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Conversations with Gunanurang

Laurie Smith

It is now generally accepted that Australia's Indigenous people arrived via Timor and/or New Guinea during the Glacial Maxima between about 50,000 and 20,000 years ago (Birdsell). At that time there was a land bridge, known as the Sahul Shelf, between New Guinea and Australia; and the distance between Timor and Australia was about 120 kilometres. Possible long-range sightings of bushfire smoke could have been an incentive for Pleistocene voyages to Greater Australia (Dortch and Muir). Recently, it has been suggested that colonization could have been accidental, the result of a Tsunami (Geritsen).

Some of these first Australians inhabited the Kimberleys of Western Australia, undisturbed for millennia until the mid-nineteenth century, when they had fleeting contact with maritime explorers. The events that have taken place around the Ord River over thousands of years, more particularly over the last 130 years, offer a unique case history of a major river valley. The Ord was for so long managed by hunter gatherers and then, within a century, exploited by free-range pastoralists. It is now being developed, with the aid of a vast dam, by agriculturalists whose aim is intensive farming. The biological studies done before, during and after the creation of the reservoir Lake Argyle in 1972, together with historical data, indicate just how savage the impact of these events has been on the natural equilibrium of the valley.

The imminent flooding of the Ord River upstream from the Carr Boyd Ranges led to hastily arranged salvage operations. The archaeologist Charles Dortch excavated Aboriginal sites at Miriwun and Monsmont in 1971 (Dortch; Dortch and Roberts). Mammalogist Darrell Kitchener reports on a baseline mammal study in October 1971 to establish what, if anything, would be lost and makes brief comments on the objectives of the January-February 1972 fieldwork. Data were collated before and after inundation to try and understand what impact the change from a riverine to a lacustrine environment on bird populations would be.

The salvage operation of 1972, grandly called Operation Ord Noah was partly inspired by a similar exercise, with a similar name (Operation Noah) at Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River, Africa, in 1959.

My name is Gunanurang or Big River.

I nurtured and cradled you, some of the first Australians, when you arrived from Timor after you had made what was then the longest ever sea voyage by humans. I witnessed most arrivals about 1,000 generations ago, or in another time language, about 20,000 years ago. How different was my communion with the sea all those generations ago. The welcome doormat of my coastal plain stretched further north than ever, inviting anyone brave enough to challenge the sea, to visit and explore...

They listen to the sounds in this new land. The mangal¹ forest echoes to the sounds of a fast ebbing tide. Rails grunt in protest at those who had the temerity to turn the tide and take the fishes. Red crabs rattle as they scuttle to their snuggeries.

There is a constant *plip! plop!* of molluscs falling to water from temporary roosts and the *splish-splash* of fishes flapping loudly, desperate not to be stranded in the ever-diminishing rivulets rushing seaward.

Away from mosquitoes and blue-grey bottomless mud, the travellers rest and eat freshly harvested oysters, the dross of their meal forming the ultimate stratum of a midden whose age will cause robust debate among scientists tens of millennia into the unimaginable future.

Habitats in the littoral zone are what they understand best. Every island in the south-east Asian archipelago to Australia has fed and sheltered our travellers, and they are grateful for a familiar foothold in this new land.

¹ Collective name for a mangrove forest which can comprise a number of species of mangrove.

I know why you revere my tumbling waters, springs and pools. Water is central to your culture, a great flood the genesis of your time, its dreaming story seared into tribal psyche by a drift across boundless seas.

My creation was nature's whim shaped by rock: molten, riven, crushed and reinvented over an eon of petro-alchemy from basalt baked in a sulphurous kiln, protolife sifted and shuffled. Shales were crushed. Now hard-baked sandstones protect me. Rain has exposed my vulnerable joints, scouring them. Their product, black bountiful soil, will nurture you.

Over millennia you have learned every nuance of my valley. A knowledge of every plant and animal has been created, your legacy the messages left in your shelters at Miriwun and Monsmont.

*Around these hearths
meals are shared
stories drift into myth*

Horses graze on the banks of the Ord. The metallic clink of pannikin and pot confronts the air, flushing corellas. Shoals of flashy, startled lorikeets play follow the leader. A lone egret with its laryngeal croak and gangling frame flies wearily away. Stone age to iron age. Here bronze has only ever been a hue. The colour of peeling bark on a river gum or a penny sun masked by smoke. Morning sun drips from tinsel leaves, an apprehensive breeze rattles the pandans.

