



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Brown, Nicholas. "On the Margins of the Littoral Society: The New South Wales South Coast since 1945." *Environment and History* 4, no. 2, Australia special issue (June 1998): 209–37.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2975>.

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# On the Margins of the Littoral Society: The New South Wales South Coast since 1945

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## SUMMARY

Since the end of World War II the south coast of New South Wales has moved from relative isolation and a declining pastoral economy to being an area of rapid growth, registering the changing social and cultural patterns of urban Australia and becoming the site for a range of national environmental and indigenous rights controversies. This article focuses on the dynamics of this centre-margin relationship, with particular attention to the overlaying of successive histories and sensibilities, and the forms of environmental advocacy these processes have produced.

Environmental history often charts its way from centres to margins. It is an enquiry that stretches from scientific expertise and ecological analysis, the edicts of colonisation, regulation and exploitation, or generalised cultural formations, to intensely local patterns, variations and experiences, and the living through of the 'values, laws and myths' that shape the intersection of 'humanity' and 'nature'. In the Australian case, the centres of European colonisation, 'born modern' at Sydney Cove in advanced practices of government, settlement and technology, confronted a deeply unfamiliar landscape, 'more a new planet than a new continent'.<sup>1</sup> In the more fertile areas of Australia, the 'centre' made rapid progress in claiming and remaking the land. Yet even in those areas, and even once the European presence seemed at its most exclusive, the margins of experience still existed, often in a dynamic relationship to those practices of governing. This article explores aspects of one such area. In building from the local upwards, I want to explore some of the most recent phases of this dynamic exchange.

## I. '... A PRICELESS NATIONAL RESOURCE'

Back from the south coast of New South Wales, along the narrow Towamba river valley as it reaches up towards a steep escarpment through forest and cleared flats, there are a few paddocks which, for all their remoteness, show traces of history moving in distinct waves. The dusty gravel road at the gates is a remnant stock route, marking the aspirations of one early colonial entrepreneur, Benjamin Boyd, who in the 1840s sought to build an empire around wool, tallow, whaling and cheap labour brought from islands in the Pacific. His vision, linking Twofold Bay and the pastures of the Monaro behind the mountains, collapsed in extravagance and controversy, leaving by the beach the 'mouldering' ruins of a church, a lighthouse, a hotel – the remnants of 'Boydstown' – and, further inland, tracks like this road, with an old blacksmith's shelter now falling into the bush.<sup>2</sup>

But the valley was opened if never formally explored, and small settlers took up the land. These paddocks recall a succession of usage, as do the generations of trees edging in on them, from the dense Coolangubra forest beginning on the ridges to the ti-tree scrub thickening on this side of the fences. A struggling dairy between the wars, the site was then chosen for a model farm to encourage a new generation of post-war farmers with techniques of pasture improvement, soil conservation, rabbit control and water management. Towards the end of the 1970s the land was claimed again, bought cheap by a group of people who helped each other build in scattered clearings: an ex-World War Two Nissen Hut from the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, carried in panels over the river; a caravan under awnings of corrugated iron; a mud-brick house decorated with found objects, including a frieze of horseshoes. From this house an orchard leads down to the river. It is untended now: the trees still show the care of pruning, but the fruit is dry and small. Under them is a tangle of garlic, planted as an organic pesticide, now gone wild; around them, and over decaying timber-terraced beds built for vegetables, strands of black plastic irrigation tubing have been exposed and buckled by rabbits.<sup>3</sup>

Along the coast there are many such places where changing patterns of settlement, land use and aspiration are overlaid, and where tensions between marginality and the forces of change are mapped out on the landscape. These forces range from the zeal of private developers, from Boyd onwards, straining to catch a new market, to the enthusiasm of those seeking an 'alternative' ideal in quiet valleys. And the patterns register compromises between these polarities, for this has been one of the more isolated and easily degraded regions in settled Australia, and the choices it offers narrow quickly.

On the coast similar processes can be traced. There is the succession from small nineteenth century ports serving inland towns, timber and pastoral industries, to the demands for private leisure stretching down meagre highways from the 1950s onwards, to more recent phases of intense residential subdivision and servicing. These new land uses, behind beaches, on headlands, around estuaries

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and coastal lakes, abut but bear little relation to the old economies of the hinterland. Behind Moruya the rusty corrugated iron on old dairy cottages alternates with the designer-tinted roofing of the 'ranches' and 'homesteads' built on recent 16 hectare rural-residential subdivisions. Each of these patterns of settlement has shaped and interpreted this environment. Each has registered changing historical contexts, fostering new community identities and positions of social and environmental advocacy.

