. But my school education, relatives and contemporary TV shows said nothing about Aboriginal Australia. It wasn't until I started university, and enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (majoring in Australian history) and Law degree, that I finally began to read, learn and be taught about that devastating impact.

Several years later, when in my late 20s, I was introduced to an amazing group of women who were to have a huge impact on my life, and my views about ecocentrism. I met Marie, Margaret, Patsy, Hazel and other terrific folks from the Ghungalu Aboriginal community in Central Queensland. We met through mutual friends, and when they discovered I had a law degree, they invited me to help them with the complex and ultimately flawed processes of the (then) recently introduced Native Title Legislation, created in response to the critically important Mabo decision. I quickly came to admire their work and the creativity they demonstrated in order to survive the daily atrocities of white Australian bureaucracy, as they worked to speak up for and protect their country. For ten years I was part of their lives, communities and work projects, and during that time I learnt an incredible amount – including how to fully face the impact of my European ancestors' devastating destruction of their way of life. I also learnt first-hand about the incredible resilience of Aboriginal people, about their profound connection to country and how their laws and cultural practices continue despite what colonialism has tried (and often succeeded) in doing. My views about ecocentrism are different today from what they were when I was young. My eucalyptus-flavoured ecofeminism and gidgee-scented ecocentrism are now both deeper and more pragmatic, all, at the same time, thanks to what I learned from my Aboriginal friends and colleagues. My friendship and work with the Ghungalu women has been profoundly

important to my personal life, my work and the way I think about the world.

Thomas Berry and Earth jurisprudence

The final important influence over my ecocentric life is the work of Thomas Berry (1988; 1999). Though I wasn't lucky enough to meet him while he was alive, his work has more than 'nurtured' my own ecocentrism: it has inspired, enriched and shaped my personal and professional life. After working for ten years with the amazing people in the Ghungalu community, my husband and I were delighted to fall pregnant, and I realized that I didn't want to spend as much time travelling around the countryside as I used to – I wanted to work from home, raise my baby girl and rethink my professional life. A year after bub was born I was enrolled in a part-time PhD in law and I attended a special event that helped set the path for the second half of my working life.

In 2009 I was fortunate enough to attend Australia's first Wild Law conference, organised by Peter Burdon and Friends of the Earth, in the Adelaide Hills, in South Australia. It was at that conference that I met and fell in love with Earth jurisprudence, Wild Law (Cullinan, 2003) and the aforementioned work of Thomas Berry. I also met a wonderful group of people (mostly lawyers – yes! – wonderful lawyers) who I continue to work with today. By reading *The Universe Story* (Swimme and Berry, 1992) and then *The Great Work* (Berry, 1999) I felt as if the patchwork quilt of my life experience and formal education was finally meshing together in a coherent way. *The Great Work* seemed to offer to me a dark, poetic guide to the kind of work that a lawyer and self-professed 'governance nerd' should focus on. After the 2009 conference, a group of us worked together to host several other Wild Law conferences and by the time the 2011 conference began, we had announced our intention to create a permanent space dedicated to increasing the understanding and practical implementation of Earth-centred law, governance and ethics in

Australia. The Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA; www.earthlaws.org.au) was legally formed in early 2012 and since that time, I have, along with other volunteers, worked tirelessly to build the organization's networks and projects.

Co-founding AELA feels like the ultimate professional expression of my ecocentric worldview. It encapsulates a wide range of programmes that cover issues that are hugely important to me and many others:

- advocating for Earth-centred law and the rights of nature;
- promoting cultural change from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism through education, the arts and eco-spirituality
- creating Earth-centred 'alternatives' to the current flawed, human-centred governance systems, through the Australian Centre for the Rights of Nature, the People's Tribunal for the Rights of Nature and the New Economy Network Australia.

AELA's work also prioritizes working in true partnership with First Nations peoples, to support their claims of sovereignty and land rights, support their self-determination and economic initiatives and increase people's understanding of

Aboriginal culture, law and the ongoing impacts of colonization.

As I finish writing this piece, I'm kept company by one of the Earth community's most wondrous beings: a domesticated dog. He is a medium-sized dog, a husky-shepherd cross with a short thick coat of golden fur, deep dark eyes that seem to hold the whole universe within them, and the cutest paws any animal could ever have. He's lying across my bare feet and I can feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathes and his thick soft fur on my toes. Every time I glance down at him, he looks back up at me. I can think of no better way to finish writing about ecocentrism than to say that the connection I feel, when I look at him, and any animal or plant, fills my heart and soul with a deep happiness. And so my ecocentric adventures continue... ■

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