Alexander Forrest, the explorer, encountered Gunanurang on 2 August 1879 (Forrest) and named it the Ord. Unlike the original custodians, he didn't see the reflection of a landscape woven with a web of mutual responsibility. Instead, he saw the potential for a pastoral Eldorado.

Within a year, and three-thousand kilometres away in Perth, this land he saw was divided, allotted and accounted for.

Understandably no consideration was given to the sensitivities of the traditional owners, and conservation of natural heritage was an unknown concept.

Words on paper

are of no use here

my people only read nature

Explorer, we know why you came. Why do you distress me and my custodians? My valley is their life blood. You seem to be ignorant of our pact of harmony. My clan respects that I nourish and protect them and they, in turn, treat me respectfully. You don't value their view of life and are disrespectful. You name things already named! You score trees, scar rocks and claim ownership. Go back from where you came.

Within a decade the intruders arrived on horseback, by boat and cart. Shrewd men, tough men, clever men who understood what was needed and brought vision, energy, stock, goods and chattels, and the know-how to 'make a go of it'—and did. Some, like the Duracks who were the first to arrived in 1887, came with their families. Others declared they weren't going to the Ord to make a home, but to make money. New chums and daydreamers, who brought mostly what they didn't need, fell by the wayside. Some caught the 'gold bug' and headed for the diggings at Halls Creek, others took the first boat home.

Pastoralist, a few strokes of your pen and you think you own me. You drew me flat on paper, but how high are my hills, how deep are my pools? These are the secret places of my peoples' souls. Straight lines, right angles and scribblings only disfigure my image. Take care with those hard cloven hooves of the animals you bring. My soils won't cope. Each of your lumbering beasts is ten times the size of one of my svelte Euros or Agile Wallabies. Macropods they may be, but their leather soles are yielding. Soil will be compacted, burrows crushed. Where will tiny Larapinta² go?

² A tiny marsupial mouse

Remains from the Miriwun and Monsmont archaeological sites indicate that mammals like the Golden Bandicoot, the Bilby and the Chudich were in the valley about the time of European settlement, but quickly disappeared (Kitchener). River bank habitats were also rapidly degraded with at least two bird species showing a dramatic decline in abundance, almost to the point of local extinction (Smith and Johnstone).

And no wonder there was an impact! The Western Australian Inspector of Stock Morton Craig estimated that the few thousand head of cattle that had survived the Duracks' overland drive had grown to 56,000 in about a decade. Station infrastructure like fences and artificial water points were few, and cattle control was limited to minimal manipulation of numbers on a broad scale, with virtually no control over where cattle concentrated. Feral animals, such as donkeys, together with the effects of over-burning (to bring on green fodder) stressed the valley even more.

The mud of winter's end
sets a trap
for thirsty cattle

In 1937, the year 'Long Michael' Durack died, a huge 'old man' Boab tree he had inscribed in the early days of the establishment of Argyle Downs Station was razed by lightning (Durack).

I knew the custodians would be unhappy. Losing gigalitres of water into Cambridge Gulf every wet season irked pastoralists.

There were calls for the Ord River to be tamed. Moves were made to retain water and to exploit the rich alluvial plains on the lower reaches of the river. Many years of procrastination saw trials with numerous crops, many of which failed because of pest infestation, but eventually there was enough success to encourage the building of the

diversion dam on Lake Kununurra in 1963 and the main dam, which created Lake Argyle, in 1972.

*Gate-crashers gorge
leaving nothing
on my table*

Yet again you have failed to consult my wardens. Hundreds of my custodians' sites will be destroyed by Lake Argyle. I won't have a choice as to where to flow. Subjugated and sluiced across a laser-flat plain, my character will be lost. Nature doesn't do right angles. Do you think you are fixing a fault?

With the dam almost complete by the spring of 1971, a biological survey team spent a month gleaning as much data as possible from the area to be inundated. Twenty habitats were selected and live capture traps employed, with twenty to twenty-five traps in each habitat. Spotlighting transects were coordinated at the same time every night. Two hours at dusk, an optimum time for crepuscular animals.

The wet season is imminent, the camp all wind and dust. A blast throws a flurry of yellow petals of a *Cassia fistula* against an electric-black cloud. The yellow carpet below the tree obeys the wind, scurries first one way then the other. The elements are undecided as to whether it is time to usher in the rain. Not just yet, it seems.

