

A CONSERVATIONIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON INSPIRATIONAL LANDSCAPES

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Born in Victoria in 1955. Became an active conservationist through involvement with the first Australian forest blockade at Terania Creek in 1979. A co-founder of the North East Forest Alliance in north-east NSW in 1989. As a full time volunteer coordinator for NEFA from 1989 to 1999 he organised numerous peaceful blockades, researched successful court cases, wrote innumerable media releases and submissions, lobbied a succession of State and Federal politicians and represented the conservation movement on a variety of committees at local, State and Federal level. Currently he lives at Byron Bay, is President of the Byron Environmental and Conservation Organisation and is trying to develop his artwork.

What is it about a natural landscape that inspires some people to devote their time and energy to protecting it? This is not an easy question as conservationist's motivations vary widely, may be incapable of precise identification and may vary over time. For this discussion I will limit my observations to forested landscapes, as these have been the focus of my conservation activities.

Probably the most accurate insight I can provide is by trying to identify what it was about natural landscapes that has inspired me to devote a large part of my life to their conservation. I supplement this with my perceptions of what has inspired other people to join the fight. Finally I make some recommendations as to how these could be identified and mapped across the landscape.

From places to themes

I was raised in regrowth woodland outside Melbourne. In my late teens I made a number of trips to north-Queensland where I spent some time living in rainforest. I fell in love with rainforest. It is hard to say why, undoubtedly the *fantastic aesthetic appeal* (giant buttressed trees, fantastic woven fig trunks, knotty vines, giant leaves) played a large part, though there was a more *intangible attraction* associated with its *life-force* (as represented by the abundance, variety, size and luxuriance of vegetation) which I never attempted to pin down (though for these purposes it could be classified as 'spiritual').

At that time my knowledge of rainforests was extremely limited, so my attraction was not associated with knowledge of their ecology, conservation status or heritage values.

This inspiration was so great that I resolved to live in the rainforest. I later moved to northeast NSW to look for my ideal property. While it was the rainforests of north-Queensland that had inspired me, I had decided to live somewhere with less climatic and political extremes. This experience of rainforests in a couple of places had transferred from a locality to the *theme of rainforest*.

For a while I stayed up the Terania Creek valley and spent considerable time exploring the rainforest at the head of the valley. This became a special place for me because of its relative naturalness (little past logging) and my familiarity with it. I became aware of the proposed logging, became involved with the local action group and eventually in 1979 I was arrested at the blockade trying to obstruct logging machinery.

The eventual success of the protest action in stopping logging inspired me to do what I could to stop logging of rainforests elsewhere in the region. When, in the lead-up to the 1982 rainforest decision, I heard of extensive rainforests further west which were proposed for ongoing logging I spent months exploring them and writing proposals for key parts to be protected.

I was fully operating on a thematic basis (i.e. trying to protect rainforest areas I had never before seen or heard about), though my inspiration had been broadened and deepened with increasing knowledge of the ecology, conservation status and heritage values of rainforest. When I heard of small pockets of monsoon rainforest threatened by mining in the Western Australian Kimberly I helped to agitate for their protection, I did artwork and research for the Rainforest Information Centre to help publicise the plight of overseas rainforests, and after NSW's 1982 'rainforest decision' I continued to agitate for an end to all rainforest logging in NSW.

It is important to recognise that while my inspiration was initiated by tropical and sub-tropical rainforests it had broadened to include all rainforest forms. This is definitely attributable to increasing knowledge rather than aesthetics or 'spiritual' reasons. Walking in a dry vine thicket does not evoke the same level of emotional response in me as a tall stand of lush rainforest. But knowing that that dry vine thicket is extremely rare and threatened does increase its inspirational value for me.

On its margins the rainforest at Terania Creek was overtopped by Brush Box and eucalypts with rainforest understories. Conservationists called this rainforest and State Forests called it wet sclerophyll. State Forests were drawing their boundaries based on dominant commercial species and we were drawing them based on what they looked and felt like. In many cases these forests were formed of giant ancient Brush Box or eucalypts over lush understories of small to medium sized rainforest trees and/or palms. They were as inspiring (aesthetically and spiritually) as the rest of the rainforest.

