

the **basin** **BULLET**

the voice of desert channels queensland

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SABOTAGE

**Vaughan Johnson: “a despicable act
of bastardry by a gutless coward!”**



As I See It

If the Basin Bullet set out to create debate it has certainly achieved that goal with the series of stories we have run on Queensland's Wild Rivers legislation. Debate is healthy and the foundation of a truly democratic society - a community environment where all points of view are listened to. So it was a little surprising at the depth of indignation raised that I should - within the framework of fair comment and opinion in an editorial piece - actually criticise Agforce.

Some of the people closest to me in life are Agforce members. I reported on the changeover from Graziers to Agforce. I have watched events roll out over the years so I am neither new to the group nor have I anything against the group's members in all their diversity. And, like all Australians, I have the right to be intelligently critical.

Agforce by its own self-description is a powerful agri-political force in Queensland. Agforce has led a charmed life over the years as far as the media goes, mostly because of a very conservative rural media in this country and Agforce is the most used voice of primary producers. Do John Howard or Peter Beattie get their feathers ruffled when someone in the media criticises them? But the media holds them accountable - Agforce must realise that the media will hold it - as the powerful organisation it is - accountable from time to time. The melodrama over the Wild Rivers criticism is the reaction of a group - or certain people within that group - of not often being challenged by the media and when it does happen, it comes as a surprise.

Desert Channels Queensland stuck its neck out in giving an editor independence. The result is probably the most widely read newsletter of regional groups in Queensland. The DCQ executive has been put under a lot of pressure since the criticisms of the rural lobby group were published. The executive has stood staunchly behind me even though I offered them a choice of easier options.

It is interesting, as a scholar of the media, to watch the role of groups like DCQ, by default, supporting a free and fiercely independent media to raise issues of interest to people in their regions. DCQ I thank you - but I think thanks are due from a much wider spectrum of readers of the Bullet.

Bruce Honeywill

IN THIS ISSUE

COVER STORY

SABOTAGE: The Tree of Knowledge in Barcaldine is poisoned. The search is on for who would do such a thing and what are the tree's chances of survival?



WILD RIVERS: The debate continues. Last month's story and editorial on Queensland's Wild Rivers Legislation caused a stir - this month Agforce has more to say along with a comment from the Chair of Desert Channels Queensland, Peter Douglas.

ARID GARDENS: Water conscious gardens don't have to be a dry boring affair - the use of drought resistant plants and efficient water use can still deliver beauty and an enjoyable living space.

DCQ News: All the latest news from Western Queensland's regional body.

CATCHMENT ROUNDUP: News from the catchments.

RICOCLET: A new column where readers have their say and a few chips are coming back at the Bullet in this Ricochet!

A TASTE OF ASIA: A recipe with a difference this month from Melanie Avery.

BOMBER: A piece of fiction displaying the high standards of art found in the bush.

SABOTAGE!

IT MIGHT NOT BE MAINSTREAM TERRORISM BUT THE IDEALS BEHIND THE ATTACK ON THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE IN BARCALTINE COULD BE DRIVEN BY THE SAME HATRED THAT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN MORE DEADLY FORMS OF TERRORISM. THE TREE HAS FOR DECADES STRUGGLED THROUGH A SERIES OF AILMENTS AND IS A MAJOR TOURISM ATTRACTION FOR THE TOWN. WHY WOULD ANYONE TRY TO POISON THIS TREE?

For more than a century this Ghost Gum has been an icon of the working classes. It's where, in the late 19th century, striking shearers sat and planned their guerrilla and industrial actions. These actions changed the face of Industrial Relations and politics in Australia forever, paved the way for a more equitable relationship between property owners and workers, built one of the world's most profitable fibre industries, and put Australia on the sheep's back for much of the 20th Century.

Now in the year that is seeing revision of the nation's IR legislation, it is ironic that a drum of Roundup is threatening the very life of what could be Australia's most famous tree.

But we're assured by local and state politicians the attack on the long-suffering old Ghost Gum is not arboreal terrorism, rather the work of an individual crank. Member for Gregory, Vaughan Johnson, speaking on ABC Radio, says he hopes whoever did it might one day, 'get a gutful of grog and spill the beans'.