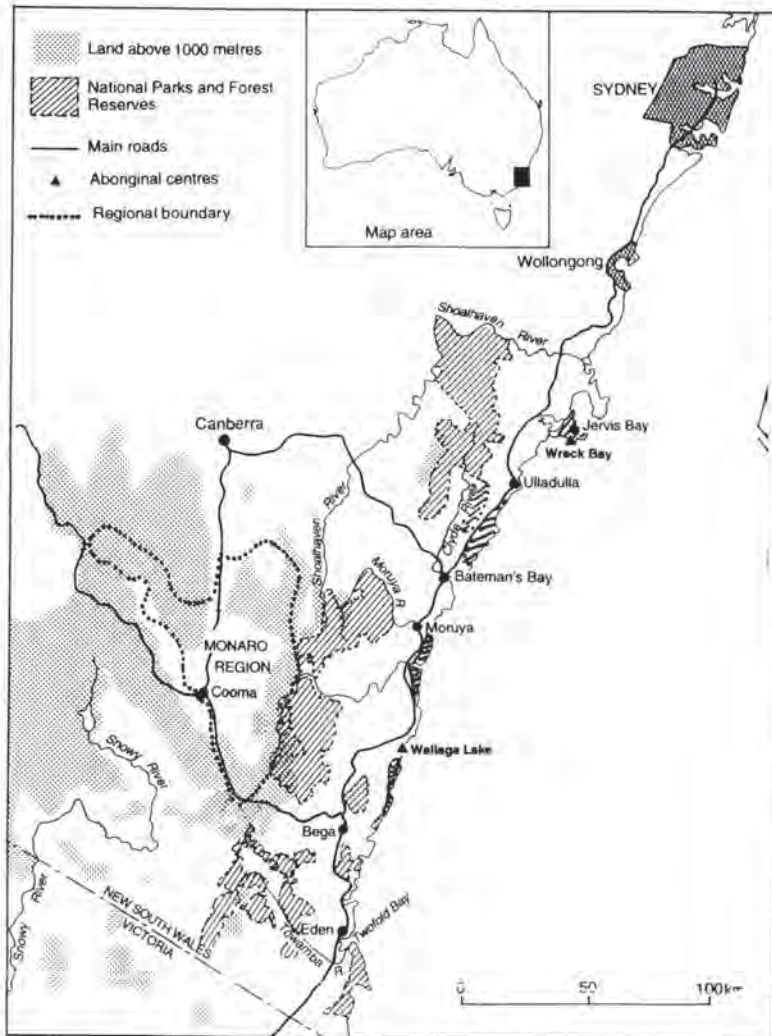


FIGURE 1. The New South Wales coast

Particularly since 1945, the marginality of this coastal region has been engaged in an increasing dialectic with the social, cultural and political changes which have characterised the centres of Australian life – from the tightening ecological, marketing and health regulation of vulnerable industries such as dairying and fishing, to the shifting aesthetics of the coast-as-recreation, to the campaigns to keep the south-eastern forests from the woodchipping mill on the southern headland of Ben Boyd’s revered Twofold Bay. In 1948 Arthur Boyd painted ‘Boatbuilders, Eden’ (figure 2), an evocation of this isolation at the farthest edge of the NSW coast: figures of Breughelian innocence working in the rough clearing of a forest that provides yet also mimics, even seems to reclaim, the bare ribs of their half-clad craft (Ben Boyd’s lighthouse can be glimpsed in the distance, near where the woodchip mill now stands). In 1985 Boyd painted ‘Bathers, Speedboat and Pulpit Rock’ on the Shoalhaven River (figure 3), at the other end of this region: a very different image of sunburnt bodies and raucous powerboats scarring a river which is also siphoned north into the pipes and taps of Sydney. This article seeks to draw out some of the significance of these overlapping histories, and of the dialectic between them.



FIGURE 2: Arthur Boyd, ‘Boatbuilders, Eden’ (1948): National Gallery of Australia. Reproduced with permission of the Bundanon Trust.



FIGURE 3: Arthur Boyd, 'Bathers, Speedboat and Pulpit Rock' (1985): Australian Galleries Pty Ltd. Reproduced with permission of the Bundanon Trust.

Australia, Philip Drew argued in 1994, is a 'littoral culture': the patterns of settlement along the coast defining a national identity more comprehensively than any preoccupation with the mythic bush. The more prosaic 1993 report of the Resource Assessment Commission on coastal management similarly affirmed that 'the coastal zone has a special place in the lives of Australians': it is where they want to live, or at least take their holidays; 'it is a priceless national resource'.<sup>4</sup>

These affirmations have much on their side. The coastal regions of Australia have been the recipients of a marked demographic drift from the inland, an increasing economic imbalance in their favour, and a secure hold on the national imagination. The south coast, for example, has averaged a population growth rate of nearly 5 per cent annually over the past two decades, among the highest in New South Wales and projected to continue.<sup>5</sup> On closer inspection, however,

these affirmations are concerned with very different things. Like much imagery of the Australian coast, Drew's celebration is of an essentially urban culture, spreading out onto suburban beaches and to weekend retreats. The coast here hosts a metropolitan ethos of pleasure and sensuality, symbolised for Drew in the modernist-vernacular fusion of Glen Murcutt's architecture – and there is a 1985 award-winning Murcutt house near Moruya on the south coast, its steel roofline reflecting the form (as Drew sees it) of a breaking wave, and meeting the client's desire for an allusion to the tent they used on the site for many years.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, there is the Resource Assessment Commission's insistence that the movement of particularly welfare or service dependent sections of the population – from the young unemployed to the retired and elderly – to non-metropolitan coastal areas prompts an urgent need to 'rationalise the policies that determine settlement patterns'.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the charter of the Commission, established by the Federal Government in 1989 to advise on ways to 'optimise the net benefits to the community of the nation's resources' (previous enquiries had examined timber and paper industries and mining at Kakadu), the Coastal Zone Inquiry recommended a comprehensive system of 'user changes', and of 'economic instruments' in general, to 'ensure that the full, identifiable social, ecological and economic costs' of development were known and recovered.<sup>8</sup> The social profile of the Eurobodalla and Bega shires on the south coast shows exactly the demographic concentrations that concerned the Commission, including 30 per cent youth unemployment (as opposed to an average around 18 per cent for the rest of New South Wales).<sup>9</sup> And the pressures associated with these movements have in turn to be met by relatively under-resourced local government and community agencies, caught up in uncoordinated regulatory systems, dealing with diverse environments, while still representing an older economic base that sits equivocally beside these new processes. 'In the future it will remain the task of local government to ensure the preservation of our coastline', the Bega local paper advised in 1968: but 'in the years ahead there may well be the wish for a much greater commercial attitude towards this national heritage'. In 1984 a Citizen's Housing Forum at Batemans Bay considered the 'cruel paradox' that while there are 'thousands of empty holiday homes along the coast, people are being forced to sleep in cars, under bridges'.<sup>10</sup> Australia might well be an increasingly littoral society, but this observation registers as much about the intersection of a range of problems as it asserts a unified identity.

The beach, Australians have long reassured themselves, is the great leveller: the images are heavily inscribed by egalitarian ideals.<sup>11</sup> Now, however, it is not so much a 'way of life' which is being figured on the coast, as the manageability of these economic, social, demographic, environmental and cultural issues which reach up river catchments, radiate out from urban centres, proliferate at the extremities of infrastructure networks and encompass new social movements. 'The coast is a region, not a line', the NSW Minister for Planning and Environment observed in 1979, 'the extent of which varies according to the particular

task at hand'.<sup>12</sup> Introducing the Coastal Protection Bill, the minister's emphasis was then on planning and engineering, and on establishing processes of expert consultation through a Coastal Council to deal with the stabilisation of 'a fragile natural system'. One impetus in seeking this coordinated action had been the dramatic erosion of NSW beaches, up to 1.5 metres a year in some areas. The icon of golden sands was under threat. More recently, in a move to provide a more comprehensive sense of that coastal 'region', the 1997 NSW Coastal Policy encompassed land one kilometre distant from coastal rivers, lakes and lagoons – earlier draft options had ranged from zones of 40 metres to five kilometres – largely in accord with the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development. These principles were set out as conservation of biological diversity, intergenerational equity, and improved valuation, pricing and incentive systems.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the 'tasks' that define the coast are in themselves dynamic, caught at the intersection of social and environmental change, and the ways in which such change is comprehended.

In what follows I want to trace some aspects of this comprehension. My emphases will be on how this area has been understood and what it has represented in its shifting conceptual and spatial identities, its ambiguous regionality – from Ben Boyd's droving track to Arthur Boyd's speedboat wash – and in this margin-centre dialectic between an intensely local sensibility on the one hand and an articulate, centralised and formalised system of language and politics on the other. This will be a suggestive rather than conclusive discussion of an intersection between environmental and social history, and between the 'insider' and 'outsider' sense of a distinctive landscape and environment.<sup>14</sup>

## II. '... LICKING SEA SALT FROM NAKED SKIN'

In many ways the coast emerged as a major environmental issue in the early 1970s, drawing on a sensibility and a series of concerns which had been gaining force for some time without achieving much coherence. Not just in Australia, but in the United States, for example, and in Britain, the coast assumed a new significance as a site of environmental engagement. In striking a balance between recreation, conservation and the prospects for more responsible, even futuristic development – this was, after all, the time Alvin Toffler's proclamation of a 'New Atlantis': the age of the sea as a vast technological and ecological resource<sup>15</sup> – much was revealed of the prevailing themes of environmental advocacy. In California in the early 1970s, for example, in the midst of the fervent campaign for 'Proposition 20', a citizens ballot initiative to secure the public right of control over land use and development on the coast, Joan Didion cautioned 'things had better work out here, because here ... is where we run out of continent'. After years of high rise development, power plant construction and general environmental degradation along the shorelines, the coast became one



of the first staging posts for a new wave of environmental activism in the United States. The focus was on issues of public access, the appropriate 'scale' of coastal development, on moving the responsibility for regulation up the levels of government, and on establishing 'Coastal Commissions' including elected and 'citizen' commissioners, intended to increase the representation and accountability of social interests in determining the future of the coast.<sup>16</sup>

