Making Tracks: Anitra Nelson

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Goolengook and Guernica”

By **Anitra Nelson**

In the Guernica of today’s universal threat from future climate change, environmental campaigners fight for light-bulb suns, such as the ecologically precious “Goolengook.” In the southeastern state of Victoria, Goolengook was the site of the longest-running forest blockade in Australia’s history. From January 1997, activists kept vigil for more than five years until a final, successful, raid in March 2002 by the government agency responsible.

During this period, Goolengook became an icon and battleground to protect the old-growth forests of East Gippsland, forests said to have given birth to the eucalypts of southeastern Australia. Covering more than one million hectares, the forests of East Gippsland harbor hundreds of rare and threatened species of plants and animals. Such forests are villi in the lungs of the planet, significant carbon sinks. If, and as, they are cleared—for timber, settlements, agriculture, and even monospecies plantations—the entire planet suffers.

When I first entered the Goolengook valley, a young wedge-tailed eagle swept unusually low along the path, leading my hosts and me into the valley depths. At some point long before, pointlessly aspiring to an Indigenous heritage, I had given myself the totem of a wedge-tailed eagle. Despite the insolence of this act, this eagle appears occasionally in my life to portend the significant. Moreover, the high-in-the-sky bird’s eye is my natural point of view.

Soon these forests, and Goolengook in particular, became subjects of my research, which focused on the conflicting interests of stakeholders in managing these forests in terms of their various use values: as ecosystem services, including high quality water; as sacred sites from the times of Indigenous inhabitation; as sources of timber; for ecotourism, hikers, and campers; for beekeeping; and as critical habitat for endangered species.

The East Gippsland forests have developed and adapted to various climatic conditions over 65 million years since the Australian continent separated from ancient supercontinent Gondwana. Ecologist journalist David Bellamy has referred to these rare, contiguous ocean-to-alp forests of East Gippsland as having “the most diverse range of temperate forest ecosystems on Earth.” The Goolengook forest block traverses two bioregions to contain a dozen distinctive ecological vegetation classes, including wet forest (52 percent) and shrubby dry forest (12 percent).

To visit Goolengook is to tread on ecologically sacred ground. Awesome, densely rich rainforest ecosystems fanfare panoplies of green shades and shapes with their own distinctive microclimates. According to official statistics, only 0.15 percent of Victoria’s land still bears mature rainforest. Here, in certain places and uniquely for Australia, warm and cool temperate rainforests merge to create and regenerate a flamboyant ecodiversity.

It took just one century of white settlement to halve land under forest cover. A tiny fraction (5 percent) of Australia’s ancient old growth forest remains, accounting for habitat loss with significant impacts on indigenous plant and animal species. Rare and threatened life in East Gippsland forests include mammals, such as the long-footed potoroo and spot-tailed quoll; birds, like the powerful owl; and reptiles, such as the large brown tree frog, along with various plants including the slender tree fern, river hook sedge, and trailing Guinea flower.

This remote valley is just 250 km from where I was born, in the early 1950s, in the timber town of Heyfield. My family has a photo of my grandfather as a timber contractor with a team of horses dragging felled trees from forests around Healesville (a town much closer to Victoria’s capital city than Heyfield). Heyfield features the largest timber mill in the Southern Hemisphere, Neville Smith Timber Industries. It is not just timber for which East Gippsland forests have been logged—much has been chipped to be manufactured into paper far away in Japan and returned to Australia as paper imports.

You could say that I was born into the complex controversy over the management of such forests but, in reality, all of us born since the mid-twentieth century emerged into a planet wrought with environmental conflicts that increasing numbers of scientists, activists, and journalists — such as Rachel Carson — have been keen to expose. And the writing centre of the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich dedicated to Carson's memory is just one symbol of researchers addressing such challenges.

Although the raid on Goolengook had been successful, it became a political issue in the 2006 Victorian state election and the Australian Labour Party government that won power moved to protect a lot more of the block from logging. Subsequently, in early March 2010, the Goongerah Environment Centre (GECO) celebrated 13 years of defending Goolengook through on-the-ground support of several thousands of activists—resulting not only in more than 300 arrests, but also saving 3000 hectares as forest.

However, this victory involved compromises and is but one tiny part of the complex terrain of East Gippsland forest management, which remains a focus of monitoring, actions, and campaigning by activists. Like many environmental conflicts today, derived from the impetus for economic growth, the one at Goolengook has subsided without the threat receding.

Such conflicts remain below the surface as smouldering roots do after a fearsome bushfire, always waiting for oxygen and forest litter to give them life again above the surface. Meanwhile, in the environmental Guernica that is now all our lives, dismembered limbs maintain a life force to rise—not only to write history, but also to right the future.

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