SOCIAL and HISTORICAL ISSUES

ARE WE LOSING OUR HARD-WON 'SENSE OF PLACE'?

Sylvia Leighton

I presented this as a poster paper to the 2009 Geraldton Landcare Conference. It relates to a change in our rural communities as changes in agricultural production favours corporate ownership over the family farm operation. Not only does this depopulate the landscape – leading to many social problems – but there is often a great loss of historical property information and records. This is very damaging to Landcare and to the natural and cultural heritage of our country.

How important is human presence in our landscape in relation to the long-term conservation of our remnant bushland? On one side of the fence some environmentalists would say the most powerful thing we can do is keep humans out of the landscape as our mere presence seems to encourage the introduction of feral species and the spread of damaging environmental disease and degradation. On the other side of the fence we acknowledge that Australia has a long and rich cultural heritage of human connection to land not only in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense contributing to our cultural 'sense of place'.

As we look further into this topic, the main issue that keeps on being highlighted to us is that having people in the bush brings us 'stories' about the functioning of the land. They provide us with the long-term observational information and knowledge which can only be gained by living in the bush and watching it over a long period of time. At this point I would like to emphasise and acknowledge that the most important layer of information was, and is, that of the Indigenous people. It is one of the greatest tragedies that when Europeans entered this country they did not think to seek out and record the information on the natural heritage of this land that had been accumulated by the indigenous peoples over thousands of years. For all of us involved in Landcare it is this layer of information that we most truly miss as we stumble along the path of trying to live in this landscape more sustainably.

LFW Officers talk to lots of people who live on their properties and have a passion for looking after their remnant bushland. They are the kind of people who have a strong interest in nature and like to observe it and try and understand it a bit better. *LFW* is in its 13th year of operation in Western Australia and is a permanent conservation programme of the Department of Environment and Conservation. Currently it has a membership of 1761 property owners who manage about 1.2 million hectares of agricultural and range lands in the state, of which over 300,000 hectares are remnant bushland. The philosophy of employing local people as *LFW* Officers has been invaluable in providing a professional level of service with indepth knowledge of the natural heritage of an area and building a 'sense of trust ' in the permanency of the programme (the average length of employment for *LFW* staff in WA is 8 years. We must enjoy our jobs!!!)

Each registered property is surveyed by a *LFW* Officer using standardised quantifying measurements, to observe biodiversity parameters of the bushland and record them on a GIS database. The assessment not only records the details of the physical health of the remnant bush but also notes the land owners' motivation and aims for the conservation of the bushland on the property. Update inspections and liaison with property owners by *LFW* Officers provide the opportunity to compile longterm data detailing ownership status, landholders' attitudes, physical health conditions and conservation issues related to remnant bush. It is from this base that the *LFW* programme can observe changes in land management and possibly see trends in longterm bushland conservation across the landscape.

One change we are observing in recent times is the rapid change in land ownership and management from the traditional family-based broadacre agricultural operation to one that is corporately owned. The south coast region shows this very dramatically. Here, the agroforestry industry has converted thousands of hectares of privately managed agricultural land into corporately managed lands. In 1988 there was only 800 ha of land planted to agroforestry in the Great Southern Region of Western Australia (land between Walpole to Katanning and across to Jerramungup). Twenty years later, in 2008, the same area now has over 160,000 ha of agroforestry, mainly dominated by bluegum plantations.

With the recent economic downturn and other market impacts we have also seen two of the major plantation companies collapse in the past six months and this will again cause a shift of land ownership and management. Of course a major percentage of the plantation properties will remain as commercial plantations but there will be

continued on page 11

continued from page 10

Sense of Place

SOCIAL ISSUES

Todd Edwards of Moulyinning took the LFW Officer to his favourite place on the farm, where he used to play as a child, and he is really keen to make sure it remains beautiful and healthy. Photo: A. Baxter

some properties that will revert back to private ownership by small family businesses and will also move out of plantation production.

The point of all this is to provide background to the issue of major shift in land management in a very short period of time. It is very difficult to get statistics (from either Landgate, the Valuer General's office or the Census) which indicate the shift of land titles from private family management agricultural production into corporate plantation management and to find out whether anyone is actually living on the property. To gain any insight into this issue requires direct communication with the land manager.

What has become apparent to the *LFW* Officers is that when visiting a plantation property there is usually no 'human face' connected to it. There is no human caretaker to show you around the land and tell you the 'heart connection to land stories' covering history, seasonal trends, nature observations and reflecting a gentle care of the land. Like most corporate bodies the plantation companies have a high staff turn-over. From a *LFW* perspective we can see that this is possibly going to contribute to the loss of heritage knowledge attached to these large tracts of land in our landscape.

Of course there have also been some shifts of properties into corporate ownership which have a very strong heritage and conservation ethos and these properties fall under the umbrella of programmes like Bush Heritage, Gondwanalink, Greening Australia or the Indigenous Land Corporation. We could write a whole report alone showcasing the understanding that has already been achieved on these properties, especially looking at the powerful impact of handing back country to the indigenous peoples so that they can carry out culture and ceremony and try to fully encompass 'human sense of place' whilst carrying out inspiring bushland conservation.

But the fact remains that in many cases we are seeing the depopulation of rural areas and as people leave they take many precious stories with them and possibly also 'connection to land'. We will lose the stories about where the family went to have picnics, the special place where the echidna scratchings were seen, the story detailing the effect of the flood, the story of the huge regeneration of the wandoo, the story of the tall tree where the wedgy nested every year, the time the bush turkey moved across the property, granddad's story of the bilby burrows up on the sand ridge, the memory of when the last brush wallaby was seen on the block.....these details may walk away with the people as they exit out of the family owned property.

So I throw these questions out to you. If corporate ownership is to be a large part of the future of broadacre farming in the state, what is the future of a 'human sense of place and connection' with these bits of land? Is this important to Australian heritage and culture or doesn't it matter? Do we provide longterm effective Landcare management if there are no humans with a longterm heart connection to the land or a longterm duty of care? Will the natural heritage of that land survive a lack of personal human connection? How are we going to record all those special 'land connection' stories which can so quickly vanish with time? We have already felt the immense loss of much of the indigenous knowledge of this country. We know this cultural tragedy and know how quickly this information can disappear. What are we going to do about the lessons that we have learned from our past about the importance of 'human connection to land' in this country?

The 2009 State Landcare Conference had all types of speakers from many and varied backgrounds. One common theme running through most presentations was examining how humans are dealing with changing environments in relation to proposed climate change and environmental change. I felt very lucky to attend this conference and thank NACC and Lotteries West for their sponsorship.

Sylvia Leighton is LFWO at Albany; contacts on p.2.