A few years earlier in Britain 'Enterprise Neptune' had campaigned to bring all of the United Kingdom's coastline into the hands of the National Trust, and to have some of it classified more specifically as 'Heritage Coast'. 'The coastline of the British Isles', it was argued then, 'is one of the most beautiful and varied in the whole world'. It was precisely this variety, this regional distinctiveness and historicity, which mattered. The British coast was not magnificent, not so much an ecosystem, but something ineffably 'British'. That tradition of seaside resorts – the first bastions of popular holidaying – should be sustained, it was argued, so long as those resorts lost their insularity and embraced the identity of each surrounding region. Here was a more sentimental attitude to the coast: the cover of the 1970 publication by the Countryside Commission on *The Planning of the Coastline* showed two elderly women, in stockings, shoes, and one in a black coat and hat, sitting back-to-back, arms folded, on a still beach, a quiet sea beyond.<sup>17</sup>

These British and American initiatives indicate two different ways of figuring the importance of the coast and of securing control over its future. Both forms of advocacy centred around issues of amenity, aesthetic conservation, and access, channelled in each case through institutional forms that accorded with a prevailing political culture. Both these models were drawn into discussion in Australia around the same time, but tailored to local circumstances. In 1974 the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate, appointed by the Whitlam government in 1973 to address 'the upsurge in ... concern' for the 'natural and man-made environment', consolidated their influence in concepts of 'coastal heritage' and a discrete coastal zone of regulated development. Yet the terms in which the Report evoked the coast – 'the coastline' being listed as a specific heading in calling for public submissions, alongside items such as nature reserves, Aboriginal sites and botanical gardens – suggested a distinctive sensibility:

Australians have a longstanding love-affair with their coasts and beaches. From the baby playing on the sand to the fisherman on the rocks, from the child meeting its first wave to the board rider out on the near horizon, most of us have our happiest memories connected with the interface where ocean meets land. We go back there when we can, and many hope to spend the days of their retirement somewhere near the sea.<sup>18</sup>

In place of the Californian concern with regulating major urban and industrial development, the Australian Committee's focus was, overall, on more suburban incursions just behind the dunes (including off-road vehicles, then emerging as

a major concern), and on the impact of smaller-scale, temporary resource exploitation (sand mining was very much an issue at that time). And in contrast to the British imagery of popular leisure and regional identity, the Australian evocation was more of individualised pleasure, of private memory rather than social history, and of the coast as a ready adjunct to stages of life rather than a seasonal, collective holiday destination. Beyond the major resorts and cities, where 'the coast has almost disappeared under development', long stretches of the Australian coast were evoked as an area of environmental concern in terms of this balance between aesthetic and conservation concerns ('the rugged coast, the eating sea' as one caption in the Report had it, featuring Burrewarra Point, just south of Batemans Bay) – a balance often struck around this distinctive individualised sensibility and the cultivation of the coast as a medium for its expression.

Similar themes emerged in the increasing interest of the Australian Conservation Foundation in the coast in the mid-1970s. The 'respectable' front of Australian environmentalism since its formation in 1965, the Foundation canvassed both the 'Proposition 20' and the 'Heritage Coast' concepts. In early drafts of the Foundation's first coastal policy statement, prepared in 1975, the need for scientific and sociological research into the strains of development was emphatically stated, and with them recommendations for the removal of private structures (shacks and boatsheds) from public areas bordering beaches, and for the 'artificial restoration' of eroded or depleted beaches by pumping sand in from the sea floor. This last recommendation was soon amended on the basis of the damage that would be done to marine environments, but nonetheless revealed the concern with maintaining the recreational integrity of the coast as a 'pleasant setting'.<sup>19</sup> Researchers from the Australian National University in the same year were experimenting at Durras, north of Batemans Bay, with a technique of 'conserving beaches' by pumping water from under the sand out to sea.<sup>20</sup> In the midst of a long-term cycle of beach recession, exacerbated but not wholly explained by the earlier engineering of groynes and breakwaters to protect port facilities and roads built on dune profiles, a frequent concern of the time was with reconstituting an environment to serve an ideal of leisure and access.<sup>21</sup>

These associations and the consolidation of this sensibility were not surprising, given the prevailing culture of the beach, and the ways an imagery of the south coast in particular had emerged over the previous decades. Over those years an increasing polarity had been consolidated between a coastal strip styling itself the 'Australian Riviera', or 'the Sapphire Coast', and an older, largely pastoral economy, battling fragile soils, erosion and irregular rainfall, generational drift, and locked into 'grievance' and 'suspicion' of political neglect in relation to the provision of basic services and falling prices.<sup>22</sup> This fragmentation of economies and landscapes was also shaped by the dialectic between centres and margins, as advocates sought organising concepts, institutions and identities which might support them.

Just to the north of the south coast region, at the base of the Sydney conurbation, in the heavily polluted industrial city of Wollongong, a strong union-influenced Environmental Control Council agitated from the early 1970s over issues of air and water quality, advancing concepts of 'radical ecology' and the rubric that 'the working man is always the first to suffer during the course of the degradation of the community's environment'. Opposition to coal mining on the Illawarra escarpment, linked also to the construction of an extensive offshore loading facility, prompted an aesthetic defence of the area in terms of 'the vertical scale of this belt of natural environment ... enables almost every resident of the Illawarra to turn towards it when seeking relief from the drabness of urbanisation'.<sup>23</sup> Further south, and just within the region, there were proposals in 1968 for the construction of a nuclear reactor on the strikingly clear waters of Jervis Bay – the tenders all came in too expensive – or in the early 1970s for a petrochemical plant, a steelworks, an aluminium smelter, a copper or oil refinery. The combined pressure of these challenges, prompting comparisons with the Californian experience of coastal degradation, led to a commitment from governments to a comprehensive zoning of much of Jervis Bay for recreation and conservation, a 'playground' for the metropolitan populations further up the coast.<sup>24</sup> Yet there were still those, such as Richard Kirby, the Chief Judge of the Commonwealth Court of Arbitration – the moderator between the strains of labour and capital – who supported development on the basis that 'every Australian should have the opportunity to be employed near beauty spots and to live in the best of surroundings'.<sup>25</sup>

Such proposals, however, were about as far as the centre reached in an overt form. With no train services below the Shoalhaven and, after the early 1950s, no coastal shipping services, the south coast exemplified the shaping of the Australian coast beyond the cities around a more dispersed sensibility, exemplified in the private beach house and access by the private car rather than by the ready contrasts of the suburbs and industry. And these two agents in themselves became increasingly central to a sensibility of the coast, to experiential engagement with it and debates over its significance.