Barcaldine Mayor, Rob Chandler says it looks

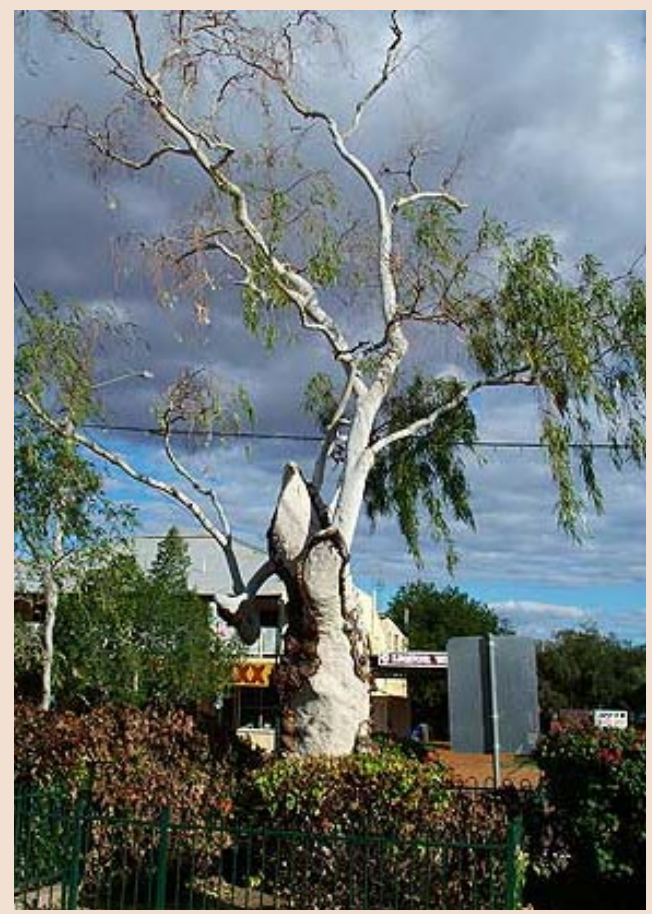
like someone has poured 30 litres of chemicals on the tree roots. The first analysis of dead leaves carried out by DPI suggested the poison was 'a type similar to Roundup'.

Pat Ogden, President of the Barcaldine Branch of the ALP, says this is not the first time the tree has been threatened. He says during the industrial dispute over shearers working weekends in the late nineties, AWU boss Bill Ludwig received a letter threatening to poison the Tree of Knowledge if the AWU didn't withdraw from the industrial dispute.

This act has hurt all Western Queenslanders

But Pat has renewed hopes for the tree, "I've been watching it closely over the weeks and this morning I saw small green leaves shooting from the brown branches. We're still waiting to get the full chemical analysis but I've got high hopes we'll save the tree."

Barcaldine Shire Council workers are pouring water around the roots of the Heritage Listed tree with the hope of diluting the poison and reducing its effectiveness.



...Sunday afternoon and I pull up beside the tree. Barcy is quiet, it's long row of pubs gleaming in the autumn sun. This clean, bright town now lives with a feeling of violation. Why would someone do this to a bent-up old tree that carries so much history? I walk around the trunk. All the leaves of the shrubs beside the tree are burnt off by the poison. I look up into the branches already browned with dieback type symptoms. An expert from DPI reckons the old tree could take three months to die ... or to come good. Even with the council's flushing he says the tree has already absorbed a large amount of chemical, possibly a lethal amount.

A road train rolls through town as I sit beneath the tree. A brahman steer, white eared and bright eyed, looks at the tree as he passes. The cattle will be in Gracemere by midnight. Why would someone do this? No answers come from the dying branches whipping gently against the sky...

If 30 litres of chemicals were poured on the tree, it was no idle action: it was premeditated, planned. If someone planned such an action what would the motivation be? Some passing anarchist just wanting to destroy an icon of



Dead leaves in the upper branches mean the poison is taking effect - But Pat Ogden says green shoots are giving him hope.

mainstream society? In Western Queensland we don't want to think about it, we're not used to this kind of behaviour. And only 48 hours ago a bank was held up in Longreach. Is the ugly outside world of the 21st century catching up with us?

Barcaldine Council CEO, Stuart Randle is a man of his times. He wants to clone the Ghost Gum and commercially market the thousands of little

"It's a despicable act of bastardry, this is a slur on what we stand for,"



Trees of Knowledge, turning the genetics of the old tree into a money-spinner.

But National Party State Member for Gregory, Vaughan Johnson, is incensed. "That tree is sacred to all people in Western Queensland and the person who did this is no more than a gutless coward."