The removal of the historic Argyle Homestead is almost complete. Disarticulated walls are stacked and blocks numbered ready for reassembly at the proposed tourist village at the main dam. The Abu Simbel of the Ord. There are signs of evacuation everywhere.

Scientists, I'm not sure why you've come. I really think the authorities could have done this better and earlier. It's hard not to see this as window-dressing. Translocating animals from submerging land to higher ground is not going to help. New locations will already be at full carrying capacity. The damage is done. My gullies and stream banks

are eroded, my ridges and slopes bare. My soft underbelly of calcareous limestones, shales and siltstones are my deepest lesions. See all around me bare plains, skeletal trees. I am not what I once was.

Deep in silt

I await

summer's sweet flush

The enormous trapping effort produced only two small mammals. (And only one of those was native!) A *Larapinta* was caught near Argyle Lagoon and a domestic mouse was trapped at Argyle Homestead.

It's January 1972. We are here to save and translocate wildlife as the dam floods. In contrast to the spring trip which was executed in accordance with standard survey techniques, the summer expedition of 1972 was simply a salvage operation as the dam's water level rose.

By the time we arrive, collect equipment from Wyndham, and get our boat onto the ever-increasing expanse of the dam, the trap sites of 1971 close to the river, like the ones at Banana Spring, Mound Spring and Argyle Lagoon, are already partly submerged. All that can be seen of Argyle Homestead is the second story of the bough shed, now very rickety and its shade creeper dead. The top of a mechanical, push-pull petrol pump with its glass half full with three gallons of muddy water indicates the water is two to three metres deep. Places like this are a boon for us. We make a good collection of small mammals and reptiles taking refuge in the rafters of the galvanised iron out-buildings.

About fifteen people in four groups are all doing different tasks. Jackaroos backed up by a film crew were the public face of Operation Noah. They did adventurous things like clearing cranky cattle from ever-diminishing islands; a group from the Western

Australian Wildlife Authority did their best to move sad and soggy wallabies to higher ground, while four of us from the Western Australian Museum helped with translocations but mainly collected specimens, some of which were shipped to researchers all around Australia. A team of microbiologists from the University of Western Australia tested everything they could get their hands on (including us), looking for local or exotic pathogens that may have incubated in the tepid, dung-infused water of the dam.

In a graceful arc

Waterfowl

descend

wiffle

brake

skate

dabble

The dam is filling far more rapidly than predicted. As a courtesy, the Durack family was contacted in Perth asking whether there were any last minute things that could be done at the old homestead site. We received a simple reply. “Save Pumpkin’s³ Grave”—too late. In a way, Pumpkin’s grave is symbolic of all that is irrevocable in the flooding valley.

The high hill on the right bank of the Ord River on the quartz ridge above Miriwun offers superlative views up and down the valley and across to Mt Misery. It is hot, almost silent, serene. Below, the Big River appears as muddy macadam. Only the tops of river gums are now visible, the flats and lagoons a mosaic of russet, greens and yellow. Far below, the bellow of a cranky marooned bull rips holes in the air. Up here, tempered by distance and warped by heat the bellow floats, now no more than a mellifluous bleat. Over near the Behn River where the ground is still dry, a brown wind spins silt, thrashes trees, quickly loses interest in the tease and drifts away.

³ Pumpkin (1859?-1908) was the Durack’s faithful retainer who accompanied the family on their pancontinental cattle drive.

Black Kite

drifts on the breeze

a final patrol

Custodians, it seems we have lost the battle but remember, a great flood was the genesis of your time. Renewal may be beckoning. Remember our pact, try to keep our spirits alive. At least make sure my name survives.

The Miriuwung Gajerrong people believe their mythical ancestors created everything in the valley. *Djaminydjem* (black soil plain), *Dadadang* (red soil plain), *Wirrdjining dawang* (sandy country), *Djibgan* (jungle country)—all habitats identified in our analysis. They also understood the relationships between the soil types and the plants and animals.

Their taxonomies may be different to ours but they understand ecology.

In 2005, the the Miruiwung and Gajerrong people, the Western Australian Government, and private sector interests finalised the Ord Final Agreement.⁴ Six new conservation reserves were to be established in the lower Ord valley. The freehold title will be granted to the original custodians, leased back to the state and jointly managed by the three signatories.

Consultation at last.

⁴ Proposed Conservation Parks, Yoorrooyang Darwang. Draft Management Plan 2011. *Department of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australia.*

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