

## OUTBACK SUMMIT, BROKEN HILL, 22-26 OCTOBER 2003

By the conference rapporteur, Professor David Dolan (Curtin University)

“Earth, water fire and spirit” were the themes of the 2003 Outback Summit organised by the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand, with the National Environmental Law Association and the newly formed Regional Cultural Alliance (including the National Trusts). Despite an impressive initial list of politicians among its registered delegates, in the event few attended, and then only for part of the time, due to the recall of federal parliament for the visits of presidents Bush and Hu.

Among the absentees was Heritage Minister Dr David Kemp, whose opening speech on 23 October was presented by the admirable Roger Beale. It was a defence of the federal government’s recent actions and priorities for the environment, with a call for us to engage in a coherent long-term nationwide environmental project – Australia being the only nation able to mount a continental initiative.

He was followed by Joe Flynn, CEO of Broken Hill based utility Australian Inland, who shared his vision of his city which could be the art capital of arid Australia, and evolve into a zero-waste community.

Waste of a specific kind was the opening theme of Jon Hawkes who literally talked a lot of shit – the issue of human waste and its disposal as it had preoccupied his theatre colleagues in the 1970s-- then went on to explain how talk of sustainability without prioritising social and cultural issues is at best meaningless, and indeed potentially fraudulent.

The next speaker was to be Kado Muir, providing an indigenous perspective, but he had cancelled at short notice so I was co-opted into providing a “surprise guest keynote address” cobbled up overnight. Making no pretence to speak for Aboriginal people, I drew on the memory and expanded the conclusions of the Outback Conference held at Burra in November 2002 under the auspices of the South Australian National Trust. The insight carried forward from Burra 2002 was that so many of the whitefellas’ outback ventures (mining, closer settlement, irrigation schemes, inappropriate crops, etc) had been extremely short-lived and often outright failures. They had frequently made profligate once-only use of virtually unrenewable resources, and apart from a few interesting buildings and some wonderful towns like Broken Hill, had left us a predominantly negative inheritance of damaged environments, feral creatures, and still-diminishing biodiversity.

The final plenary speaker of the first morning was EIANZ chairman Simon Molesworth who argued more optimistically that while much remained to be done, much had been achieved in Australia in recent decades: particularly

with regard to protecting built heritage, and moving away from the self-defeating mindset which framed cultural and natural heritage as different and even sometimes competing issues.

The two afternoons were devoted to parallel sessions for the three organizations which jointly organised the conference. You need to refer to the updated program to see the full range of topics which cannot be canvassed in this brief report which is no substitute for published proceedings. The Regional Cultural Alliance focussed on public art, built heritage and museum activities which enhanced the liveability and sustainability of regional towns and communities. When people feel good about their local society, they are more likely to care about their shared heritage and environment.

The NELA sessions addressed a range of issues, many to do with the impact of new legislation and regulation such as “free trade” agreements. To a non-legal mind there were several jolting reminders that our legal tradition with its emphasis on the supposed sanctity of private property, and compensation for claimed loss of dubious individual rights (too often the “right” to enrich oneself whatever the cost to others now and in the future), complicates or undercuts political efforts for the long-term common good.

Many EIANZ delegates are consultants and their presentations frequently recounted good and successful individual or group projects: local environmental victories and truces, school and community education programs, buying time for a river here or a species there – mostly small and localised, but many of which may be worthy models to emulate. Delegates then had the chance to see local projects of varying success, by means of excursions to heritage places, outdoor art installations and museums on the afternoon of Saturday 25 October and the following Sunday.

A debate on sustainability of outback agriculture and pastoralism, and a “hypothetical” on turning the rivers inland, also provided opportunities for other voices to be heard. NSW ALP government minister Craig Knowles who has held several relevant portfolios, won applause for acknowledging that the public (voters, taxpayers) were heartily sick of short-term thinking and buck-passing between local, state and federal governments; and called upon his colleagues in all political spheres to integrate the big picture with local issues. Democrats federal leader Senator Aiden Ridgeway called for the nation to get its priorities right.

The second morning of plenary sessions featured new Australian Heritage Commission chair Tom Harley who explained and defended the recently passed legislative changes. Readers of this report should be familiar with ICOMOS and National Trust comments on the new federal heritage system; and know that (too) much will depend on the exercise of ministerial discretion and as always the willingness of the government to adequately fund conservation programs.

Don Garden from Melbourne University gave a masterly overview and synthesis of Australia's environmental history. Sudden illness upon her arrival in Broken Hill meant that Justice Nicola Pain of the NSW Land and Environment Court was unable to attend in person, but her paper was read to the conference. It was an historical account of the development of environmental law and regulation in NSW, prefacing a plea that the scope of the court is severely limited by the law as it stands, no doubt in response to awareness of widespread disappointment in the stance of this court on many issues.

The final plenary session of the conference was the presentation of an oral summation extemporised from notes, which has been condensed into this written report. I ventured to suggest that the absence of the politicians, which had been generally regretted but accepted as inevitable under the circumstances, pointed to an underlying reality too easily un-noticed or taken for granted: that the nation's political alliances and cultural friendships reflect only military and commercial priorities and take no account of the global impacts of their environmental policies.

And what of the four themes: Earth, water fire and spirit? What did we learn about them?

Earth: we have exploited the soil, over-cleared it, degraded its fertility, allowed it to erode on a massive scale, poisoned it in places eg: through salination, and buried our waste in it. There are a few good local programs for soil conservation, but also localised resistance to positive moves such as the reduction of land clearing. We have also used the earth (stone and clay) to make buildings which are now a key part of our heritage.

Water: we have wasted it massively through innumerable practices including inefficient irrigation and inappropriate introduced vegetation and crops, using it wastefully in mining and industry, polluting it, and exporting it under real cost in the form of animal and vegetable products which require a lot of water to produce. There is now political concern over the Murray-Darling system, and a number of good localised programs, and we may be on the way to developing a workable water rights regime; but some interests seem to think they are entitled to be compensated for not being allowed to continue forever the wasteful practices of the past.

The elder who gave the indigenous welcome made the comment that "fire is OK; people are the problem", which is one way of looking at it. Horrific fires have damaged Canberra and Sydney on recent years, and South Australia and Tasmania not so long before. In the outback, changes in fire regimes over many decades have led to various problems with weeds and erosion. We seem to be looking hardest at the question of fire – perhaps because it inflicts immediate damage on private property.

Spirit: the participation of the RCA in the conference reminded us that the arts, understood in the broadest sense, are essential to the human and community spirit. We must plan for cultural sustainability and contemporary creativity as well as preserving the built heritage which embodies the spirit of past generations and is their gift to the future.

Although spared some of the problems of the cities, the outback experiences other problems *in extremis*. The main problems of the outback are of course an extreme case of certain of the problems to be faced throughout Australia – water supply, erosion, environmentally inappropriate activities, the imbalance between public and private rights, the lack of investment in infrastructure, the shrinking of all sorts of services, and the lack of a serious national population policy.

As should be evident from the preceding paragraphs, presentations at the Outback Summit mostly fell into two categories: wide-ranging big-picture stuff which on balance identified some encouraging progress but reminded us of the huge task if the Australian outback is to be socially, culturally and ecologically sustainable; and examples of good things happening chiefly at the local level. The gap is in the middle: where are the long-term programs to expand and develop the good initiatives to meet national needs, and achieve the changes needed to address the continental imperatives? Cultivating this middle ground might be a good topic for the next summit.

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