"It's a despicable act of bastardry...a slur on what we stand for," Mr Johnson told the Bullet, "This tree is an icon of the freedom of democracy. This act has hurt all Western Queenslanders."

"He's got to be a bloody rat!" Pat Ogden tells me when I ask him what he would like to see done to the culprit. "He'd probably plead insanity if you took him to court. Really you have to feel sorry for him." But Pat's real concern is for the Tree of Knowledge as he makes his daily pilgrimage to watch those tiny green shoots that might mean its salvation.



Shrubs surrounding the Tree of Knowledge are dying from the poison.

WILD RIVERS

The Debate Continues

A Message from the Chair of DCQ

Peter Douglas Writes: The Basin Bullet ezine was a recommendation of a review into our communication strategy. It is now central to that strategy, with a readership of more than a thousand.

The reasons why the Bullet is so successful is that it is colourful, short, has something for everyone, and gives a fearless but balanced view on touchy issues. That is why Bruce Honeywill has been given editorial independence.

The Basin Bullet is intended to provoke and promote debate on issues of importance to the community of the Desert Channels region. And last month's article on wild rivers has done just that. As stated in the editorial, the opinions expressed are not necessarily that of Desert Channels Queensland.

Agforce are feeling aggrieved, and for that, I'm sorry. Their unedited response, amongst others, appears in this edition. Other responses can be read on the Desert Channels Queensland website at www.dcq.org.au/news/basin_bullet/letters.html

The stand-out issue in this debate is the number of interested parties who have not read the codes for the Wild Rivers Act, or had them explained in plain language. Objective debate is based on fact not hearsay, and I am already on record in an ABC interview urging a much more comprehensive consultation to be carried out.

I did this because I believe the river systems of the Desert Channels region are prime candidates for listing and I would prefer the community of our area to have a better understanding of the whole process, and the potential effects, than they have now.

Agforce has its Say

Kim Bremner Writes: AgForce would like the opportunity to respond to the editorial and article on wild rivers contained in the April edition of the Basin Bullet.

Firstly, AgForce is a membership driven organization, which is why after numerous requests and resolutions from members and branches and careful consideration of the facts, that AgForce decided to oppose the wild rivers legislation and any declarations flowing from the minister. Pardon the pun.

AgForce is also apolitical. We work with whatever government is in power at the time. We do not support any political party but will happily acknowledge those parties which support AgForce policy. But an election promise is not sufficient reason to support bad legislation. AgForce will oppose any legislation that restricts primary producer's legitimate aspirations to improve his land and his family's living conditions.

This legislation is the only piece of NRM legislation that does not have, as an objective of the Act, to consider sustainable development. Every other NRM legislation including the Vegetation, Water and the Integrated Planning Acts have sustainable development as an objective of their respective acts.

