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# Assimilating Nature: The Bunya Diaspora

Anna Haebich

Colonizer and colonized, we all inhabit these death-scarred landscapes.  
We are here by hope, and we are here by violence.

*Deborah Bird Rose (1999)<sup>1</sup>*

The bunya pine has a special meaning for Queenslanders, being endemic to the Bunya Mountains and Blackall Ranges in the South-East corner of the state, with a small stand in North Queensland. The bunya holds particular significance for local Indigenous peoples. They are bound to the tree through custodial rights and obligations and systems of traditional environmental knowledge that incorporate 'classification ... empirical observations of the local environment ... [and] self-management that governs resource use',<sup>2</sup> built up through generations of interaction with the bunya forests. Indigenous groups celebrated their spiritual links to the bunya pine in large seasonal gatherings where they feasted on its edible nuts and performed ceremonies, adjudicated disputes and traded goods. The bunya's majestic height, striking unique silhouette, dark green foliage, unique botanical features and Indigenous associations held a fascination for colonial artists, natural scientists, entrepreneurs and gardeners. Over the years they assumed custodianship of the bunya pine, assimilating it into Western scientific, economic, legal, horticultural, environmental and symbolic systems, which replaced Indigenous custodial rights, obligations and knowledge. The spectacular bunya gatherings were mythologised in colonial writings as mystical, primeval ceremonies and barbaric rituals.<sup>3</sup> Despite 'fierce and actively hostile tribal resistance' to colonisation of their lands, Indigenous groups were progressively driven out of the bunya forests.<sup>4</sup> Empty landscapes left by the retreating forests - victims of timber felling and land clearing - came to symbolise the vanishing ceremonies and dwindling Aboriginal populations of South-East Queensland. While surviving Indigenous groups were swept into centralised reserves and settlements from the late nineteenth century, so too the bunya trees were cordoned off in 1908, for their own protection, in Queensland's second

national park at the Bunya Mountains,<sup>5</sup> where they stood 'like the spirits of the departed original Queenslanders, mourning over the days which are forever gone'.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, at the same time as the bunya was disappearing from its natural habitat, it was making its way into public and private gardens across the Australian continent and around the globe, becoming one of an elite group of trees admired and celebrated around the world. Tantalising glimpses of this spreading 'bunya diaspora'<sup>7</sup> can be found in the records of nineteenth century travellers such as botanical artist Marianne North who visited South-East Queensland in 1880-1 as part of her mission - originally suggested to her by Sir Charles Darwin - to document the unique flora of Australasia. Of the fifteen-year-old bunya pines struggling to survive in Brisbane's dusty drought-stricken Botanical Gardens, North noted tartly that they were "'not a patch" on those in the Temperate House at Kew [Gardens in London]'.<sup>8</sup> However, the trees she observed in their natural habitat in the Bunya Mountains inspired her to complete four paintings, now held in the Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens.

Mapping the 'bunya diaspora' and retracing the steps of the bunya pine's spread from the forests to the gardens of the world are part of the research for a major virtual exhibition, *On the Bunya Trail*, being prepared by Global ArtsLink.<sup>9</sup> This intriguing detective work has led to bunya planting sites around the world. Papers presented to an international symposium of Araucariaceae enthusiasts in Auckland in March 2002<sup>10</sup> told of trees flourishing in sites from riverside parks in Perth to botanical gardens in Naples. A tour of specimens in Auckland parks and gardens culminated in a commemorative planting of a bunya pine by conference organisers. Web searches and further research in Australia unearthed a host of additional specimens in Australia, England, Italy, USA, Singapore and New Zealand.



**Plate 1. Bunya in Botanical Gardens Melbourne, 2002. Photograph by Anna Haebich.**

The spread of the bunya from the mid-nineteenth century reflected trends in colonial botanical research and horticultural style preferences and, during the early twentieth century, commercial cultivation of the tree by governments, and civic uses by local municipal, church and institutional authorities. Writing of plantings of *Araucaria* specimens in Tasmania, Phillip Parsons notes that these broader trends were also influenced by particularities of local history and society. Trees also spread along networks of families and individuals who cultivated them to mark special events or residences or in order to harvest the nuts for personal or commercial use. The tree could be readily grown from easily transported bunya nuts. Colonists took little notice of the fact that this conflicted with Indigenous prohibitions on planting the bunya in other locations; however, an official prohibition operating from 1842 to 1860 honoured their strict taboos on cutting down the trees.