For the north coast of NSW Les Murray captured this phenomenon in his 1977 poem 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle', in the imagery of 'the Long Narrow City ... looped through the hills, burning all night, ... entering' the coast, : 'It is good to come out after driving and walk on bare grass'.<sup>26</sup> For the south coast, with its tighter strip of land between the mountains and the sea, and its narrower river plains behind the beaches, this experience of the coast framed by the car and the ubiquitous fibro-cement cottage was even more marked. The 'dynamics of development' below the Shoalhaven closely corresponded to the upgrading of roads, the gradual replacement of river punts with bridges, and a distinctive pattern of new settlements being reached not by the 'coast roads' which figured so prominently in Victoria (the Great Ocean Road, for example), but over spur roads from highways five to ten kilometres inland, winding through

‘tunnels of trees’ down to small subdivisions by the sea, each often cultivating a distinctive and sometimes exclusive character.<sup>27</sup> In private or rented beach houses, in developments burgeoning from the early 1960s onwards (‘Paradise Lagoon’, ‘Sunpatch’, ‘Longbeach’, ‘Malua Bay’, ‘Rosedale’, ‘Guerilla Bay’), this coastal sensibility was reinforced.<sup>28</sup> And in turn it shaped points of reference in valuing and defending that environment, in negotiating its marginality and reinforcing the distance between old economies from the new.

This sensibility was very much a creation of the post-war years: of prosperity and mobility, and an increasing interest in the ‘quality of life’. It can be readily contrasted to the ways in which the south coast had been constructed earlier in the century, around an itinerary framed partly by various forms of public transport – trains to Cooma or Kiama, motor coaches through the valleys, and coastal steamers – and partly around a hinterland that was portrayed as productive, industrious and attributed with diverse scenic and restorative properties. So, for example, a 1911 package offered by the NSW Government Tourist Bureau encompassed Cooma for its ‘dry, bracing climate’ and the mineral waters at Rock Flat, near the edge of the escarpment, before heading down past giant tree ferns to the Bega Valley for fresh fruit, a refreshing bathe in the river, and the chance of viewing ‘an occasional black’s camp ... [which] proves interesting to the stranger’. There was also the option of a trip to Tathra for ‘an ocean blow’ or to Eden, where rheumatic subjects might take advantage of the practice of standing up to the neck in the intestines of a whale as it was stripped on the beaches.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps extreme in some of its sensations, such a construction of the coastal region was nonetheless familiar up until the 1940s in its emphases on health, curiosity, and a kind of natural history: ‘the brain-weary man, jaded with cares and worries, will find quiet and repose at Currarong’.<sup>30</sup> Even Boyd’s ‘Boatbuilders’ (figure 2) might be seen in this context, with its artisans, intensely engaged in their craft, almost childlike in the foreground, a settlement and wharf in the mid-distance, and a sublime landscape beyond – a kind of semi-feudalism still actively being lived then on the private tenant and share-farmed dairy estates at Kameruka and Bodalla.

Similar themes endured in William Dakin’s *Australia’s Seashores*, posthumously published in 1952 as ‘a guide for the beach-lover, the naturalist, the shore fisherman and the student’. Dakin was a retired Professor of Zoology from the University of Sydney and a popular radio speaker, and his book, which ran to several editions, was a detailed inventory of animal and plant life. Dakin focused especially on the south coast: there the careful observer might note, for example, a marked species shift in seaweeds and molluscs below Tuross, and ‘glorious sea-pictures’ to be found on rock platforms between Ulladulla and Twofold Bay. He wrote evocatively of ‘that narrow strip of land over which the ocean waves and the moon-powered tides are masters – that margin of territory that remains wild despite the proximity of cities or of land surfaces modified by industry’.<sup>31</sup> The coast from these perspectives was not a zone of personalised sensation – ‘the

child meeting its first wave' – or of environmental fragility and beach recession. It was instead a space for the affirmation of a range of more generalised identities – of health, modernity and aestheticism – through contrasts, especially between an elemental sea and land, nature and humanity, the 'wild' and the cultured. Like the mid-distance figures in nineteenth and early twentieth century paintings of the Australian beach, defined, as Geoffrey Dutton notes, against 'long lines of sand and water', these images of the coast express a sensibility partly detached from its environment by such therapeutic sensations. In this, it is very unlike a coastal imagery of the 1960s onward, so Dutton argues, of immersion in 'sensuous qualities', and a much more intimate 'response of bodies' to the experience of the sea and sun – the kind of preoccupation with sensation dissected in Boyd's image of speedboats on the Shoalhaven, the vibrant red of his bathers' skin in the sun and their spread-eagled sexuality (figure 3).<sup>32</sup>

The private car does not explain this transition from the therapeutic to the sensual coast in any simple, deterministic sense, but it is a crucial part and perhaps a symbol of what was occurring. The increasing presence of the private car was noted in the early 1950s, as were the changes and opportunities with which it was associated, whether in terms of dividing the coast into ranges of metropolitan influence – Melbourne in the south, Canberra in the centre, Sydney to the north – in accentuating the seasonality of the tourist trade, or in balancing a public and a private environmental aesthetic. In 1953, for example, a Bega entrepreneur, just returned from the United States, enthused over the prospects for 'a well laid out community of accommodation' – a caravan park – to attract that emerging phenomena, 'the car tourist'. Within a year the first signs of 'American style' comfort had appeared – hot and cold water, vine-draped trellises – and seemed to be luring even the most seasoned campers from their scattered sites to aprons of mown grass. Next summer caravans were noted as prominent among holiday makers who might not stay as long, but came in greater numbers from further away and over an extended period. Even the leading Melbourne architect, Robin Boyd, was sufficiently attracted by the new concept of the motel as he drove up the coast in 1957, and by the area around Merimbula, south of Bega, which was just opening up for development, to design the award-winning Black Dolphin Motel for a site between the tidal lake and the beach – although its construction in bare concrete and undressed timber, striving to be in sympathy with the surroundings, was far from the popular Americanised ideal, and sought a rather purer form of 'authenticity' than the average tourist was perhaps hoping to find.<sup>33</sup>

And by the 1960s some of the caravans had stopped moving along the highways, providing a first claim on the many blocks of land being carved into the bush behind the dunes, confronting councils with issues of servicing, rating and regulating this new market. There were some 2276 new allotments created in Eurobodalla Shire in 1961-62, for example, at time when the total permanent population was under 7000. In the early 1960s near Batemans Bay, Griffith

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Taylor, the prominent geographer, paced out this ad hoc yet recurrent reconfiguring of the coast between the road and the sea:

I measured approximately the zones of the beach nearby. The active surf had tossed up a line of scattered tree trunks and branches; then came twenty yards of sand, then inland there was a surface of innumerable valves of tiny shells (possibly due to dredging), then a hundred yards of tussock grass in which a belt of casuarina trees had formed a copse. Here a camping ground had been cleared; and such an evolution epitomises the start of many southern tourist resorts.