By the mid 1980s I had found an affordable and remote rainforest property and was living amongst giant old eucalypts on the rainforest's ecotone. My increased familiarity with ancient eucalypt dominated forests and their inhabitants deepened my appreciation and understanding of them. The inspiration of the massive towering eucalypts was such that I began painting them. The fact that I had learnt that they were hundreds or thousands of years old added to my appreciation of them

In the late 1980s I became increasingly concerned about the fate of oldgrowth forests. While I had experienced and been inspired by particular areas of such forests before, this took on a different emphasis when I went spotlighting with a zoologist and learnt about the array of fauna dependant for their survival on large hollows in ancient trees. Finding out about the ecology of hollow formation and the dramatic decline in a suite of animal species, along with hollows, in logging operations then inspired me to start campaigning on the *theme of oldgrowth forests*.

I had my first court case to protect a particular area of oldgrowth forest in 1988, the success of which inspired me to continue the fight. In 1989 I became aware of various individuals and groups scattered throughout northeast NSW fighting for various patches of forests which had one theme in common – they were all oldgrowth forest. I called a meeting and we formed the North East Forest Alliance (NEFA). From 1989 until 1999, I volunteered my time fully to the protection of forests in northeast NSW.

From the beginning NEFA had as its basic objectives the protection of rainforest, wilderness, oldgrowth and threatened species.

Naturalness

I think that both wilderness and oldgrowth are aspects of '*naturalness*', with the pinnacle of naturalness being an area formed by natural processes with little evidence of interference by people. I believe that it is people's appreciation of the concept of *naturalness* that has underpinned the relative success of the wilderness and oldgrowth campaigns.

It is worth recognising that each person's concept of naturalness is related to their experience and knowledge. A person with no experience of native forests could visit an area of regrowth and weedy vegetation and consider it the pinnacle of naturalness; with further experience and knowledge that person will begin to discriminate 'relative naturalness'.

Protection of oldgrowth was (and is) undoubtedly the main focus of NEFA's public campaign. In the beginning it is unlikely that many people in north-east NSW knew what the word 'oldgrowth' meant; after a few years of the campaign most people had probably formed some association with the name 'oldgrowth' and there was strong public support for its protection, even from people who had never seen it. Community attitude surveys have repeatedly shown the vast majority of people now support the protection of oldgrowth even though they have probably never experienced it for themselves, and I suspect never even seen meaningful images of it.

NEFA had regular blockades and attracted many people to come and undergo severe personal deprivations to try to stop logging operations. At Mummel Gulf one blockade went for three months through the middle of winter in very primitive conditions. At other blockades people would be threatened, run off the road, beaten up, arrested, jailed, fined, spend days locked onto machinery or up trees or tripods, spend weeks with minimal shelter in rain and mud, and still come back for more. Some people were willing to put their own lives at risk by placing themselves in dangerous (even life threatening) situations to make getting past them as difficult as possible, and some were badly injured in this process. Surely this displays an extremely high level of inspiration.

Getting people to commit to blockading degraded, low site quality or regrowth forest, no-matter what its other conservation values, was always more difficult. Without the aesthetic and associated spiritual appeal of older forest and larger trees people are less likely to be inspired sufficiently to put themselves through the trauma.

I believe that it is the concept of the 'most natural', 'least disturbed' and/or 'best bits' that people are inspired by. This is not a new concept, as I believe it was precisely this that inspired many people in the past to agitate for the protection of particular forest areas. All that was new was the labelling of this as 'oldgrowth' and a concerted promotion campaign.

In many instances oldgrowth may not be 'visualised', and when it is it will differ significantly between people depending on their experience and background. People who have something to lose (i.e. loggers) will always adopt the narrowest definition possible, ecologists will always need a rational definition to determine the category they give to a piece of forest, and lay people will base their assessment on what it feels and looks like.

For me the interaction of site quality and structure greatly influences the aesthetic and spiritual appeal (and thus inspiration) of a given stand of forest. From my experience, the naturalness threshold at which forests inspire people is below that for classing a stand as oldgrowth in scientific terms.

I think that if you took a bus load of people (with no phobias about the bush) off a city street and showed them around a variety of forest types and growth stages, most would identify similar areas of each forest type as having a high degree of naturalness and thus inspiration.

Remoteness

Wilderness had been pursued as a theme for years by other conservation groups; NEFA effectively incorporated it as a subset of its oldgrowth theme (while still campaigning for it specifically).