The first colonists to see the bunya pine were escapees from the Moreton Bay convict settlement in the early 1820s. In the following decade, colonist Andrew Petrie visited the Glass House Mountains with Aboriginal people who blamed his later blindness on his 'commercially motivated search for seedlings and samples of the tree' during the trip." Perhaps they would have attributed the unfortunate fate of British botanist/collector John Carne Bidwill to a similar cause. In 1843, after a brief visit to Moreton Bay to investigate the bunya pine, Bidwill returned to England with dried bunya specimens and living plants which he presented to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew and which Sir William Jackson Hooker used to designate the tree's scientific classification and nomenclature - *Araucaria bidwillii*.<sup>12</sup> Hooker had little hesitation in honouring Bidwill, despite the many known Indigenous names for the tree and the colonists' chosen term, *Pinus petrieana*, which honoured Petrie's associations with the tree. Ironically, Bidwill's continuing connection with the tree would play a role in his premature death in 1853 when, aged only 38 years he succumbed to the deleterious effects on his health of the rigours of an earlier exploratory trip when he became lost in the bunya 'scrub'.<sup>13</sup>

The bunya spread out along the scientific networks of explorers, botanists and botanic gardens of the British Empire. Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt who visited the Blackall Ranges in 1843 enthused in his journals over the 'remarkable mountain brushes, out of which the bunya-bunyas lift their majestic heads, like pillars of the blue vault of heaven'.<sup>14</sup> During the late 1850s the indefatigable Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller forwarded seeds to Kew Gardens and botanical gardens in Australia and New Zealand from his base at the Melbourne Botanical Gardens. Bunyas from von Mueller were listed at the Royal Tasmanian Botanic Gardens in 1857. In 1876, Walter Hill, Director of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, sent in a further specimen.<sup>15</sup> Bunya cones could be purchased for ten guineas each at Covent Gardens, London in 1856. In 1863, Kew Gardens boasted a bunya tree of four metres that, ten years

later, was reported to be bearing massive cones. Works by professional artists, like Conrad Martens who travelled through the Darling Downs region in the early 1850s and Marianne North, also presented the tree to scientific audiences. Reports on Indigenous practices and successful plantings by colonial families like the Perries also served to promote the tree in scientific circles.

Not surprisingly, scientific interest in the tree spilled over into the world of commercial nurseries and public and private gardens. Indeed, botanist John Bidwill combined his scientific interests with entrepreneurial activities seeking out exotic plant species in the colonies for the firm of Luscombe, Pince and Co. in his hometown of St Thomas in Exeter, which had plant collectors operating in Mexico, Brazil, West Africa and Australia during the 1840s.<sup>16</sup> By the 1860s bunya plants were for sale in Melbourne nurseries and private gardeners could select from a range of Araucariaceae offered in circulating nursery catalogues.<sup>17</sup> The bunya pine's symmetrical shape, domed crown, straight trunk, height, and exoticism fitted well with fashions in nineteenth century gardening and landscaping, making the trees a ready favourite with the gardening public. Glenn Cooke notes that the Gardenesque style, promoted by John Claudius Loudon (1873-43), which dominated garden styles from the early nineteenth century, 'emphasised the use of exotic plants, which were placed in specific settings in the landscape so that the individual colour and form of the tree could best be appreciated'.<sup>18</sup> This was also a period of major colonial expansion and a vast range of exotic plants were transported to the British Isles from all parts of the world. The favourite for gardens in Victorian England was a close relative of the bunya pine, the monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*). The bunya was also popular with specimens to be found at the Fox family gardens at Penjerrick and Glendurgan as well as gardens at Mount Edgecumbe and the Abbey, Tresco in South-West England.<sup>19</sup> Owners of large country estates in Australia were also attracted by the features of the tree which, following the boom of the gold rushes, came to signify wealth and status in the landscapes of country Victoria. This was replicated in rural areas in the other colonies and large private urban estates and this continued on until other less grandiose horticultural styles and imperatives took over the gardens of the wealthy from the early twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

The bunya's particular design qualities of good definition with height and dark green foliage rendered it highly suitable for large open expanses and it was used extensively for landscaping in public gardens during the late nineteenth century. Planting schemes devised by Edward La Trobe Bateman in 1855 for the University of Melbourne included bunya pines and they featured prominently in plans for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, later in the century.

