Alternative Australia: *celebrating cultural diversity*

Alan Dearling with co-pilot Brendan Hanley (Mook Bahloo)

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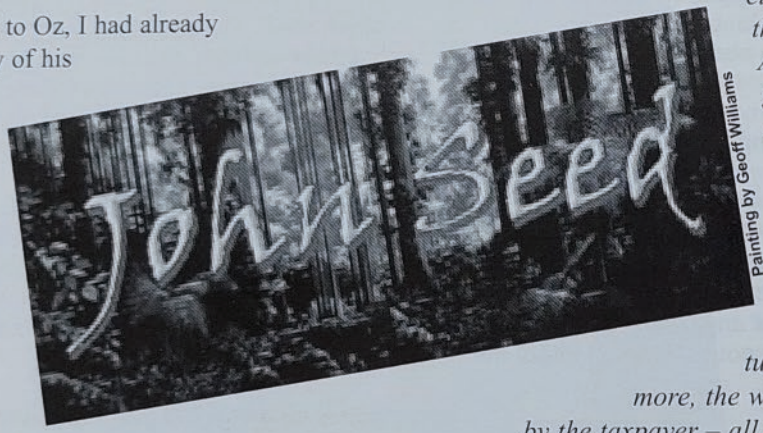
John Seed – deep ecologist, earth patriot and new man of the trees

"The most important thing we can do is to hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying."
Thich Nhat Hanh

***"Because when we do that then our compassion is out there, we're out there with all of the rest it, we feel that interconnection, but also we then begin to be in a position to be able to do something about it. Without that pain there's not enough motivation. Our ideas aren't enough motivation to do anything."* John Seed.**

Before venturing from Brit to Oz, I had already heard about John and many of his buddies. I'd visited a couple of his associated web sites and even bought a copy of his book, *Thinking like a mountain: towards a Council of All Beings,* written with Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess. We've only been e-mail correspondents, yet I feel I know him quite well. I like him for his energy, optimism and enthusiasm. He's definitely still out there, doing it. And he's a friend of Mook and Shanto's, sharing a history back to the Terania Creek blockade in 1979.



Painting by Geoff Williams

Listen to the resonance of the words he sent me from the Giblett forest, Western Australia – one of the last and most glorious old growth rainforests.

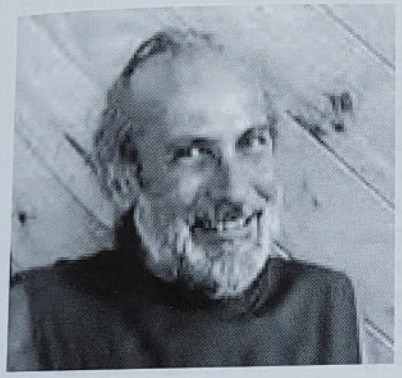
"Sitting by the campfire at the protest/witness camp here at Giblett forest in the SW of WA. Guitar and didge drift over from the other fire. I guess there were 20 of us camped here last night, a motley crew of young ferals and old hippies and Chris Lee up on his platform thirty metres above us perched halfway up a massive Karri tree, his seventh night up there. We were waiting for CALM (the State Government's Department of Carnage and Land Massacre – alias Conservation and Land Management) to declare the area a TCA (Temporary Control Area) and try and move all the people out."

"They have a quaint habit in these parts called 'scrub rolling', where they send in dozers and anything else they have that weighs a few tonnes to flatten the undergrowth, to clear the way for the chainsaws through the deep undergrowth. Ancient cycads, she-oak, snotty gobbles, bulich, tea-trees, lucepogan, isepogan – crushed orange everywhere. It's so disgusting, such a majestic, huge forest, most of it trampled into dust to expose the big trees, and then 85 per cent of the volume of these turned into woodchips. What's more, the whole thing is heavily subsidised by the taxpayer – all the roads and port infrastructure and, in spite of the loggers' and chippers' vast profits, the workers get paid so little that they qualify for social security support to supplement their income."

