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Paul Faulstich
Pitzer College

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ABORIGINAL DREAMING

by Paul Faulstich

PART I

WITH HAWK WINGS

*In the Dreaming times we were one.
We were lizard and wild cat,
Rock hole and tree.
We lived in the clouds
And deep in the molten earth.
We floated through the sky
With hawk wings,
And glided through the waters
As snakes.
Today I walked through my country.
MY country.
I walked with the taste of dust in my
mouth.
I floated through the sky
With hawk wings,
For in the Dreaming times
We are one.*

PART II

The earth is the very substance of Australian Aboriginal life. The importance of the sense of place in Aboriginal life cannot be overstressed. An intimate knowledge of the environment and geography was, and still is, imperative to survival within a hunting and gathering context. Aboriginal religion is likewise intimately tied to the natural features of the landscape. The earth, with its mythological places, animals, air and soil, is sacred to the Aborigines.

The Aborigines tell of a time when the earth and animals did not yet exist in their present forms. Mythological creatures inhabited the landscape, and with their supernatural powers they transformed the earth and created the features of the landscape which exist today. When they completed their wanderings they changed into intangible spirit beings, and to this day they dwell in special places within the landscape. This mythological period, known as the Dreamtime, is the foundation of Aboriginal religion and philosophy.

The notion of a Dreamtime is found among Aboriginal tribes across Australia. Generally, Dreaming does not refer to an ordinary dream experience, but rather it is a metaphysical concept which structures the world and unites humans with animals, the natural environment and supernatural beings. Through the Dreaming, all things are related in a system that links, through mythic and symbolic metaphor, the temporal with the ethereal, the past with the present, and the human with the non-human.

The Dreamtime permeates all aspects of Aboriginal living, from the sa-

and fauna live side by side in harmony. This practice does not separate humans from Nature, nor does it imply a policy of non-interference. It does call, however, for the larger flow of natural processes to continue uninterrupted. It is a deep ecological answer to the issue of "man's place in Nature." But this model cannot be obtained from the conditions prevailing in the National Parks now, nor in the immediate future.

Chase's indictment of NPS politics and policies over the years was much needed and valuable. Further, he has raised a number of issues which need to be seriously pondered by the new environmentalists. Maybe, as he suggests, there is no wilderness left in America. Maybe it is not possible to return Yellowstone and other National Parks to the status of self-sustaining ecosystems. These issues should be faced by ecologists and others concerned with the future of America's wild lands. A debate should ensue over the more cogent issues Chase has raised. In this respect, he has served his function as a "gadfly." But his distortions and exaggerations of the deep ecology position have served no positive function. And until the questions raised are resolved in some satisfactory way, we must conclude that he has failed to show that the deep ecology position is either fundamentally mistaken or unworkable.

George Sessions is a professor of philosophy at Sierra College, co-author of Deep Ecology, a mountaineer in the High Sierra with several first ascents, and is on the cutting edge of the emerging deep ecological paradigm.



The Central Desert of Australia. To the Aborigines the landscape is rich with sacred history and tribal traditions. Photo by Paul Faulstich.

cred acts of ritual and renewal to the events of daily living such as hunting and gathering. The Dreamtime gives cultural form and meaning to the landscape, for every prominent feature of the land is imbued with a spiritual and mythological significance. Through sacred myth and ritual, the Dreamtime landscape is superimposed over the physical landscape, and together they create a cosmological totality which expresses the Aborigines' unique and beautiful relationship with the environment.

In Aboriginal Australia there are two distinct yet inseparable views of geography; one pertains to the physical landscape and the other pertains to the symbolic landscape. Through the creation of sacred spaces the physical geography of the site is transformed into a symbolic cosmology that provides a link with the spirit world and Dreamtime events.

Totemic associations provide links between the human and the non-human. Special rocks, trees and water holes all have mythological significance. The totemic association of humans to the landscape expresses a physical and psychic transformation which supplies them with a structured and enduring association. The order and design evidenced in the world and realized by the Aborigines is expressed through their totemic social structure.

Throughout the world, tribal societies have held in sacred esteem certain locales within the physical environment. In Aboriginal Australia, these places have been used for the purposes of ritual, shamanism and mythologizing.

Across wide geographical and tribal boundaries in Australia, individuals identify intimately with a specific tract of land, for it was their ancestors who created their country. Territory is defined by features of the environment and the events associated with them. The topography is brought alive through places which articulate physically that which is non-physical, i.e., spiritual and mythic realities.

The Aboriginal connection to the earth is symbiotic. Sacred places are cared for and guarded. Punishments for disrespect are severe. We should listen closely to what the Aborigines can teach us.

PART III

In the Outback, distance is meaningless from a Western perspective. Ask an Aborigine from Yuendumu how far to Waite Creek and the answer will be "not far, close way . . . little way." Get in the car and drive, and drive, and eventually (maybe) you'll get there. A hundred miles via ungraded dirt road. Road!? That's what they call it. A potholed, washboarded, bulldusted track. A road? A joke.

The trip to Waite Creek might last three hours, depending on how many dozen (so it seems) Aborigines are crammed into my Holden HQ Stationwagon, and whether or not the journey is considered by some as a hunting trip. If it's a hunting trip I drive fast — 70 MPH or so. The faster you drive, the less likely it is that one of the Aborigines

will spot a kangaroo or a bush turkey. The car is full of shamanistic men all looking straight down the tire tracks that proceed our tank into the cosmos. These people don't "see" animals, they smell them, or sense them, or magically "know" when one is near. As I learned long ago, the faster you go the harder it is to know. To know anything takes time. So I floor it across this expanse of desert. The red dust billows from behind the car forming a dirt curtain that divides the desert in two. Perhaps we'll get through this without the opportunity to shoot at — to kill — anything. So I speed over the ruts and anthills toward some mythical place.

In Aboriginal Australia the rifle has replaced the boomerang and spear, and the automobile has almost replaced walking. You often have to travel for 50 or 60 miles before you spot a turkey or kangaroo. They don't stand much chance against "civilized" technology. Before the Aborigines were forced into European ways there was no need to choose between animals and humans. The sides were matched evenly, there there was no winner or loser — just players.

Death by spear — that's the way I would want to go if I were a kangaroo. To feel that hand-hewn stone rip into my flesh. And to be eaten — cut open, examined, played with, burned, and consumed. My meat would be used to carry the burden of Aboriginal existence. Perhaps a bone of mine would be cleaned and carried inside the shaman's dilly bag, to be used for its sacred powers when needed.

But these days the kangaroos are dying out, victims of the automobile and rifle. The Aborigines too are dying out, but not because of the automobile or rifle (necessarily). Here there are other forces at work — ethnocentrism, greed and power. Ripped from their land, which is their blood and their life, they have become strangers in a world that suffocates them. They are hopeless, but not helpless. "But why should WE help THEM? We already send them a check every fortnight; we don't tax them; we build them houses which they don't even take care of; we sell them our alcohol; and write books about them." So you hear over and again.

But the Aborigines, like the kangaroos, don't stand much of a chance against the mining companies and the governments. And yes, I'm on THEIR side. I always side with the earth.

Paul Faulstich is an anthropologist who has studied extensively the Aborigines of the Australian Central Desert. He is now in Hawaii, where he hopes to see EF! become active.