From the early 1900s, government and local authorities, churches and private corporations extended this early civic use of the bunya pine, attracted by its ornamental suitability for town and cityscapes and the grounds of large institutions. The beauty of the tree and its emerging symbolic meanings in settler culture of heroism, eternity, authority, Australianness and even the 'home' of European forests were also acknowledged through its growing civic use in commemorative settings. Arranged in groups or as feature trees bunyas lined broad avenues, such as the entrance to Concordia Lutheran College in Toowoomba,



**Plate 2.** Monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) in suburban Auckland, New Zealand, 2002. Photograph by Anna Haebich.

adorned large institutional settings such as the Wolston Park Psychiatric Hospital near Goodna, and filled more and more parks. In Perth bunya pines could now be found in established inner city suburbs at Raphael Park, Queens Park, Beattie Park, Hyde Park, Kings Park, Perth Zoo, Karrakatta Cemetery and in the grounds of the University of Western Australia. The trees also marked out cemeteries, as in the Toowong Cemetery in Brisbane, and returned soldiers war memorials in numerous country towns.<sup>21</sup> In 1927 the tree represented Australian flora at a ceremonial tree planting by the Duke of York to commemorate the opening of Old Parliament House.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, the development of a national nursery industry made these practices all the more attractive and possible. Large quantities of cheap plants were now readily available from government forestry plantations where the trees were grown principally for use as soft wood - between 1915 and 1930 bunya wood was used for butter boxes and to line and seal wooden homes - and to create fire-resistant, frost tolerant forests. In 1920-21 alone the Queensland government launched plantings of 6000 seedlings of hoop and bunya pine at plantations on Fraser Island and Mary Island and at Atherton and commercial bunya plantations were being trialled in northern New South Wales. Civic use of the bunya pine appears to have gradually declined from the 1930s and it is only recently that a new interest in the monumental amongst some landscape gardeners has rekindled a minor interest in ornamental use of the tree.

Writing on surviving specimens in present-day Tasmania, Phillip Parsons<sup>23</sup> concludes that major planters of bunya pines were governments, municipal corporations, botanical institutions, large private schools, churches and wealthy owners of large rural properties. This would appear to be the case across the 'bunya diaspora' in Australia. Home gardeners were interested principally in more practical matters of food and flower production and planting a tree that took several years to produce and that promised to take up most of a suburban backyard would not have had much appeal. Furthermore, for many years this exotic addition would have been outside the budget of most home gardeners. Nevertheless, bunya pines were planted by the less privileged and powerful, often for primarily sentimental reasons - to commemorate a special event in the life of a family, a move to a new location or to recall Queensland - or even to help to ensure the survival of the tree.

Many of the trees of the 'bunya diaspora' are still standing. There are specimens in botanical gardens in Trinidad, Singapore and Naples, in the grounds of the University of California, the Sarasota Jungle Gardens in Florida and at various sites in New Zealand. In Australia, the fledgling trees in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, scorned by Marianne North, now form a distinctive feature along the river perimeter of the gardens. In rural areas, solitary 'signature trees' can still be seen on distant horizons standing near abandoned homesteads. In cities such as Melbourne established bunya 'beauty trees' now constitute an 'aging population of trees', some perched precariously close to busy thoroughfares, their continued existence subject to the 'economics of amenities trees' in local council budgets.<sup>24</sup>

Some bunya pines have become the subject of 'bidwillii paranoia': the fear of



Plate 3. Bunya in Queens Park, Ipswich, 2002. Photograph by Anna Haebich.