So, let's learn a bit more from the man himself. The following words are John's. They've been pieced together from a number of sources, including interviews with Ram Dass, Samantha Trenoweth and James Bennett-Levy. If you want to hear more from this remarkable guy, check out the Rainforest Information Centre site – http://forests.org/ric/ There's also a nice section about John at the rainboweb site: http://rainboweb.com/janos.htm

Background
"It went I.B.M., L.S.D., meditation and community."

My own awakening started when I left my job as a systems engineer for IBM and I dropped out and was living on the land. I had no interest in ecology but then I found myself, just through circumstance, involved in the defence of a particular forest. Once I started to do that I also started to become intellectually interested in the subject, and then I discovered that this rainforest that I was defending was in fact the place where I had evolved for the last hundred and thirty million years, and therefore it wasn't in the least surprising that it was able to get inside me and affect me so powerfully and use me in this way. Terania Creek, in 1979, involved a couple of hundred hippies staging what was, as far as I know, the first direct nonviolent action in defence of the rainforests anywhere in the world.



I had a very powerful spiritual experience of the environment through Terania Creek, the Franklin River, the Daintree and all those direct actions. Each of those things gradually transformed my life, until I finally surrendered to the earth. Now, I find myself asking for guidance and direction and energy and wisdom from the earth, knowing that I am part of the earth, knowing that I'm a cell in the body of the earth. I just go back to the forest, lie down on the forest floor, cover myself in leaves, imagine an umbilical chord going from my belly deep down into the earth and pray for nourishment, wisdom and guidance. There I find energy and an ability to act, to inspire other people, to think, write, dream, make films and do all of these things.

It took a number of years, countless demonstrations, press conferences, leaflets, and many people willing to sit in front of bulldozers and go to jail. But eventually 70 percent of the people of New South Wales came to agree with us, and the government established a series of national parks. To protect the remaining rainforests we formed an organization, the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC). In response to our success, however, Australian logging companies began to look offshore, and in 1983, community representatives from the Solomon Islands contacted RIC for aid in resisting the same logging companies we had fought, as well as Malaysian and Japanese companies. In the years that followed RIC volunteers provided technical, financial, and political support to defend forests and communities in the South Pacific, Asia, South America, and Russia. In 1984 I was invited by Earth First! to the U.S.

Rainforest Information Centre

More recently, in India

Meanwhile, all the psychological aches and pains, which had mysteriously vanished when my Earth service was all-consuming, now returned... So I returned to India in 1995 searching for some resolution to the spiritual crisis that had begun for me a few years earlier. In Lucknow I spent a month attending satsang with the 86-year-old Advaita teacher Poonjaji. I received a blessing from Papaji, which rekindled the flame inside me which had been wavering and doubtful.

Nearly 10 years before, in 1987, I had received a letter from Apeetha Aruna Giri, an Australian nun residing in the Sri Ramana Ashram at the foot of Arunachala. Could we please help her to reclothe the sacred mountain? I asked, John Button, permaculture designer, if he would consider a tree planting project in the deserts of Tamil Nadu. John and his partner, Heather Bache, have worked as volunteers organizing the rehabilitation of Arunachala. The space between the inner and outer walls of the vast 23-acre temple complex has been transformed from a wasteland into the largest tree nursery in the south of India. Hundreds of people have received environmental education, and a 12-acre patch of semidesert was donated to the project and transformed into a lush demonstration of permaculture and the miraculous recuperative powers of the Earth.

It doesn't really matter what symbols we use: Shiva, Gaia, Buddha, God. What we need now is for the followers of all faiths to turn their allegiance to the Earth. What matters is that we refuse to be drawn to one or the other of the great polarities: spirit and Earth. We must neither reduce everything to spirit, from where it appears that the material world is some kind of illusion, nor reduce everything to the material, so it looks as if spiritual seekers are abdicating responsibility to care for the creation.

Deep Ecology – a defintion

To me it refers to the biocentric as opposed to the human-centered approach to things. It means rather than seeing the world as a pyramid with human beings on the top, we see the world as a web and the humans as just one strand in that web. So it's the kind of deep questioning, using the intellectual science of ecology as almost a spiritual truth, to allow those truths to become personal.

