

GOING WALKABOUT

Fitting into Country: Ecology and Economics in Indigenous Australia

Deborah Rose

When Jessie Wirrpa went walkabout, she called out to her ancestors. “Give us fish,” she would call out, “the kids are hungry.” Jessie’s country included the dead as well as the living, the *Dreaming* ancestors as well as her own parents and grandparents. Everywhere she went she encountered signs of life. A discarded stone spear point, some charred sticks from a campfire, a *Dreaming* tree that got knocked by lightning when her oldest father died. No distinction between history and pre-history for Jessie: in her country, the present rolled into the past on waves of generations of living beings who had all worked to keep the place alive.

We walked and drove through much of the country where Jessie’s *Dreaming* ancestor, the Owllet Nightjar, travelled. He had a main camp at the waterhole where Victoria River Downs station is now located, and he travelled north in search of a particular hardwood for his spears so that he could kill a big crocodile. Site visits at the homestead were a bit inhibited by all the strangers there, but once we got out into the open country to the north, Jessie called out to Old Man Nightjar to let him know who she was and to tell him she had brought a new person. The Old Man was Jessie’s countryman, a term that includes all the living beings who belong in a given country and that applies equally to women and to men. As we walked she told the stories. Here, Old Man Nightjar had stopped to cook some lily corms, and because he didn’t crack them properly they exploded and burnt his whiskers. Further north he encountered the Black-headed Python as she came travelling across the country out of the west. When he saw her he took fright: “Ohhh,” he worried, “that’s a really big snake, and I’m only a little bird. I’m getting out of here,” he said, and he flew home. Jessie chuckled over his mishaps, and somehow he seemed even more like a member of the family.

Walking with Jessie, I experienced an expanded awareness as my senses opened up. We Westerners are said to privilege the visual, so maybe for us learning about “country”—as Australian Aboriginal peoples call their habitat—starts with learning to see. The track of the Black-headed Python is completely visible: Jasper Gorge snakes its way through red cliffs of stunning beauty, and is to anyone’s eyes the track of a very, very large snake. Other parts of the story are visible there, too. There is a place where she set down her *coolamon*, and the large stone is there; back there is a place where she split the rock with her hair string—and the split rock is there. As I learned more of the Black-headed Python story, the country came ever more alive. She carried in her *coolamon* the seeds of many plants. In the hills she put the seeds for hill country plants, and out on the flats she put the seeds for those plants. I began to see connection, association and differentiation, which I began to understand as organization and belonging. There was a fit between creation and the world today.

Jessie “fit” into country like a fish in water, and I tagged along. She knew the soils, creeks, ridges, springs, shelters, and other aspects of her country. Each such niche was a habitat: this is where we go for conkerberries, this is where we go for lilies. When we get the lilies we’ll crack them before we cook them, and we’ll chuckle about Old Man Nightjar who forgot to do it right. If we were to see a nightjar, we’d see his funny looking whiskers. The stories were all around us. Every species of tree had a name, and every tree lived within relationships of beneficial connections. This one provided shade for humans and food for black cockatoos; that one you could make medicine from; another one had bark that you would turn into ashes and roll your

chewing tobacco in. Many of the species of grass, and most of the shrubs and other plants, had names, and so of course did the animals and insects. And they were connected, all of them one way or another, by being enmeshed in overlapping relationships of benefit. Some plants provide benefits that do not pertain directly to human beings at all. Others offer benefits that are widely shared between humans and many other living things. The “black plum” (*pulkaal*, *Vitex acuminata*) is good firewood, and the fruits are edible for humans. In addition dingoes, emus, and turkeys all eat the plums. Furthermore, the pollen provides food for bees and thus contributes to native honey.

Knowledge of how living things fit by benefiting each other is not just a body of information, it is a system of action. The river fig (*Ficus coronulata*) is good firewood (as riverside woods go), and the fruits are edible. In fact they are very edible: the fruits are a major food for birds, ants, fish and turtles. When you go fishing and the figs are ripe, you can eat some yourself, and then throw some into the water to attract the attention of turtles. Why? Because the time when the figs are fruiting is also the time when turtles are becoming fat and thus are really good to eat, especially the livers. Like ripples in the water, some benefits keep on expanding. When we went for conkerberries Jessie knew it was time to go because the fireflies had appeared. We saw the bushes from a distance, and she pointed to where a turkey had been eating the berries. When it is eaten up that high, it’s a turkey; higher again and it’s an emu. Then she hushed us, because she saw marks of a goanna under the bush. With a few hand signs she organized the kids to circle the conkerberry bushes, and told the young women to flush out, stun, and kill the *goanna*. We cooked it later, and later again it became the subject of stories: there we saw the *goanna* track; here he jumped out, and over there Margaret hit him. Debbie didn’t know what to do, and we all had a good laugh. Here we cooked him—“good dinner camp, that one.”