bunya cones - which can weigh as much as ten kilos - crashing from a great height onto innocent passers-by in public parks and other open spaces.<sup>25</sup> This has prompted many local authorities to cull the cones during the fruiting season (January to March) and to post warning notices. In some cases concerns have escalated into open conflict, with demands for the trees to be chopped down. This was the case at Minden Primary School where concerned parents demanded that trees in the school playground be removed to prevent injury to children. In this case the trees were saved. However, an acrimonious neighbourhood dispute erupted in the Perth suburb of Nedlands in the early 1990s after a large cone crashed through the roof of a neighbouring home causing extensive damage. It resulted in the tree being chopped down and led on to a heated public debate about 'tree versus human rights' and protection of heritage trees.<sup>26</sup> In 2001 in Cambridge (near Hamilton in New Zealand) a bunya tree of 27 metres, claimed to be the best specimen in the country, was poisoned on two separate occasions by an anonymous attacker and had to be placed under protective surveillance to prevent further abuse. A special barrier was also erected around the tree to provide protection from the 'steady stream of foot traffic' as members of the public 'flock[ed] to see the tree since news of the attacks'.<sup>27</sup>

It is a sobering fact that, woven through the many passionate dialogues about the 'bunya diaspora' there was a particular absence - the voices of the bunya's Indigenous custodians. This silence did not necessarily signify a loss of traditional knowledge and custodianship; rather, it suggests a guarding of knowledge from those who indiscriminately took what little was shown to them in the past. Furthermore, as Marcia Langton reminds us, this frequent absence of Indigenous people from environmental planning and debates represents 'not just a *lacuna*, but a comprehensive flaw in understanding the role of human presence in Australian landscapes'.<sup>28</sup> This painful silence is only starting to be broken as Indigenous people move out once again to publicly assert their custodianship of the bunya tree and forests through meetings with environmental and other planning authorities, native title claims and plans to revive the bunya festivals and to establish related economic enterprises. Indigenous connections to the bunya pine are also being expressed through the settler practice of commemorative plantings, adopted by some groups as a way of formally honouring their peoples and cultures. In 2001 Aboriginal people in Canberra joined others at the Peace Park next to the National Library in plantings celebrating the bunya pine as the 'International Tree of Peace', reflecting the significance of the bunya ceremonies in creating peaceful relations between Aboriginal people.<sup>29</sup> Members of the Purga community near Ipswich have begun planting a commemorative avenue of bunya pines on their property to honour their elders.

The reopening by Indigenous custodians of channels of sharing and exchange remains, of necessity, a guarded process, given escalating appropriation of resources and knowledges by non-Indigenous groups, from local tourist interests to multinational companies. Vandana Shiva uses the term 'biopiracy' to refer to contemporary practices whereby traditional environmental knowledge shared by Indigenous peoples as 'gifts' is converted into private property through intellectual

property rights (IPR) claims:

In the present world market economy, where knowledge represents money, capital represents power, and profit is the sole aim, those who own capital seek IPRs to protect their 'discoveries', which are often based on the cumulative and collective innovation of traditional societies. ... Biopiracy leaves the donors poorer, both materially and intellectually, as they are excluded from sharing in the benefits of their own resources and knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

In this climate, Indigenous peoples are now negotiating for formal recognition through native title; acknowledgement of custodial rights, and incorporation of traditional environmental knowledges in 'models for shared responsibility in land management' through which their 'human agency and stewardship will be maintained', along with the 'practices which reproduce the distinctive landscapes shaped by their forebears'.<sup>31</sup>

So the bunya diaspora begins to circle back within itself, beginning the journey back to its rightful custodians and the forests of South-East Queensland. This was the powerful message delivered by Paddy Jerome, Jarowair elder and Bunya Mountains custodian, to a symposium on the bunya pine held at the ECO-Centre at Griffith University in Brisbane in 2002.<sup>32</sup>

Now we are trying to keep all of our ways alive. It is very important that we revive the bunya festivals and our people are talking about this. We are already reviving the initiations. ... But first we need to reconcile with our Aboriginal ancestors. ... My people believe that every living thing on this earth was linked with spirituality and each and every one of us must respect the earth and each other as equal. ... My ancestors walked through this land, the land speaking to them ... We belong to this land, the land is our Mother; we are part of a spiritual structure. That's Aboriginal culture. That is *Boobarran Ngummin*, the Bunya Mountains, our Mother.<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