Deep Ecology – philosophy, intuition and action

There's this idea that all our intelligence is in our thinking and that this is betrayed by feelings, that we need to be objective about things and not get emotional. We're unconscious of the fact that we survived for thousands of millions of years before thinking came along, which must have taken extraordinary intelligence. I came from my mother's womb and she came from her mother's womb and it goes back through womb after womb until wombs were invented. Before that, reptilian eggs and before that, spores. At every step of the way, each ancestor of mine and yours had to somehow survive long enough to reproduce before being consumed. At every step along the way, millions died without being able to do that. How many eggs does a fish have? Well, we had a zillion fish ancestors, one after the other, and every one of those had millions of eggs, of which two or three survived. At each generation, our ancestor was one of those. There's incredible intelligence in that, yet it had no thinking associated with it at all. It was feeling, intuition, instinct.

At the moment, we can't smell anything except our own stench. We can't hear anything except our own thoughts and our own voices. We've forgotten that anything else speaks. The world is reduced to human beings and resources. It's a horrible idea but, when we let go of that, we can once again harmonise with the incredible choir of the myriad beings of nature and that is what has the longevity, that is the thing that potentially lives forever

Never lose hope

I've steeped myself in the prophecies of doom from the scientists – the number of species becoming extinct every day, what's happening to the atmosphere, the intractability of nuclear waste. I've soaked up all this stuff. On the one hand, I realise, there is no way that the environment movement is going to get us out of that. If all of the efforts of all the well meaning people were multiplied a thousandfold, it wouldn't get us out of that. It's so huge and the momentum is so fast. On the other hand, my ancestors survived ice ages, my ancestors learned how to walk the land after being fish, my ancestors went from being inorganic to being organic. When you identify with all that, there's this fantastic pedigree, this unbroken record of survival and success and it becomes difficult to completely lose hope, even in the face of what seems like a hopeless situation.

I had been steeped in the philosophy of Deep Ecology, but I felt that it wasn't enough just to think these things. I felt that, unless we could move from having ecological ideas to having an ecological identity, it wouldn't change our behaviour.

Council of All Beings

Working with the Buddhist activist Joanna Macy, we developed a ritual to address our contemporary situation. The Council of All Beings, as we called it, began with mourning for what has been lost, the acknowledgement of rage and anger. Using guided visualization, movement, and dance, we re-experienced our entire evolutionary journey. We made masks to represent our animal allies and give voice to these voiceless ones, invoking the powers and knowledge of these other lifetimes to guide us in appropriate actions and empower us in our lives.

The first thing we do in our rituals is a sharing of what our intention is, and how we see things. Then you suddenly find yourself together with a group of people who love this Earth and have the intention to heal the Earth and to heal our separation from the Earth. After that, almost anything that you do becomes a vehicle, so it can be as corny as you like. Everyone can go and hug a tree for half an hour. Most people

haven't ever hugged a tree for half an hour, and maybe even if you just go off and do it by yourself, it might work for you. But if you're with a group of people and you do this and then you come back together in a circle again and share your experiences, you'll find that half of those people have had some very, very profound experience during that time. Or you can put your face really close to the ground and take a one hundred inch exploration of a little piece of earth, with your nose right on the ground and just inching forward. Explore a hundred inches of ground over half an hour and then get together with the group and discuss what you've discovered. To spend a day together just doing anything at all which is bringing us into contact with nature and looking at these things, every single person in that group will undergo some shift, some transformation.

Ceremonies and rituals

Ritual touches us at a deeper place than our intellect. We resonate with it.

I believe that loss of the ceremonies and rituals that acknowledge and nurture our interconnectedness with nature is a large part of the problem. We modern humans are the only culture as far as I've been able to find out who have ever attempted to live without these ceremonies and rituals as an integral part of our societies. The people who place great importance upon such rituals and ceremonies are people who live in very, very close connection with nature, hunter-gatherer societies for instance, where people are immersed, imbedded in nature all of the time.