Taylor was writing for a tourist guide to the region, published in 1964, and predicated on the assembly of a private itinerary of experience: 'you can have the holiday of a lifetime on the south coast if you enjoy outdoor recreation, because most of the area is almost as unspoiled and natural as before the whiteman came'. The region was, another contributor enthused, a 'coastline ... still barbarous, primitive, aboriginal'.<sup>34</sup>

By the 1970s, as issues of environmental quality emerged and as aesthetic and regional criteria were more formally included in environmental classifications, it could even seem that the car window of the passing coastal sojourner provided the ideal vantage from which to appreciate the landscape of the region.<sup>35</sup> In 1976 a team of National Trust members, 'with varied expertise in the natural sciences, practical, professional and artistic fields', surveyed the northern portion of the area, constructing their evaluation of its importance around 'vantage points' from roads and tracks. Such points, it was argued, 'emphasise the importance of accessibility to view the landscape and relate to the aesthetic variables of light, colour, texture, pattern, line and form within the range of vision'. And from this perspective, and regardless of the economic trends, it was argued that 'in the opinion of the survey team', the fact that the hinterland to the coast 'is worked, often by descendants of the first pioneers, and has a tradition of good husbandry and a continuous history of production, is an essential ingredient in the scenic quality and recreational value of the landscape'.<sup>36</sup> The landscape which, from the motor coach of 1911, presented a diversity of collectable images and local industry, seems by the 1960s to have been rendered in some ways a frontier for each motorists rediscovery, and then in the 1970s to have become a heritage backdrop, a source of 'recreation support activities' for those who – as the local shopkeepers protested – could fit all they needed into their cars, to be unpacked on reaching their 'place at the coast' and packed up again as they left.<sup>37</sup>

The point here is that the private car represented a way of experiencing this region which can also be seen to have contributed to a form of environmental engagement. The car is a powerful symbol of the centre-margin dialectic in the mobility it makes possible, in the resources it requires and its impacts (the roads that wind through so much of the region, from the highways to the eroded tracks to secluded beaches), and in the links it can forge between distinct places around

highly personalised forms of access. As much as environmental advocacy might rail against the effects of such agents, it is important to consider to what extent the increasing awareness of environmental issues has been made possible by them. The south coast from the 1950s emerged as a motorists landscape, a string of villages between the mountains and the sea, of state forests and forest trails, of caravan parks, motels and beach houses.

By the early 1980s many of the most active environmentalists on the coast were those who had taken up land at the end of those stony spur roads in the 1960s, building houses in the bush behind the dunes and consolidating ‘villages’ there. They were fighting to limit any further development around these small communities. By then large-scale entrepreneurs were looming, and development-minded councils were seeking to alter zoning restrictions to permit ‘urban expansion’ and protesting at the new areas of National Park being proclaimed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service on the Deua River behind Moruya, for example, or in the Murramarang National Park, established in 1973 under the new Coastal Lands Protection Scheme: a thin strip of dedicated Crown and gradually acquired freehold and leased land just back from the beaches and headlands where visitors were encouraged to enjoy the experience of ‘being in the bush’, away from motels and caravan parks.<sup>38</sup> One such group, the Coastwatchers, formed in 1983, drew heavily on the resources of the Canberra bureaucratic and academic circles from which many members retreated on weekends and holidays to the beaches around Batemans Bay. Opposing further subdivisions, they lobbied to consolidate and extend the Murramarang National Park around their properties – but not to the extent of resuming their properties – to leave those spur roads from the highways unsealed as a deterrent to those who did not appreciate the ‘natural value’ of the area, and to oppose the introduction of reticulated water to their communities. Once it was supplied, they argued, further development would be both easier to argue for and more attractive to a council seeking to expand its rate base. Eurobodalla Council, for its part, asserted a basic incompatibility between septic tank sewage systems discharging into the soil and the use of bore water.

Coastwatchers, then, were defending the ecological integrity of forests, beaches, fragile coastal lakes and ‘villages’, but on the basis of a restricted scale of settlement, access and amenity. Their campaigns drew on a sensibility eloquently expressed in the poetry of one of the organisation’s most prominent members, R.F. Brissenden, who evoked a beachscape of sensuality, the unfolding of generational experience on the sand, and a beguiling sense of succession from Aboriginal to European occupation in this elemental space:

... there on the sand our children  
 Laughed, licking sea-salt from naked skin.  
 We cannot ask forgiveness – but this site  
 Bears our name, our mark, as well as yours.<sup>39</sup>

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The equivalence suggested here between the traces of Aboriginal lives – the poem is titled ‘South Coast Midden’ – and the entitlement earned in the pleasure of ‘our’ children, would have been inconceivable in any other area of Australia, particularly for someone of Brissenden’s sensitivity to ‘sacred’ places.

The Coastwatchers’ advocacy was an attempt to hold and value the coast as it had been when their cars brought them, their expertise and their leisure to its margins: in some ways, they sought to secure their privilege against any further accommodation on those fragile ‘grassy shelves above the beach’ of ‘man with his vagrant wheels’:

... my mattock and my spade  
Loosened the roots, or wheels helped gouge the ruts  
That with each storm scour deeper.<sup>40</sup>

Finding the voice for this engagement was also a part of the centre-margin dialectic. For the Coastwatchers, this was clear from the start. Brissenden’s poetry from the late 1970s reveals a search for synthesis – but also a strain in the diction – between archaeological, zoological and ecological imagery, often placed exactly on the shores and beaches around Durras.<sup>41</sup> This search for a voice was enacted more generally as, in seeking membership, the organisation became conscious of the need to avoid a sense of division between local and Canberra members, but also of the imperative to make the best use of whatever skills were available in lobbying local government and, perhaps more importantly, in securing the influence of the NSW Department of Environment and Planning over local authorities. The membership form for Coastwatchers included 36 boxes in which applicants were invited to indicate their ‘skills and abilities’, ranging from ‘mail handling’, ‘typing’ and ‘telephone contact’ to ‘biological’, ‘zoology’ and ‘legal’, including ‘persistence’. Under ‘Other (please specify)’ one reply was ‘Local Aborigine. I would like the south Coast to stay as natural as possible for the next 1,000 years’; another member wrote: ‘Local mother of 6 who cares about our forrests [sic] and would like them to be around when my children have children’.<sup>42</sup> Here were two quite distinct forms of environmental literacy, the experiential integrity of the margin and the sophistication of the centre held in a fragile balance

Many groupings had similarly to negotiate this relationship between a localised sensibility and an increasingly formalised language of environmental advocacy, turning as it did on the coast around a form of individualised entitlement to this elemental space (‘this site ... bears ... our mark as well as yours’). The argument that such advocacy after the 1940s increasingly represented the claims of an urban, intellectualised synthesis of aesthetics, science, sentiment and ethics, has much in its favour, but it needs to incorporate a sense of the forms of access to specifically valued places, and of identification with them, which stimulated and shaped that engagement: from the armchair, to the



car seat, to the camp stool. This is particularly the case in Australia where environmentalist advocacy has been so informed in general by highly selective, anti-urban ideals of 'nature'.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s the rivers, mountains and forests behind the coast had begun to attract bushwalkers and canoeing groups from Sydney. They came in small groups by chartered bus from the rail terminus at Nowra, and, led by figures such as Myles Dunphy, actively catalogued the 'scenic attributes' of the Budawang Ranges, inland from Ulladulla and the 'varied interests' of the coast itself. By the 1960s, however, weekend bushwalking excursions along the coast, now organised by the National Parks Association, often involved camps of over 120 people near Pigeon House Mountain, the Clyde River, or at Nadgee, south of Eden, where they pondered 'one of the duties of this generation, to find how to use but hold'.<sup>44</sup> These camps often produced extensive records of flora and birdlife especially, again seeking a careful balance between precise documentation and the immediacy and inclusiveness of experience. Such a concern informs the injunction:

The first idea we should have is that enjoyment of wildlife does not depend upon knowing a heap of names ... to finish a trip with only a catalogue of plant and animal names in one's memory is to waste a precious opportunity [to witness] ... the processes of nature.<sup>45</sup>

Equally, there was the imperative, expressed in the *National Parks Journal* in 1961, that 'the science of ecology has been the concern of intellectuals for too long'. 'Modern, urban industrial man', it was argued, must 'learn what ecology is and place himself in balance with his environment'. One the great opportunities in visiting some of the more untouched areas on the south coast, such as Nadgee, was in appreciating 'a complete ecological unit' and being able to recommend such 'concrete samples' for preservation 'by our highest authority – Parliament'.<sup>46</sup> Again, this shaping of a position of environmental advocacy is revealing not only in terms of the familiar, general account of its political ascendancy from recreational to pressure group, but as an awareness and a literacy cultivated in the specifics of place:

A week ago I returned after a visit to the Nadgee Faunal Reserve on the far south coast. Nadgee was at its best ... we could look north and see the wide moors of Green Cape. To the north of Green Cape and its lighthouse lie cape after cape and beach after beach. The whole of it a 'sanctuary' in the state of change. Nadgee is probably a sample of what it was.<sup>47</sup>

Getting to the coast, being there, and seeking to imagine what it represented, would seem to have figured strongly in the environmental history of Australia's littoral culture. Equally, these experiences were a product of specific and changing circumstances.

## III. '... TO DEFEND THE FABRIC OF OUR REGION'

The late 1970s brought new patterns of engagement to the south coast, further overlaying the area with an increasing tension between 'insider' and 'outsider' perceptions, and mapping out new identities of social and environmental engagement. Nadgee itself, as the first declared area of coastal 'wilderness', was one product of a debate between recreational and scientific premises in conservation policy from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>48</sup> At a more general level, through much of the 1970s the Eurobodalla Shire provided the laboratory in which the Division of Land Use Research of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation based its most comprehensive project up to that point, seeking to identify 'the problems involved in community control of regional patterns of land use'. The area was selected because of its 'dynamism', and the perception that it represented in microcosm the strains and issues that increasingly would figure in regulating the development of urban Australia and its resource and environmental impacts – and also, perhaps, because the shire was central to the electorate of Jack Beale, an engineer by training, who as NSW Minister for Conservation from 1965 to 1971 and of Environmental Control from 1971 to 1973, was keen to tap into fields of expertise in environmental management not then represented in his own department. For its part, the South Coast Project represented the Land Use Division's aspiration to move beyond a technical and prescriptive approach to land use classification. There was, instead, a commitment to 'providing information for facilitating an informed consensus within society', and advising on 'how spatially distributed resources should be used to improve community well-being'.<sup>49</sup>

This study was an exhaustive testament to the reformist aspirations and methods then surrounding such issues of planning and regulation in Australia.<sup>50</sup> Yet it also revealed how contingent those practices were. By the end of the project the levels of governmental and 'expert' cooperation on which it had been based had collapsed into a distrust of reform imposed from the centre, an awareness of the areas of incompatibility between ecological and social inquiries, and a realisation that the assumption with which the study had begun – that local government bodies were an effective conduit for the 'informal consensus' of their communities – was unsustainable. The sense that planning was inherently political overtook the project, as did the perception of 'a general quickening of pace in Australian society' which 'meant that planners increasingly are working in environments characterised by more contending affected interests, each represented by more sophisticated and aggressive proponents'.<sup>51</sup> While the south coast project was the prototype for later, computer-based models of land use planning, its language of consensus was quickly replaced by that designed to negotiate between vying 'stakeholders'. One of the most recent descendants of the methodology developed in the South Coast Project – now styled a 'social

technology', or a 'value sensitive ... mediation support system' – was applied to the more narrow compass of the forests behind Batemans Bay in the early 1990s. The very different assumptions informing this project can be effectively conveyed by the following advice to those 'scoping the study' of environmental conflict:

It is implicit in the scenario assumed here that the incentive for stakeholders to participate in the search for a compromise between such extreme positions is that, if they do not, government will impose a solution which could be quite insensitive to the relative values perceived by some stakeholders for parts of the conflict area.<sup>52</sup>

So much had changed in the conceptualisations of environmental engagement, even including the placement of 'government' no longer as 'our highest authority' to be petitioned, but as an autonomous agent acting in interests of its own. The following two case studies explore aspects of these transformations.

The dispute over logging the forests behind Eden, accelerating from the beginnings of woodchipping operations in the late 1960s to major confrontations in the late 1980s, and into the most recent phase of Regional Forest Agreements, relates directly to the centre-margin dialectic as it shapes the patterns and identities of environmental engagement. From the start, the issue of clearfelling native forests for woodchips outraged many and brought a new synthesis to a range of debates touching on environmental issues. Richard and Val Routley's *The Fight for the Forests* was a formative early manifesto for the campaign, canvassing issues from the need for resources to meet disputed population projections to the political economy and prevailing 'ideology' of forestry. 'The Eden project is sprawling over what was a few years ago the wildest and most unspoiled coastal area in southeastern Australia', the Routleys wrote in 1975. Even though they considered it 'the most environmentally benign of the woodchip export projects', especially in comparison to operations in Tasmania, they still itemised failings in areas including erosion control, wildlife protection, accuracy of yield and regrowth calculations, in setting adequate royalties levels and guaranteeing the profitability of the industry.<sup>53</sup> The dispute over the south-east forests produced a very clear distinction between the images of the forests promoted by the NSW Forestry Commission – derelict, fire-prone and in need of management (or, in the terms of local timber workers, 'decayed, white ant shot-through tub');<sup>54</sup> those images which emerged as central to environmentalist campaigns ('look at a tree, what do you see: Art or Politics?'); and the enthusiasm of the many advocates from outside who journeyed into the forests to obstruct the cutting by forming barricades. 'Finally in the bush', a student from the University of Sydney proclaimed in one such exercise in 1989: 'A child of the modern city, I do not understand this magnificent temple of an exotic religion. Awe-inspiring, strange.'<sup>55</sup>

Gaining in prominence after the 1982-83 campaign to save the remote Franklin River in Tasmania from damming for hydro-electricity, the pictures of