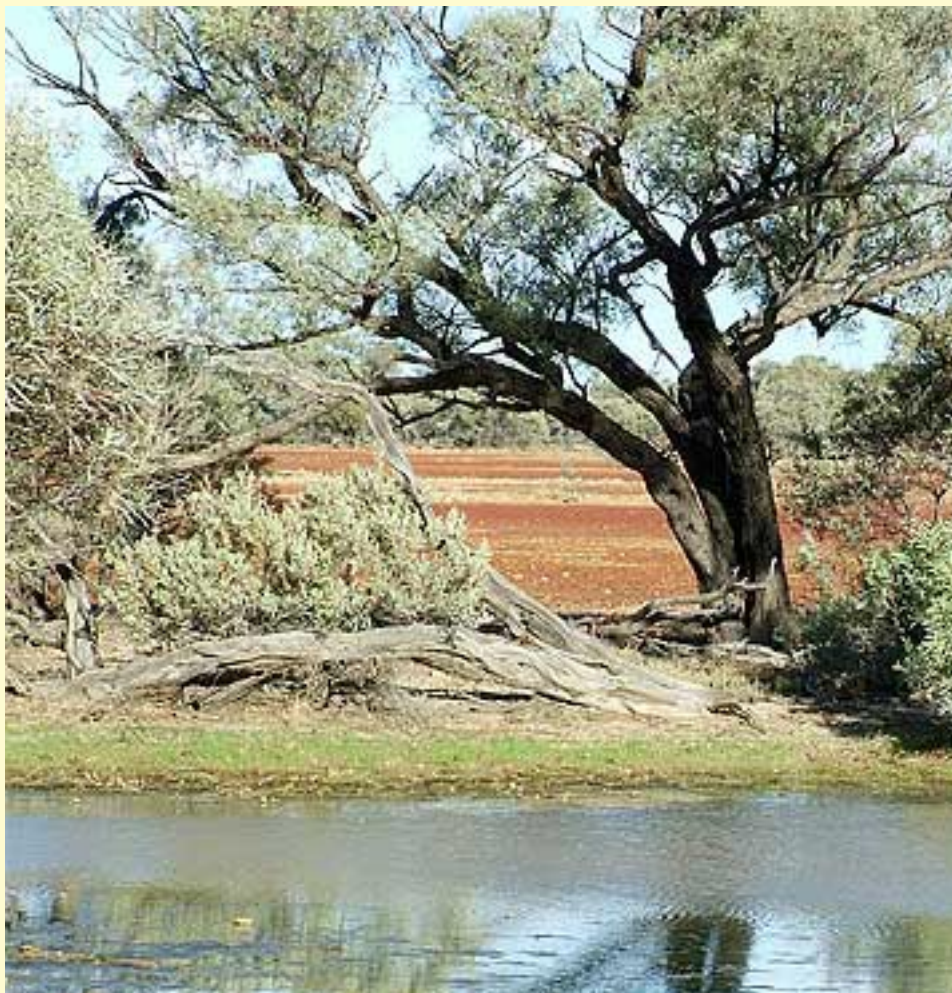
If AgForce has it wrong why does the Federal Government, local government, the National Rubber Vine Management Committee, Burke Shire Council, Etheridge Shire Council, Cook Shire Council, Croyden Shire Council, Queensland Mineral Resources Council, Fraser Island Association, Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell and the Cape York Land Council all support AgForce's call for changes to the legislation, declarations and codes.

AgForce has never said you need a permit under the Wild Rivers Act to clear a fence line although there are limits to the width under the Vegetation Man-

From Desert Channels Queensland:

As well as informing the community, DCQ gives them a voice in the management of the region. We did this recently by facilitating discussion on the Georgina Diamantina resource operations plan (water) to enable community members, not covered by peak body view points, to have their say.

If what you read in the Bullet gets you thinking and talking about things, and asking questions, then it's doing its job.



Agforce's Comments:

agement Act. But the code clearly says if you want to clear weeds, you can only do 20 metres at a time and allow that to revegetate with native species before clearing the next 20 metres - try doing that with rubbervine!

You cannot build any storages of any size other than stock and domestic in the areas declared. The use of the Water Act 2000 under the Gulf Rivers Water Resource Plan will stop that. Given AgForce experience in other catchments restrictions on stock and domestic are not far away.

In your article you quote Larissa Cordner as saying that the \$60 million is to provide funding for policy support. Legislation is the enactment of policy, the government policy and legislation is to restrict development in the declared areas how can you restrict people without enforcing compliance.

While current gravel and sand permits will remain in force, what of future needs? the code specifically states you cannot remove material from a wild river area.

AgForce policy on water development is to allow small off stream storages for diversification and drought proofing in underdeveloped catchments. The Wild Rivers Act will never allow future aspirations of landholders however small to be met.

You have hinted at changes being made to the code. AgForce has received nothing in writing from the government suggesting this. While submissions on the code close on April 24, again AgForce's experience is that unless significant lobbying is undertaken no changes to the code would occur.

John Amprimo states government policy about "lifting the bar" - that is the government wishes to make these Wild River areas national parks but does not want to compensate landholders so the Wild Rivers Act is the next best thing.

AgForce and I have better things to do than beat up a story over Wild Rivers Act. AgForce is certainly not confused about the intent of the legislation or the implementation of the codes and will continue to fight for our member rights and aspirations.

WISE WITH WATER



Arid zone, water-wise gardens are taking shape at schools in Longreach and Barcardine with the assistance of funding and planning support from Desert Channels Queensland.

Kids, parents and teachers have already planted 50 local native species, installed a watering system, and mulched the front garden at Our Lady's Catholic School while the Longreach State School community has done a similar thing.

Arid zone, water wise gardens are also being built at Longreach State High School, St Josephs Catholic School in Barcardine and the Longreach Kindergarten.

These projects are under the Cooper Creek Catchment Committee's Wise Urban Water Usage program and are funded through DCQ by the National Land-care Program along with in-kind support from the individual school communities.

