

## **LANDCARE AWARDS:**

**Artists change how we think about the world.**

**Zsuzsi Soboslay**

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The Namadgi National park, part of the Alpine region to the south-west of Canberra, is flanked by farm territories and areas of alpine recreation. Rangers have to manage feral pigs, wild horses, non-native weeds, and the continuous use by recreational users for skiing in winter and bushwalking throughout the year. Within this region, the Ready-Cut cottage located in the Gudgenby valley is a curiosity. Amongst the 90 or so surviving alpine bush huts guarded and maintained by the Kosciusko Huts Association, this pre-fab kit-home is an urban type of dwelling originally built within farmland, but surrounded by native bush. These days reclaimed by Parks, and no longer a working farm, the Valley is in a complex state of transition. Fences are falling to the ground. Tor-like rocks look over native grasses encroached by invasive thistle weed. Platypus splash in the river, but feral dogs howl in the pre-dawn and at dusk stalk and kill kangaroo. Further down the dirt road, Yankee Hat is a rock art site treasured by local Aborigines, protected by Parks, and respected by hundreds of visitors. On the cold May weekend I visit, about 15 woolly-hatted children and their respective parents are trekking back from a viewing in the brittle late afternoon.

This part of the Namadgi Park is a complex area to manage. Recently, there have been disputes over right management between Landcare and other interest groups around the maintenance of non-indigenous alongside indigenous vegetation. But as Ranger in Charge, Bernard Morris points out, this kind of debate is a long-standing and inherently positive one, with people passionate enough to care, passionate enough to argue their point of view.

He points out that National Parks are neither 'natural' nor a fixed entity, but are themselves a cultural construct, defined in relationship to urban environments which value [or do not] wild spaces as areas of conservation. The Parks Act, passed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, both wants to protect the Park from urban push, yet carries a sense of protecting urban and farming areas from invasion by *it*. As well, there is an expectation that it be available for recreational use by an urban rabble which may or may not quite understand it.

Parks made available the Gudgenby Ready-Cut to accommodate two artists in a project which—a surprise to all involved--won the 2009 NSW/ACT Urban Landcare award. The project built unusual partnerships, brought new audiences to both the arts and the National Parks via its exhibitions and Open Days, and created awareness on of new ways of *thinking* about human relationship to land. Artists Paul McKee and Kirstie Rea each spent five weeks immersed in the experience of this landscape and its complex histories.

A few years previously, McKee, under the auspices and project management of -Craft ACT, initiated research and created installations along with two other artists, Joanne

Searle and Dan Maginnity, in three of the smaller alpine huts. The exhibitions reflected on tensions between contemporary and historical cultures and land use, the fragility of the huts [30% of which were lost to the 2003 Canberra bushfires] and the lost lives of its itinerant residents. The Gudgenby immersion project was structured differently. The point was not to *produce art* but to experience and live within all the site's complex realities for a longer period of time, and see what resulted from this experience. Ranger Morris relates how he himself moved from a place of suspicion-- from '*what do they want*'--to an interest in 'how are they thinking, what are they learning, what do they give?'

Interestingly, Morris sees there could be parallels between the life of Parks and those of artists themselves, with perhaps both perceived as generally 'remote' from mainstream awareness. "Maybe 97% of the population don't even think of the Park as having anything to do with them," he says. Yet "the human process of seeing, experiencing and interpreting"—indeed, an act of *reciprocation* --is what is exciting and critical to all land-management endeavours. "That's what we Rangers [and, I think, most of us in some way] have to do every day of our lives."

The Natural Resource Management (NRM) Council, the chief sponsor of the project, recognizes that this is indeed one of its major achievements—a recognition and place for differences of opinion, but also of where values are congruent in surprising ways. Barbara McConchie, former Executive Director of Craft ACT, at the helm of the project since its inception, notes with admiration that the Council took the risk to move outside of its core business [as did Craft ACT] and recognise a potential overlap of interests.

Barbara McConchie, former Executive Director of Craft ACT and at the helm of the project since its inception, says that the chief sponsor of the project, the Natural Resource Management (NRM) Council, took a risk in moving outside of its core business. They recognised a potential overlap of interests between National Parks and artists.

"This project highlighted the way unusual partnerships can create new ways of seeing and reflecting on the world. Different approaches and opinions were exchanged, but we saw a surprising congruence of values as well. I think the Landcare judges saw that the artists' work reflected on many diverse ways of relating to the land."

This kind of perspective is gaining leverage in areas as diverse as human resources and land management practices. As part of the complex balancing act between co-existent histories, realities, and needs.<sup>1</sup>: what do we value/consider/listen to? Hitherto it's been unusual to link the notion of ethics with arts practice, but, as a result of such immersion projects, where artists live in intimate reciprocation with wild environments, this is precisely what such projects seem to teach and achieve.

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<sup>1</sup> George Gundry, a third-generation Lake George farmer who teaches holistic management practices, uses the term 'enlightened self-interest'.

Both resident artists—Rea and McKee---underwent a transformation of their own visions. Rea, an internationally-recognised glass artist, has temporarily let go using the medium with which she identifies, her medium of expertise. Instead, her exhibit represents her experience of emptiness in the Valley with lines of wool thread hung across the gallery space, sketching the outline of mountain ranges, the entry gate, the cottage balcony. With these outlines she foregoes 'objects' in favour of recreating a sense of Gudgenby's 'ghost voices', its sense of space, volume, and vacancy. McKee, a textile artist who has long worked with scraps of cloth and blanket re-backed and re-combined as mementoes of lives long gone, now understands his work as representing *hope* and *preserving stories*, rather than loss. Perhaps nature's continuity worked its way through his bones. His works perhaps exhibit a new kind of transparency.

## MORE THAN SURVIVAL

The Kosciusko Huts Association publishes a brochure informing people about safe use of the huts it caretakes. These brochures also relate stories of mishaps/adversities in these parts of the bush. But there are probably thousands more stories of which we never hear. These would include the non-human stories which have, somewhere, left their trace--tragic or joyous--in the topography of the landscape or the rings of the trees.

In these days of urgent concern around rapid climate change and the effects of human action, maybe 'right answers' will become less significant than discovering new ways of relating, asking questions, and increasing systemic dialogue in these landscapes, so that we—artists, rangers, Landcare participants, the public in general—can become aware and at best, be transformed by what we learn.

*The national finals of the Landcare Australia Awards is being held in Canberra in June. Readers can view details about the 88 finalists online at [www.landcareonline.com](http://www.landcareonline.com) and vote for the project they would most like to see supported with a trophy and \$1000 cash prize. Voting for the People's Choice award is open between 30 May and 23 June and the winner will be announced on June 24 at the national Ceremony.*