John Seed address protesters at the Daintree Blockade, Cape Tribulation, 1986

I'm thinking in particular of some dances and ceremonies that I saw among the Hopi Indians on those mesas a couple of years ago. I was particularly interested in them because they seemed so like the Council of All Beings, where a hundred dancers were dressed from top to toe with different animal features, animal masks and feathers and all kinds of things. And I realized then that these people think this was the oldest continuously inhabited village in the Western hemisphere had been performing these ceremonies and rituals without break for thousands and thousands of years. So this isn't a process that you complete. It's not as though, "Well, we are alienated therefore we need these therapies and then we'll be okay." It's more like being okay is to realize that these ceremonies have to have a space in our lives. It's not something that we're ever finished with. So I'm thinking of that and the Penan in Sarawak who are the last nomadic hunter-gatherers in Southeast Asia, who also speak for the other voices of nature just to make sure that everyone remembers those voices.

What sort of miracle?

So, what kind of a miracle do we need? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that it would need would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before and realizing that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then deciding to make the change. That doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen, but on the other hand the whole road that we've travelled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water and walk on the land – anyone with a pedigree like that, you can't lose hope.

A better metaphor (of what life is and what the Earth is) I think was described by Lovelock, the British scientist who popularized the Gaia hypothesis, when he said that what we're doing to the Amazon is as if the brain were to decide that it was the most important organ in the body and it started to mine the

liver for some benefits that it might get from it. Once we realize the connection, we realize deeply that we can't do that any longer because we know that it can't be in the interest of the brain to mine the liver or in the interest of a leaf to destroy the tree on which it's growing.

How I act

I feel that my own journey is one where I continually make that surrender to the larger picture whenever I am at any kind of a crossroads – then I look at it and I make that surrender and I don't need to know that. My own sense is that the earth is undoubtedly alive, the earth is undoubtedly intelligent, much more intelligent than me, and in fact my intelligence is only the tiniest fragment of the intelligence of the Earth. I'm just a leaf growing on this tree. And so it's safe for me to just surrender and allow the sap to come from the tree and move me where it will. So I don't know and in a way I don't need to know.

When I look back over the last year for instance, I'd say I spent about half my time doing workshops, spiritual-psychological workshops, which is also fundraising because all of the money from these workshops goes back into the rainforest, and as more and more people become interested in this that part of it grows. And about half of my time is spent on political action including large projects to protect rainforests in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and Ecuador that I'm involved in and supporting, and on direct action like chaining myself by the neck underneath a vehicle to prevent it from moving into the forest. And I don't know how I budget that time – I just do what I feel like doing.

The Amazonian butterfly philosophy

Ram Dass: I experience you as becoming an *instrument for the earth.* You're a pseudopod that comes out of the Earth and speaks for it. You speak for the trees, you speak for Gaia, and you're kind of surrendering, not even intentionally, and I can feel how that transformation might have occurred in you. Can you talk about the change in your self consciousness as you become more and more surrendered into that intuitive way of expressing the needs of the Earth to be heard?

Well, once I understand intellectually that my relationship to the Earth is that of a leaf to a tree, the needs of the tree have priority over the needs of the leaf. The tree can exist without the leaf but the leaf can't exist without the tree. New leaves can come, you know. So once I know that intellectually and then once I discover the tools for taking that knowledge and allowing it to sink more deeply into my being to that place where my values are made, where my intuitive moment-to-moment decisions are made, and I practise those things, then I feel like I start to partake of the nature of everything else, which is just total ordinariness. It's not as though there's anything special about this way of being: I think about a certain species of butterfly that I saw on a television program in the Amazon where one flock which flies together is made up of two different colored individuals, I think black and orange. And when they land on a stalk of grass, the black ones all land to make a perfect circle and the orange ones form these petals around it disguising themselves as a flower that fools their predator. Now the black ones didn't decide, hey I'm a black one, I'm going to go in the center. They just did what they wanted to do, they just did what they did. And I'm made out of the same material as those butterflies. I'm related to them, you know, I've been around here since exactly the same time that they've been around here and we're all made out of the same aboriginal substance.