Learning to be wise with water - clockwise from the bottom left, Dennyael Penny, Georgia Barbeler and Shanaye Stewart at Longreach State School; Sue Kinsey keeps an eye on son Mathew at the Working B at Our Lady's School; and Megan Thomson repots plants while Erica Washington gives advice.

DCQ News and Events

Most of the DCQ team members have spent time under the shade of our new marquee in the past month discussing issues with the locals at a number of shows around the region.

This effort has been spearheaded by our Landcare Facilitator, Cameron O'Neil who has been able to inform people of the progress of the latest round of Landcare funding that we advertised to the community in March. Project applications closed in late April and are currently being assessed by our panel of independent technical experts which will then make recommendations to the Board for the final decision.

We also had a very well-received presentation at the 36th Australian Landcare Council meeting held in Longreach on 18th May. Our 15 minute presentation ran to over the hour with delegates keen to question us on, not only our unique region, but our work with the community to ensure that we have a viable, healthy and prosperous region to pass on to our kids.

Brett Carlsson, our Weeds and Ferals man, is carrying out trials on the effectiveness of water-based chemicals on Devils Rope

cactus. He is working with the NRM&W Land Protection Officer and Longreach Shire Rural Lands Officer to see if the messy and expensive diesel that is normally used can be phased out.

Brett is also driving a research project between DCQ and NRM&W that will monitor the movements of wild dogs with GPS tracking collars. The project will provide the community and landholders with some facts on where wild dogs are coming from and how far they will travel into new areas.



Our mapping man, James Shaddick, has produced nearly 30 property maps for landholders, enabling them to undertake DCQ funded Grazing Land Management (GLM) training delivered by DPI&F. These maps incorporated property boundaries, satellite imagery, land type/vegetation data from NRM&W, Regional Ecosystem data from EPA

and landholder supplied infrastructure data (mainly collected using GPS). The maps are an integral part of the GLM workshops and DCQ is one of the few organisations in the region capable of supplying these products.

Preliminary discussions are being held with University of Qld (Dept. of Geography), Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, the Environmental Protection Agency, Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CSIRO Alice Springs), and other interested parties to establish a three year postgraduate position to identify and develop an effective and affordable system of measuring information about our catchments. The position will concentrate on the use of remote sensing to gather data that will help assess catchment health, monitor trends, and assist land managers in their decision-making.

Our wrap of the month comes from a community member in the far north of the region who told the Landcare conference that the DCQ administration team was very friendly, and no matter how busy they were, they always had time to help. Well done, Team!

Catchment Roundup

Project Coordinator, Jeff Poole reports on the recent Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee meeting...

The sign over the hotel bar stated, in no uncertain terms, 'Shirts Must be Worn'. I knew I was in for an interesting few days in the quintessentially Australian Outback town of Eromanga. The old brick building had seen better days but was standing the test of time as it bathed in yet another sunset of red and gold hues.

The warm night was beginning to lap at our heels as we threaded our way to the bar to quench the thirst of a day's dusty travel. The population of the town must have quadrupled with the influx of oil rig workers and those attending the 27th Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee meeting, and they all seemed to be here in the pub, jostling, shouting, chatting, expressing their outspoken opinion, or just having a yarn to an old friend or work mate in a quiet corner.

The evening at the bar set the scene for the meeting that kicked off early the next morning. An eclectic blend of seasoned landowners, conservation reps, concerned community members and professional natu-

ral resource managers that make up the committee fired into action with as much passion as an old-fashioned pub brawl. The discussions were vigorous and everyone took the opportunity to voice their opinions on flow patterns, overland flow and water charges: 'changes to the land caused by a shift from sheep to cattle are affecting run off'; 'it's taking longer for water to run to lower parts of the catchment and there's less of it'; 'water should not be taken from the river system free of charge'; 'it's our given right as land managers'.

It's amazing how the channel country can have a good season even without rain: it all hinges on rainfall in the north, and good floods. The discussion around the table that morning reinforced for me just how much potential effect our actions in the upper part of the catchment can have downstream.

The Wild Rivers Act came in for vigorous debate particularly for its supporting codes. The Act aims to preserve the natural values of Queensland's pristine rivers starting with a number in the Northern Gulf and Cape York regions, but with potential to apply to the Cooper. The underpinning codes have come under fire from some sectors as having the potential to hinder the careful management of the rivers or even population growth. The committee intends to address this code to ensure that if Cooper Creek is declared a 'wild river' at some

future date, the legislation is not only to the advantage of the river, but poses no detriment to those who depend on it for their livelihood.

The Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee exists to be a voice on such issues. By harnessing the experience and knowledge of the community, the Committee is able to advise regional bodies, Desert Channels Queensland and the South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resource Management Group on community opinion and concern. This information is fed to State and Federal governments to ensure that the community is involved in the decision-making process for the management of our land and catchment. In return, the regional bodies communicate government policies and action through the Catchment Committee to the community. There is never any right or wrong, and often a number of differing opinions are put forward, but this brings a balance to a worthwhile democratic process. It gives a voice to the people.

If you would like to know more or to get involved, phone Desert Channels Queensland on 07 4658 0600

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Letters to the Bullet

Stephen Tully writes: I'm somewhat surprised at your open attack on agforce regarding wild rivers. Much of the problem is the interpretation of the legislation which by anyones interpretation is could account for both opinions. If therefore you had a neutral position you would have at least called for more clear regulations written as a binding document. The wilderness society have been the main drivers of this legislation and their story of what is going to happen is very different to the government line. The "trust ME" line from the government is simply not good enough. Time and time again we have seen well intentioned legislation cripple an industry.

Winton Mayor Bruce Collins writes: I write to comment on the Wild Rivers issue as recently reported in the "Basin Bullet". I should, however, like to first congratulate DCQ on the "Basin Bullet". I have found it concise, interesting, readable and attractive. Re the coverage by Basin Bullet of the Wild Rivers legislation and the current debate ... I read the Code thoroughly in October last year and a second time recently to check my facts. It was then that I discovered that it is a moving feast, with some of the more stringent clauses missing in the latter edition. This says volumes about this Government's approach to consultation – if I or any other stakeholders want to know what has been deleted or added to the Code we are expected to re-read a fifty page document. Frankly, I don't have the time and I am absolutely sure that 95% of affected landholders won't either. Back to the Wild Rivers issue, the first question that needs to be answered in a dot point format is, "Why is the legislation necessary"? What undesirable environmental consequences will the Act guard against

that cannot be addressed by existing and developing Catchment Management plans, Resource Operational plans and other existing legislation? If there is to be "no impingement on current usage", then just what is the need for the Wild Rivers legislation? I cannot find that spelt out anywhere. My number one criticism of this legislation is the manner in which it has been developed and passed into law. While there have been vague motherhood-style statements from Ministers about the spirit of the legislation and "pristine river systems", there was no serious consultation with landholders or local government in the development stage.

Bob Norris of Cook Shire Council writes: When you look at the codes you will see that the devil is in the detail. Everybody up here is all for conservation of our rivers but there has to be balance. The Government has been talking about sustainable ecotourism, however urban development (including rural residential, commercial and industrial) is assessable in both zones for applications relating to material change of use, reconfiguration of a lot and operational works, but is not permitted within one kilometre of the main streams and 200 metres of other watercourses. The code stipulates that the HPA is one kilometre on either side of the main river and its (11) tributaries. Even though the Government has said that existing activities will continue to be permitted, the Code appears to stifle future sustainable development of these areas. Apparently building gas pipe lines and mining for bauxite will not have any effect on wild rivers - are they going to use aerial hooks when the pipeline crosses watercourses and helicopters with digging equipment at Aurukun. It seems pretty cynical, doesn't it. You should also note that the Conservation Groups have in their sights a large chunk of Queensland's Rivers.

In an open letter to Northern Gulf landholders, John Bethel wrote: I am certain that to push for repeal of the act is akin to putting all your money on a 100-1 pop in the last at Randwick with about as much chance of succeeding. In all my years of involvement with this community I have come to see the Grazing sector in this region as political realists who have always been pragmatic enough to come to a compromise position that we can all live with. I have fond memories of past battles won! I urge you to stick to what is achievable i.e. rewrite the codes to make them practical, rework the section of the act that is unworkable in it's present form, use all the resources and expertise that exist in your own community to get the job done. Agforce has a serious credibility problem at both a State and Federal level and even more so out in our community and to be seen to be pushing their barrow and being party political will kill off any chance you have of achieving a result on this issue. As chairman of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group I will not be supporting the signing of the letter or the Agforce position on Wild Rivers Act repeal. I have a responsibility to represent all my stakeholders, but I will work tirelessly behind the scenes to build on our relationship with the State government and its agencies to achieve a just outcome for the whole community affected by this act. Far more will be achieved by negotiation and building alliances than will ever be achieved by belligerent opposition and politicking.