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denuded valleys and ridges in the south-east forests were perhaps even more popularly accessible as statements of environmental destruction. Equally, they were tied into a challenge to an industry which had a firm base in an already vulnerable region and which, like equivalent conflicts emerging in the forests on the north coast of New South Wales, fostered a sense of 'ruralism' which powerfully intersected with concepts of class.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the Franklin, the Tantawangolo and Coolangubra forests were not wilderness in any comprehensive sense, and in engaging in the dispute there advocates had also to draw together local identities and a larger agenda of environmental concern.<sup>57</sup> As early as 1978, following graphic exposure of clear-felled areas in television reportage, foresters were searching for less conspicuous ways of working in the area, proposing leaving 'retention strips' by roads and on skylines while admitting that 'aesthetics is a fairly new concept in forestry'.<sup>58</sup> Public relations forums sought to understand the intensity of reactions to the export of woodchips from Eden for paper production in Japan, debating issues such as 'is packaging material a socially undesirable product?' By 1988 local timber workers were more defiant: 'here on the south coast of Australia we have the unenviable task of devising and funding, in a very short time, a strategy to defend the fabric of our region'.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, local conservation groups were both very active in opposing the logging but also becoming more valuable to the central agencies, such as the Total Environment Centre, run in Sydney by Myles Dunphy's son, Milo, and the increasingly oppositional Australian Conservation Foundation, which were incorporating the south-east forests issue into larger campaigns to defend and extend the National Estate. An informant in the Towamba Valley, living among the small 'alternative' communities which were quickly drawn into the protests in the forests, supplied photographs of a clearfelled forest coup in areas where more selective logging was supposed to be practised, of poorly constructed snig tracks prone to erosion in the first substantial rain, of creeks bulldozed.<sup>60</sup> Yet when local groups, sensitive to the economic vulnerability of the region, began to propose alternative employment strategies, or a range of less damaging timber industry practices based around small sawmills and new timber technologies, the response from these central organisations was uncompromising.<sup>61</sup> A 1985 memo from the ACF Campaign Director insisted:

We must remember that this battle will be won in the capital cities. Although we must recognise the difficult position of local conservationists we cannot allow their concerns to override the broader objectives of the campaign to terminate the present Australian woodchip operations.<sup>62</sup>

One such local conservationist, working from Tathra with the Far South Coast Environment Group, wrote 'when you live in this area it is not very easy to be labelled as someone who wants to stop it all'.<sup>63</sup> The line from the leaders of the South East Forest Alliance was even more uncompromising:

Any energy put into economic issues – in a campaign sense – would be better spent promoting a far simpler message: ‘This industry is sick’. All the time, the only real way of ensuring that the change we get is what we want is not through the inherent rationalism of our argument – but through the political pressure we should be generating in support of the forest’s plight as an environmental issue.

In these ways the south-east forests conflict brought a new intensity to many of the issues outlined so far, and discussed by Peter Herbst elsewhere in this journal in connection with the Monga Forest, west of Batemans Bay. In the process of these disputes, this corner of New South Wales has been taken into the forefront of a new phase of environmental confrontation. Just one component of this engagement was the ‘assembly of one of the largest biological data bases in Australia’ by a Joint Scientific Committee, appointed by Commonwealth and State Ministers of Resources, to investigate the south-east forests. Their report, with its controversial central tenet that logging proceed around ‘a patchwork of larger and smaller reserves representing as much as possible of the ecological variation present in the region’, including select pockets for endangered koalas, prompted considerable debate regarding the reconcilability of ‘science’ and environmentalism (the committee’s recommended practice resembled, so Greens Senator Bob Brown put it, bombing a city but leaving the restaurants).<sup>64</sup> At one point, the Committee even appeared attracted to the idea of defining a distinct ‘new province’ centred around Eden and ‘the south coast timber industry’.<sup>65</sup> Most recently another stage of this process has been acted out in the participation of local conservationists in a Regional Forest Agreement Process which recommended much restricted areas of logging and a reduction of tree removal from 70 per cent to 50 per cent in any area. Acknowledging that this level of exploitation still went against preferences for the preservation of native forests expressed in national opinion polls, the representatives of the Bega-based South East Forests Conservation Council defended it as a stage of compromise and negotiation with state government, within the new bargaining framework of the RFA, and through consultation with other interest groupings in their region.<sup>66</sup> If this was co-option – ‘after all, the NSW conservation groups as well as the timber unions and the industry groups received government funding to facilitate their involvement’ – it brought with it new patterns of advocacy:

Close your eyes and imagine if you will a second storey two bedroom flat facing the intersection of two major Sydney roads. To this picture add two large computer systems running from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. daily. ... Of course, you could always provide an escape by going to the negotiations at the National Parks and Wildlife Service head office ... [where] nine different interest groups contrived internecine plots separated only by portable office partitions. You could try placing a radio against the partition separating you from your neighbour’s State Forests, both to cover you scheming and to annoy them with blaring techno, jungle and hip-hop tracks.<sup>67</sup>

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These tactics were a long way from platforms in the trees which had featured so prominently in the protests in 1988-1989, but there were equally a part of the evolving techniques of environmental citizenship, acted out in specific landscapes and drawing on distinctive literacies. From the fug and sophistication of these negotiations – ‘crowding around a computer late at night trying to find the combination of compartments that might save the koala’ – advocates still had to return to the more personalised, immediate conflicts around Bega and Eden, and to reconcile the formalities of one language of environmental engagement with the experiential base of another.

For the Aborigines on the south coast, similar processes of defining an identity in the dialectic of centre and margin have had an even more distinctive impact, forming another series of waves moving over this conceptual and actual landscape. The Wreck Bay community near Jervis Bay was formed in the late nineteenth century by Aborigines from around Sydney who petitioned ‘we have been hunted about a good deal from one place to another and find it hard to get a living for ourselves’. They sought to establish ‘a piece of land ... where we can make a home for ourselves’. Given the isolation of the area, the settlement was permitted and left largely alone, at least until the official policy of assimilation came into force in the 1940s. Then regulation intensified, often including pressure for adults to find employment elsewhere and for younger people to move away for vocational training: to Wollongong, for example, to work in the steel mills.<sup>68</sup>

Further south at Wallaga Lake, an Aboriginal Reserve established in 1891, the same pattern was evident, although there marginality had the added dimension that the station had been placed by the authorities at a considerable distance from Bega, yet Aboriginal workers had to travel to the Bega valley for the seasonal work in bean and pea picking on which white farmers largely depended. Both factors – isolation and this pattern of employment – reinforced an image, as the anthropologists of the 1950s put it, of their ‘intelligent parasitism’.<sup>69</sup> Equally, however, in 1949 a section of the Wallaga Lake Reserve, including burial sites, was revoked to make way for holiday cottages.<sup>70</sup> In 1955 the Aborigines Welfare Board noted ‘a fine spirit of co-operation and understanding towards the aborigines by the white community’ of the district around Wallaga Lake, ‘provided the aborigine [sic] shows that he wishes to uplift himself’.<sup>71</sup> Even so, while the last initiation ceremony at the bora rings of the Yuin people, living at Wallaga Lake, had been held in 1910, this community, like Wreck Bay preserved a strong sense of traditional stories and identifications with place.<sup>72</sup>

In the 1970s these identifications began to inform campaigns for cultural recognition which were at the forefront of an emerging Aboriginal political movement in Australia and contributed significantly to environmental politics. Encouraged by National Parks officers, Gubbo Ted Thomas led a forceful campaign to stop logging on the sacred sites of Mumbulla Mountain, between