Many people find something very special and inspirational about being in an area where you are not aware of modern technological society (i.e. away from machinery noise and human structures), where you can think that maybe no person has ever put their foot precisely where you are, and can think that the place would have been the same thousands of years ago. I would class the feelings this generates as *intangible*, though they are an influence on the feelings generated by a forest's naturalness. They may be described as *spiritual*, and for the purpose of this discussion I will label them as being generated by a feeling of *remoteness*.

In tall wet forests you can get some feeling of remoteness in a small (few hectares) patch of forest that has escaped prior disturbance, provided it is within a larger stand of forest and

remote from busy roads. There is no doubt that the larger an area is the more intense is the *sense of remoteness* that can be felt, though it doesn't necessarily require the tens of thousands of hectares required for designation as 'wilderness'.

Threatened Species

In the past, threatened species have often been used as a reason for protecting an area of forest which is primarily being targeted for other reasons (i.e. rainforest, wilderness, oldgrowth). However, there are significant exceptions to this. Koalas, in particular, have inspired people in a variety of locations to fight for the protection of degraded and regrowth forests – they are a *theme* in their own right.

Within north-east NSW a greater emphasis is now being placed upon *threatened species* as a theme by forest conservation groups, with strong campaigns being run for degraded and regrowth forests that have very high biodiversity values. In some instances these have inspired people to blockade with a similar level of enthusiasm as demonstrated at oldgrowth blockades in the past.

Community attitude surveys have consistently shown threatened species to be one of the highest ranked conservation issues. Like oldgrowth, I think threatened species are an *inherent inspirational theme* that only requires a concerted publicity campaign to bring it to the forefront of people's minds. People focus on the 'cute and cuddly' with a hierarchy of preference for different types of species, with plants, fungi and algae down the bottom. However, even those threatened species at the bottom of the pile may still be considered inspirational, with the 'inspiration' probably coming from an inherent belief within most people that all species have a right to exist.

Landscape Features

Upon reflection I find it interesting that landscape features (waterfalls, watercourses, cliffs, mountains etc.) have not been more of dominant theme in northeast NSW's forest campaigns of recent years. Certainly they have been a component of many campaigns and doubtlessly add to the experience of a place. This may be in part because:

- many of the most scenic landscape features have been included in national parks in previous community campaigns;
- many of north-east NSW's forests are tall dense forests in rugged terrain where the vegetation obscures scenic views and streams are relatively small and down steep slopes; and/or
- tall forests of big old trees and lush rainforests are generally more inspiring than landscape features.

I would hypothesise that landscape features become more important in drier landscapes where they are more readily viewed and where the best vegetation (structurally) is associated with sheltered and moister sites, which are in turn associated with landscape features (i.e. pockets of rainforest around waterfalls or in gorges, taller forests on stream banks, etc).

Cultural Values

It is equally surprising that non-Aboriginal cultural (i.e. historical, scientific, artistic, etc.) heritage has not been, in my experience, a strong reason given for people wanting to protect areas of forests in northeast NSW. However, *proximity* and thus *familiarity* have been important reasons for some areas. People are more likely to be inspired to protect an area if it is near to where they live, even if it is not oldgrowth, rainforest or habitat of threatened species.

Protection of areas because they are of importance to Aboriginal people has been a strong motivator for many conservationists. Obviously, in the case of non-Aboriginal people this inspiration is based on knowledge, while for Aboriginal people there are many more factors

at work. In respect to NEFA's activities, Aboriginal people made it clear early on that they wanted to determine what was appropriate for the sites they considered important. Again, I defer to this position; suffice it to say that there are many landscapes of particular inspiration to Aboriginal peoples.

Thoughts on identifying and mapping Inspirational Landscapes

In summary I consider that there are a variety of themes which contribute to the inspiration that a landscape generates. I do not consider that these need to be experienced to exist, although I would expect that most people visiting a place would experience most of them. The significance and breadth of these themes is influenced by knowledge, with some requiring knowledge to enable someone to appreciate the experience. For example, seeing an endangered animal in its natural habitat can be inspiring, though if you don't know its endangered it is just another animal. Even going to a place known to be the only place that endangered animal exists can be inspiring even if you don't see the actual animal – the same can apply to significant historical sites such as where some event took place.