These letters have been abridged for space - full texts can be read on the Desert Channels Web Site

Grilled Fish

Melanie Avery of Longreach is just back from a four-month tour of South-East Asia. She reckons her 'Western Queensland' palate has broadened and, after months living on local cuisine, misses the heat and bite of Asian cooking.

A Burmese breakfast of bean paste, garlic and crispy pancakes – sounds very different to Weetbix at Nogo – the fragrant green and red curries of Thailand; minced beef salad (Larb) from Laos; dumplings and noodles from China; and that fresh, tangy taste of Vietnamese spring rolls!

“All these dishes are quick and easy to make, and use the freshest ingredients, herbs and spices,” Melanie told the Bullet.

So what does a person do when she gets back to the roast mutton and three veg in Western Queensland? “The first thing I did when I got back was pick up a couple of recipe books and start trying out a few recipes. This is one of my favourites – quick, easy and versatile...see for yourself.”

So Mel gives us all a glimpse of the fresh foods of Asia with her photography and a taste with her recipes...



Preparation time: 20 minutes + 15 minutes marinating
Total cooking time: 6 minutes
Serves: 4

4 firm white fish fillets, such as perch (approx. 600g total)
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
3cm piece of fresh ginger, grated
1 teaspoon each of cayenne pepper and sweet paprika
2 teaspoons sugar
1 ½ tablespoons soy sauce (Japanese preferable)
1 tablespoon rice vinegar

Pat the fish dry with paper towels and place it in a shallow dish.

Combine the garlic, ginger, chilli, sugar, soy sauce and vinegar. Spoon over the fish and let marinate for 15 minutes.

Arrange the fillets on a foil lined grill tray and cook under a medium heat for about 5 minutes, or until the fish is cooked through. Do not turn the fish over during cooking. Serve with plenty of steamed rice or as we did at home a fresh salad and homemade potato chips.

Note: You can easily adjust the chilli content to your liking, use more or less to suit your individual taste.

Recipe sourced from The Essential Asian Cookbook.

Bomber

By Helen Avery

He shouldn't have died here. Not in a place like this. He should have dropped in the dust...like an old dog, an old scrubber bull...dropped in the dust and become the dust and scattered like the dust wherever the wind should choose to blow. Not like this – pinned between the stark white fluorescent light and the tucked in too tight sheets and beds with rails of steel as cold as claws and as smooth as tears. Not here – walls and angles, too many people with smiles and hands smelling of disinfectant – kind and firm and clean – too clean for love.

In the hospital he shrank and faded. Some days they would wheel him past the cold windows to the verandah and leave him for an hour or so, enclosed in a patch of pale sun between concrete pillars. Pale sun and a thin breeze – better than inside but only just. The gardener would stop to yarn and the old man could smell the earth on his hands and the sweat on his clothes – moist and rich as fruit – not the fine-wine-dry of the heat and dust of the downs country.

I remember meeting him, as clear in my mind as a photograph and yet there was really nothing much to remember – just an old man, an old building, a sky and a day as warm and smooth as honey. He had watched us coming towards him. He spent much of his day watching...changes across the face of the sky, movements of the earth, grass growing. He had seen the column of dust approach through a shimmer of heat, had thrown on a bit of a shirt and was still thrusting the tail into his trousers when we stepped from the Toyota. They were too long the trousers – old pyjama pants held with twine, dragging at his ankles. The fly gaped open threatening his modesty. Excited he was, buttons askew, beaming to see us. The quick hands tangled in the shirt and the trousers and

the twine and the wanting to greet us. If it hadn't been for the tangle and the broken canvas sandshoes on his feet, he would have danced to greet us as nimble as a girl.

As it was he was pinned there – caught for a moment – against the grey corrugations of iron, an angle of sky and a tired step propped at one end with an extra bit of firewood. He stepped forward then, out from the photograph and away from the step, laughed and grasped our hands and “G'day,” he said. “G'day!”

He turned to me.

“You must be Shardie's girl?”

He took my hands in both of his, winked at the Young Boss and we laughed together, the three of us, laughter as sweet as a benediction.

“Shardie's girl!”