- 1 D. Bird Rose, 'Indigenous ecologies and an ethic of connection', N. Low (ed.) *Global Ethics and Environment*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1999): 184.
- 2 M. Johnson 1992 cited in H. Fourmile, 'Traditional knowledge and global governance', in N. Low (ed.) *Global Ethics and Environment*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 220.
- 3 B. McKay and P. Buckridge, 'Literary imaginings of the bunya', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002).
- 4 Governor Bowen to Colonial Office 1861 cited in A. Haebich, 'A chronology of the bunya pine', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002): 116.  
B. McKay and P. Buckridge, 'Literary imaginings of the bunya', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002).
- 5 22,500 acres of land in the Bunya Mountains were reserved as a national park in 1908, the second such declaration in Queensland.
- 6 S.A. White, 'notes upon the birds observed on the Bunya Mountains and Stradbroke Island', *Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union*, XIX, 1920: 216.
- 7 I am grateful to John Dargavel, President of the Australian Forestry Society for suggesting this term.
- 8 G. Cooke, 'Representing the Bunya Pine', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002): 85.
- 9 The Project has also published a collection of articles about the bunya pine edited by Anna Haebich, *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, November, 2002. The On the Bunya Trail Project was jointly hosted by the Queensland Studies Centre at Griffith University which promotes research about the state through projects, seminars, conferences and publications, notably the *Queensland Review*, and Global ArtsLink, the award winning regional art gallery and museum in Ipswich that combines art, social history and new technologies to explore the region. The Project was funded by Queensland Heritage Trails Network, a joint initiative of the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government, established in 2000 through the Federation Fund and working partnerships with local government authorities and local councils to create and link 43 heritage places celebrating the state's unique history, culture, and natural features.
- 10 International Dendrochronology symposium, Araucariaceae Symposium, Auckland, March 2002. The papers presented to the symposium are in publication.
- 11 J. Huth, 'Introducing the bunya pine', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002): 15.
- 12 W. J. Hooker, 'Figure and description of a new species of Araucaria', *London Journal of Botany* ii (1843): 498-506.
- 13 T. Blake, 'This noble tree': J.C. Bidwill and the naming of the bunya pine', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002): 44.
- 14 McKay and Buckridge op. cit.: 66.
- 15 P. Parsons, 'A view of *Araucaria bidwillii* in Tasmania', paper presented to the International Araucariaceae Symposium, Auckland, New Zealand, 2002. The papers presented to the symposium are in publication.
- 16 D. J. Mabblerley, 'Bidwill of the bunya-bunya', *Curtis' Botanical Magazine*, 18,1, (2001): 33.
- 17 A. Watt, 'Araucarias in Victoria', paper presented to International Araucariaceae Symposium, Auckland New Zealand, 2002. The papers presented to the symposium are in publication.
- 18 Cooke op. cit.: 85.
- 19 M. Paviour, 'Araucaria cunninhamii and its status in gardens of South-West England', paper forwarded privately to author.
- 20 Parsons op. cit.
- 21 J. Dargavel, 'More to grief than granite: arboreal remembrance in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 64, 2000.

- 22 [Canberra tree]
- 23 Parsons op. cit.
- 24 L. Andrews, 'Management of Araucaria and Agathis species in Melbourne', paper presented to International Araucariaceae Symposium, Auckland, New Zealand, 2002. The papers presented to the symposium are in publication.
- 25 Andrews op.cit.
- 26 *Subiaco Post*, 19/1/2002: 17, 26/1/2002; Dr Joanna Sassoon, private communication.
- 27 [www.waipadc.govt.nz/Pages/General/Press/bunya\\_jul01.htm](http://www.waipadc.govt.nz/Pages/General/Press/bunya_jul01.htm).
- 28 M. Langton, *Burning Questions Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia*, (Darwin: Centre for Natural and Cultural Resource Management, Northern Territory University, 1998: 72).
- 29 *Canberra Times*, 13/3/2001: 4.
- 30 V. Shiva, 'Ecological balance in an era of globalization', N. Low (ed.) *Global Ethics and Environment*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1999): 62-3.
- 31 Langton op. cit.: 75.
- 32 The symposium was hosted by the Queensland Studies Centre and Global ArtsLink as part of the On the Bunya Trail Project. The papers were published in A. Haebich (ed.) *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, (2002).
- 33 P. Jerome, 'Boobarran Ngummin: the Bunya Mountains', *On the Bunya Trail Special Edition of Queensland Review*, A. Haebich (ed.) (2002): 4-5.