In relation to forests, I think it is a combination of aesthetic appeal and feelings generated by the vegetation, which provide the greatest inspiration. I believe that the derived inspiration is primarily influenced by vegetation colour, texture and structure, site productivity and naturalness. Landscape features influence this, but become more important where the vegetation becomes poorer and less dominant. The wilderness indicator of remoteness would be a secondary influence.

I believe that knowledge of landscape features and components influences the level of inspiration generated by a landscape. Knowledge of the significance of a vegetation type or of the vulnerability of inhabitants of the landscape can inspire people in the absence of direct powerful aesthetic or spiritual inspiration

As major quantifiable influences of landscapes on people's inspirations I would identify:

- *Relative visual appeal of vegetation* - which incorporates aesthetics and feelings, and is influenced by structure, site productivity, colour, texture and form.
- *Relative naturalness* – which incorporates feelings, and is principally influenced by the degree of modification of the natural landscape and secondarily by a sense of remoteness from human influences.
- *Relative visual appeal of landscape features* – which incorporate aesthetics and feelings, includes waterfalls, streams, cliffs, mountains etc.
- *Natural themes* – which incorporates aesthetics, feelings and knowledge, where knowledge has broadened or intensified the inspiration originally generated by one part of a theme (i.e. rainforest, wilderness, oldgrowth etc.).
- *Natural components* - which incorporates aesthetics, feelings and knowledge, where knowledge about, or experience with, components of the landscape has generated inspiration (i.e. Koalas, threatened species).

I would suggest that maybe artistic representations of a landscape or sites identifiable by a community as being of particular cultural significance for natural values are in part reflections of the above influences. Though I recognise that there are many other factors influencing the place an artist chooses to paint (ie accessibility and familiarity) or that a community considers significant (ie proximity and familiarity).

I consider that there is still a need to identify sites of cultural significance to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and take these into account in delineating inspirational landscapes.

One approach could be to delineate all places of known cultural significance, identify common attributes and themes and then map these across the landscape. Another approach is to identify inspirational attributes and themes, use focus groups (preferably of inexperienced people with no pre-existing prejudices) to identify their relative significance

and then map these across the landscape. Known places of cultural significance can then be used to help refine the outcome and identify missing attributes.

For the second approach, which I prefer, it is necessary to identify the possible range of features that will influence inspirational landscapes and for which mappable data is available or able to be derived. These would include ecosystems, growth stages, naturalness, remoteness from settlement, threatened species habitat value, natural features and cultural heritage sites.

For some regions of Australia there is good mapped (often in a computer GIS) data which can be used. I have been extensively involved in the comprehensive regional assessments in eastern New South Wales and thus have a good idea of the mappable data available for this area. Based on my knowledge of this data I would recommend identifying:

- *Relative visual appeal of vegetation*: amalgamating ecosystems into a limited number of classes based upon a combination of aesthetic values and floristics (i.e. rainforests, wet heaths, forests dominated by stringybarks with a grassy understorey, etc.), and site productivity (i.e. separating the same ecosystem where it is growing on a steep slope and poor soils and thus stunted from where it is growing on flatter country and good soils and thus tall).
- *Relative naturalness*: regrouping structural mapping (which is only available for forests) into classes based upon naturalness (i.e. relative proportions of large old trees and site productivity) rather than existing 'oldgrowth' definitions. Including a review of the national wilderness inventory data classifications to capture the feeling of remoteness and an aspect of naturalness, though without a size threshold.
- *Relative visual appeal of landscape features*: using mapped and topographical data, along with a DEM, to identify, categorise and map the immediate view-sheds of prominent waterfalls, gorges, cliffs, mountains etc., and set distances from streams and waterbodies depending on their size.
- *Natural components*: combining the available distributional models for threatened fauna and flora into classes based upon the number of threatened species likely to occur at any particular locality. Given the low number of models for flora it would also be necessary to use plant locality data. For some species (i.e. Koalas) their distributional models could be used in isolation.
- *Cultural values*: delineating boundaries of sites identified as being of social and cultural significance (aesthetic, historic, scientific, geoheritage etc.).

Once the mapped data had been derived and collated then there would be a necessity to rank it in some form using focus groups, map it and refine the outcome. In such a process it would be necessary to recognise that some areas would qualify as 'inspirational' on the basis of a single value or a combination of values. For example, an area of high naturalness may be automatically included and one of moderate naturalness may only be included where it is also of high aesthetic or landscape value.