Jessie was a stern teacher. When I caught my first turtle, I realized that I had no idea what to do next, and I hollered for her. She came along the riverbank and said in her grumpiest voice: “I’ll show you once. After that you’ll have to do it yourself.” I like to imagine Jessie telling Simon Schama how wrong he was. Schama, as is well known and frequently quoted in academic circles, claims that landscape is a product of seeing, and that “it is the shaping perceptions” of humans “that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.” In my imagined conversation, Jessie brings her gruffest voice to the fore and tells Schama that in her country there’s no such thing as raw matter. She would tell him about country that flourishes through looped and tangled benefits. The world is alive, she would be saying, and the living beings as well as the landforms and habitats have learned to fit together. Another of my teachers, Daly Pulkara, compared his knowledge and way of being in the world with that of Whitefellas (*kartiya*): “This *kartiya* got new way, just growing like this grass here. New one. Well, we are not that kind. I bin grow like this one—I bin grow deep. Top bushes might be white man. Not me. I’m right down to the roots, just stay there forever.” He talked about showing a white man some roots and saying to him: “That’s the beginning. That’s where we bin start from.”

Through Looped and Tangled Benefits

To have roots is to have a history of fit, and the knowledge of the ongoing dynamics of fit. This kind of rootedness informs a knowledge system that encompasses economic, ecological, and philosophical domains to form a philosophical ecology of Life with a capital L, in Erazim Kohak’s terms. Kohak uses this distinction to demarcate Life (capital L) as a process, from the individual lives in which it configures itself. *Dreaming* stories tell us about Life: about its continuous coming forth into country. Life is what is happening in the living world.

As Jessie and I walked, she took notice of what was going on. When the March flies bit us, we knew the crocs were laying their eggs, and Jessie began to think about going walkabout to those places. When the *jangarla* tree (*Sesbania formosa*) started to flower, we knew, or Jessie knew, that the *barramundi* would be biting. There was always something to pay attention to, and the information told of what was happening in other places. So with the March flies: it was not necessary to keep going to the crocodile places to check to see if they were laying their eggs. It was enough to be bitten by the first March flies of the season, and that could happen anywhere. A similar pattern concerns the river fig. The event that announces both ripe figs and fat turtles is the cicada song. Cicadas sing turtle fat, people said.

To be honest, cicadas drive me mad. In fact I found much of the insect life of the tropics very difficult to endure, and if I never again sit on a steamy river bank in 45° C heat with my head about to explode from the reverberations of screaming cicadas, and with blood running down my legs from the March flies, that will probably be okay with me. But once I learned that they are “tellers”—that they give us news of what is happening in the world, I stopped feeling so hassled. And then one year a group of people came over from Western Australia for young men’s business, and they had a cicada song that they sang “for ceremony.” Cicadas are called *nyirri*, and in that song the women performed a cicada descant—a high shrill cicada voice that rode across the men’s singing like the voice of the world. We had a great time, dancing from afternoon all through the night, and calling up cicadas and turtle fat.

Dancing cicadas all night long is not the way my scientific colleagues at the Australian National University do ecology, and I think that’s too bad. There is a lot to be learned, along with getting the benefit of all those fabulous turtle livers. Ecologists are actually studying the science of fitting in, and I want to say a few words about that. But let us first consider an indigenous perspective, because here we see so clearly that fit within country gives an ecologically inflected meaning to the concept of survival of the fittest and to the economic ideologies that took it up. Unlike Darwin’s theory of survival through competition, an indigenous concept of survival of the fittest denotes the continuity of patterns and flows that enable living things to fit into country. Those who are most fit are those who know most about how to fit in. Jessie’s way, both of fitting in and of understanding patterns and flows, shifts the concept of fitness toward relationships of dynamic and mutual benefits. It offers a synergistic account of life in which fitness is a project shared amongst living things, rather than a scarce good to be competed for. And it brings people into country as participants rather than as “winners.”

Ecologists are working toward a similar account of Australian ecosystems. On this continent, the greatest threats to species are fire and drought, and species adapt and survive through complementarity, rather than through competition. Tim Flannery, for example, writes that because of a variety of stresses in Australian ecosystems, living things do best by recycling nutrients rapidly, and they accomplish this more effectively through “species developing intimate relationships.” Here, those species “that cooperate in large, complex systems” have the best chance for continuing life. Life wants to live, and we are learning that the way Life lives is by finding its fit and enmeshing itself in webs of mutuality. I veer into philosophical ecology here and am inclined to speak of creation, because the term so clearly conveys the profundity of Life as it creates itself, organizes itself, seeks mutual benefits and connection.

But to return to my lessons with Jessie: Jessie often took me by the hand as she guided me and took care of me. Holding her beautiful and capable hands taught me this: she walked in, and worked for, Life. She walked in knowledge, in communication, in memory and in story. She fit perfectly.