He was small, compact small. As neat and round and tight as a drum – an old drum smoothed and polished dark as leather from the smoke of fires and the touch of many hands. I thought of Moses. It was the beard I suppose – a wonderful untamed expanse of whisker that flowed across his chest to his middle. It gave him a dignity that would have been lost otherwise in the tangle and twinkle of hands and feet and the smile that shimmered behind his eyes. There was a fire on the beaten dirt in front of his quarters – an old fire, confined by a sheet of iron and deep with ashes. He snatched his rag hat from his head to shift the kero tin closer to the coals. His bald head gleamed copper. Steam shifted across the surface of the billy and the scent of smoke and summer was thick on my skin.

“A-a-a-ay boss,” he said, and they hunkered down side by side and sorted out the weather, the leaking trough, the bloody old ram from Pacey’s, the fence that needed straining out near Western bore.

He stood, the old man, hooked the lid off the syrup tin by the woodpile and chucked a handful of tea leaves into the billy.

* * *

“Real tea – thick and sweet and black as sin and tasting of smoke – not like this – this stuff the girl brings – pale and weak as ... shit, I need to pee... Sister! Sister!... I need to... No! Not there! Not in that tin thin! I need to pee like a man, girl. In the dust, legs apart in the dust with the sun on my back and the stream of my water splashing the sun-hot dirt between my feet and the heat of the sun and the dirt and the rough grass reaching my thighs and my eyes as full of the sky as tears. I wanna cry, die, cry like a baby, cry-baby, cry...”

His hands fluttered brokenly against the light, plucking, picking, searching for something to hold against the skin, something to warm the thin shrinking blood that beat like a bird in the bars of his chest. It had not been so bad at first – the fuss, the girls, their hands on his old body stirring the wicked flickerings of youth. But that had all gone, faded to nothing, not a flicker...

“...just the dead ashes of a cold fire sifting heavy enough to bury me in a nothing of ashes and dust, dust and ashes... unless we become as little children ... little children playing in the dust of the earth beneath the languid leaves of trees. Bare, brown bellied children laughing loud and full and dimpled, tossing stones in a circle – a game of stones in the dust... small brown hands reaching for stones, tossing them high in the air against the sky and the sun... catching them in the hand as smooth and warm as the sun and the water of the brown river and as old as time...”

Then it’s cold again and white and his hands are empty and crabbed with age, plucking at sheets. A girl comes in to do things with charts and pans and curtains.

“We’d play y’know, as kids like you... with stones by the river.

We’d make a circle and toss the stones.

There were rules y’know.

Y’ had to throw the stones in a circle.”

“Like marbles?” she said. “We used to play marbles when I was a kid.”

“No, stones. Y’d pick ‘em. Y’d have to pick ‘em right.

They’d have to feel just right in ya hand and y’d know when they were the right ones because of the feel...”

During her shift she stepped outside for a few minutes – to stretch and shake the hospital feel from her limbs and light a quick cigarette. She leaned with her cigarette and watched the gardener, deft and quick with the clippers, snip, snipping at edges already snipped and neat. She stepped away from the building towards him, crossing the path, feeling the sun on her shoulder blades and the clean air.

“The Old Boy used to play with these he told me today,” she said.

She bent and picked up a couple of stones from the side of the path, smoothing the sun warmth with the ball of her thumb and feeling them on the curve of the palm of her hand, tracing their shape with the tips of her fingers.

“...like marbles.”

The gardener crouched at her feet, rich dirt stuck to his boots, his hands broad and stained from the growing of things and scarred from use. He glanced at the stones in her hand then back at his work. His hands continued to move as concise and firm as a surgeon’s.

“Them old blokes,” he said, “they miss the dirt...”

He hiked a thumb towards the building behind them.

“...inside there.”

He didn’t look at her again and said no more.

She tossed a stone in the air and it spun against the sky and the sun. She caught it and cupped its warmth against her cheek for a moment then dropped the stones into her pocket. She turned and went inside.

The old man took too long to die. He faded away – like a shadow slipping backwards into a dream. In those times when he wrenched his head backwards and forwards across the pillow and his hands twisted and danced on the covers, sometimes the stones could soothe him, the ones the girl had brought.

He died finally, inevitably. They would have thrown the stones out but the girl took them home. Sometimes she smoothed them with the ball of her thumb and felt their weight on the curve of the palm of her hand, traced their shapes with the tips of her fingers.

She kept them for a long time.

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