For a long time, because of this big bulge here [touching forehead], I forgot a lot of that, and I have this propensity to forget. The butterfly never, never forgets who it is and what it wants, but I can easily forget. Therefore for me to spend my weekends acknowledging and searching for and finding and loving my rootedness in the Earth and accepting my dependency on the Earth, accepting that I'm not an independent spiritual being but that my spiritual being grows out of a complex and exquisite biology, then I just become an ordinary miraculous butterfly-like creature.

Sustainability in Papua New Guinea

In the Pacific, in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, in Vanuatu, where the people do have land rights, the decisions about the fate of the forests are much less in the hands of governments than in the hands of communities who've traditionally owned the lands. The only way to protect the forest in the end is to offer those people some alternative economic development that doesn't require the destruction of the forest. You can't expect them, having no economic life whatsoever, to take a lofty view of these things. They don't want to see the

forest logged but they see themselves as having no alternative. The problem is that they don't have the skills or the kind of infrastructure that allows them economic development. So one of the things that we noticed was that there was a small portable sawmill called the 'Walkabout', that was being manufactured in Papua New Guinea. There were about 300 of them around the country, and wherever these sawmills were the logging companies couldn't get a contract because all of a sudden the people found that the trees had value for them. So the first thing we did was an ecological audit of existing walkabout sawmills and we discovered, as we'd suspected, that the worst of them was an order of magnitude better for the forest than the best of the large logging companies, mainly because the sawmills require no bulldozers and heavy machinery. Compacting the soil is even more damaging than the removal of the trees.

The Rainbow Bus, 1986

We found an area to intervene using these sawmills. This was in Morobe Province in Papua New Guinea where a large logging company was about to sign a contract with the Zia tribe. This company had moved its way along that stretch of coast clear-cutting its way along, and it was so confident of getting this contract for about 250,000 acres that it had already built a wharf and a fuel dump, and it was a matter of weeks before the contract was finished and signed. We came in and offered the people a choice, saying if we could provide them with three of these small sawmills, one for each of the villages in that community, and a management plan to go with them so that they could rotate around through a small section of forest in a sustainable way, and also a guaranteed market for the sawn timber, would they agree to spurn the advances of the logging company which they did. So four months later, we now are handing over those sawmills this week. The Australian High Commissioner, I believe, is over there as part of that ceremony. The people are getting 200 times as much for each tree they saw as they would have got for the logs from the logging company, and although in the short term they're not getting as much of a windfall in 1991, they can see that this is going to go on sustainably. Each sawmill only cuts seven acres a year, and we believe that on a 50 year rotation they'll be able to go back to the first side again and keep logging. So that's 350 acres per sawmill for three sawmills out of the 250,000 acres that were at threat from the logging company. So we feel like this is now a model and we're looking for other places where we can use the sawmill in this way, and also other modes of sustainable development that we can provide using Australian aid, and other funding sources.

Modern life and a cowboy story

I often travel by plane and I use all of this fuel. And the only thing that helps me in this is a metaphor from an archetypal cowboy movie from my childhood. All the cowboys were asleep and the fire's gone out and the clouds come over and there's a bolt of lightning and all the cattle start stampeding towards the cliff. The cowboys jump on their horses and they don't ride in the opposite direction, they ride straight towards the cliff, and they ride even faster than the cattle. Now their aim is not to go over the cliff, but they realize that it's only by keeping pace with the whole thing that they're going to be in a position to lean on that herd and turn them around before they reach the edge. So I use a computer and I know the chips were cleaned using CFCUs, but there is no harmless way to live these days, really. Or if there is, way out in the woods somewhere, it seems pretty irrelevant to me. I'm prepared to get my hands dirty with sawmills and airplanes and anything at all, but I'm also, I believe, prepared to let go of them like that as soon as...they'll wither away after the revolution, that's all I can say.

"I try to avoid hope. It's just a subtle form of suffering, you know. I'm just 'Be Here Now'." **Ram Dass, San Rafael, 1999**