Bega and the coast. As Thomas then wrote to the NSW Premier, 'it is hard to imagine anything more stupid, arrogant and bad-mannered' than Europeans, and politicians especially, 'coming down here and going up Mumbulla Mountain looking for Aboriginal sacred sites .... What do they expect to see – stained glass windows and statues of angels?'<sup>73</sup> This last phrase became something of a refrain in subsequent campaigns centring on the emerging concept of 'sacred sites', occurring again in the 1988 video, *Sites We Want to Keep*, prepared by the Australian Heritage Commission and focusing on the Mumbulla Mountain campaign: 'we don't have any glass windows or statues of angels or men; we just got ordinary stones'. But these stones needed to be identified and preserved: 'get the form, fill in the form, return it to the Heritage Commission'.<sup>74</sup> After the original confrontations, collaborations between the Forestry Commission and Aboriginal communities saw over 7508 hectares of forest declared an 'Aboriginal place' on Mumbulla Mountain, and 1100 hectares core area kept clear of all logging.<sup>75</sup>

At Wreck Bay, there was a similar assertion of a distinctive claim to place. The voices of the Aboriginal community there began to figure increasingly in campaigns for the conservation of Jervis Bay, especially as Naval property adjoining both Wreck Bay and Jervis Bay was targeted for development in 1988 and as extensive studies of the Aboriginal community there documented its close association with the marine and terrestrial environment. In 1979 the community blockaded their village against outside intervention, including the proposal to make their housing available to white Australians. In 1987 Clyde Holding, Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, handed over 160 hectares to the Wreck Bay Community, prompting Aboriginal leaders to lobby for a national park which might offer their people employment and the capacity 'to set their own priorities and carry out their own goals'. Following the listing of 38000 hectares on the National Estate in 1981, the administration of the Jervis Bay National Park (created in 1991) was granted to the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council in 1994, and in 1997 the official name of the Park was changed to Booderee.<sup>76</sup> They now conduct tours through the Park, just as at Wallaga Lake the presentations of the Umbarra Cultural Centre reconstruct the landscape for visitors as that community sees and values it.

These campaigns achieved much on the south coast specifically, and in reworking the marginality of the coast more generally by empowering local voices to tap into discourses of the centre ('get the form, fill in the form ...'). Ted Thomas began by organising the Yuin South Coast Walkabout, a travelling exhibition from Sydney to the Victorian border, which, he argued, gave 'Koories ... the confidence to talk to white people'.<sup>77</sup> In 1978 a Yuin land claim included proposals to build 18 houses for themselves, to develop a commercial oyster lease, a motel and caravan park for Aboriginal visitors and other tourists, an irrigated market garden and timber from Crown Land.<sup>78</sup> Behind Wallaga Lake, the mountain which has brooded over this part of the coast, named Mount Dromedary by James Cook in 1770 because of its resemblance to a camel, is

increasingly reverting to the name Gulaga, describing a pregnant woman – although this is a usage which marks local boundaries of culture, history and conscience.<sup>79</sup> Both the villages of Wreck Bay and Wallaga Lake sit on the coast as places white Australians pause, think and ask before entering – tourist maps show Wreck Bay as ‘closed to public’: not only the landscape, but the environment there, in part belong to someone else, even though in some ways the uses they make of the land and the sea vary little from that white Australians might expect. Much of this impact is precisely because these settlements are on the coast and not in some ‘outback’: they are in that area of assumed access and immediacy, but now that 1960s evocation of ‘primitive, aboriginal’ attributes as an inducement to tourists confronts white Australians with a very different image of self-determination.

#### IV. ‘NO ONE SHOULD OWN THE BEACH’

Coasts do not figure strongly in environmental histories, excepting perhaps as Clarence Glacken’s formative, metaphorical evocation of those markings in the sands of Rhodes, representing changing patterns in our comprehension of ‘nature’. Glacken’s frontispiece for *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* in itself catches something of the elusiveness of coastal regions as transitory, liminal spaces, somehow unclaimed between an elemental sea and the more defined histories, cultures and environments inland. Glacken chose a 1703 engraving showing the philosopher Astrippus cast onto a beach, his ship sinking in the distance, and deducing from geometrical diagrams he has found drawn in the sand that his company are saved: the markings represent the footprints of humanity.<sup>80</sup> This article has been concerned with some of those ‘traces’, but not as they allude to larger issues to be resolved elsewhere, but as they have been acted out on those margins. The coast is, as already noted, a unifying image in Australian culture, an egalitarian landscape; yet it also a space – ‘a region, not a line’ – that registers many of the strains and changes of that culture.

Some of the small settlements along the south coast can seem to be almost emblematic of those changes, and also of the scale of resources available to meet them. The village of Congo, for example, is one of those distinctive post-war settlements, eight kilometres down a narrow, stony unsealed road to the coast, south of Moruya. As of November 1995 it can grow no bigger than its 129 blocks, with a current permanent population of around 100. It has been locked within the new Eurobodalla National Park, a strip of 35 kilometres of coastline, ranging from 90 metres to 2 kilometres in width – a relatively successful attempt at reclaiming and restoring Australia’s ‘injured coastline’ over the last twenty years.<sup>81</sup> Congo’s residents did not oppose the creation of the Park, although they did wrestle with some aspects of it: they value the area – that is why they settled here, away from all the services of cities – and they have participated in projects



to conserve it, working with local authorities, for example, on 'Landcare' programs to evoke a sense of 'stewardship', to eradicate bitou bush and protect the dunes. The Park has, however, changed their lives in many ways: those who want to walk their dogs on the beach can only do so at particular places and times, always carrying a license with them. Dune reclamation projects have made it difficult for older people to get down on to the beaches. No wood for fires can be gathered from the forests by residents. For a long time before the proclamation of the Park, the community had lobbied the Eurobodalla Council to seal the road into the village and provide them with a bridge rather than a flood-prone crossing. Since the establishment of the National Park the Council has another reason to hesitate about spending money on the road, not wanting to encourage traffic into a sensitive area. For their part, many residents are concerned about their own amenity: the state of the road, for example, makes it difficult for meals-on-wheels deliveries to a few older people who retired here, are aging and facing increasing disability; it keeps the children of younger families from school after heavy rain.

There is even division within this small community, centred around the intersection of its history and changing concepts of the landscape. The Congo Area Association, largely comprising teachers, council employees and professionals who work in Moruya, wants the small 'primitive camping' site (meaning it has only the most basic facilities: fireplaces; pit toilets; a tap for running water) behind the beach closed because of the disturbance caused by the highly peaked seasonal nature of its usage and the damage that is being done to the area. The Congo Community Group, mainly representing older residents who first came to that camping ground thirty or forty years ago, then gradually moved from there to their own holiday cottages, then converting them to permanent houses, now define the camping site as central to the identity of the village, part of its 'social' atmosphere and its seasonal rhythms, its reason for being here in the first place.

More recently, however, Congo has had to deal with another issue. From petitioning local government for the improvement of roads, bridges and other services, they have now sought to become a registered party to Native Title Determination NC96/34, lodged in 1997 by the 'Broulee Claimant Group' – a group of local Aborigines, based just to the north of Moruya, who, following the High Court of Australia's Mabo decision in 1992, are claiming 'exclusive title' to areas of coastal foreshore and coastal water out to three nautical miles, and to tidal portions of all rivers and creeks in their area on the basis of a continuing tradition of reliance on fishing. Their claim runs south as far as Congo, and in deciding to participate in its determination, the Congo community have had to find a new literacy, appropriate to a Federal Court and not a council chamber, and confront the challenge of a different reading of their landscape. 'No one should own the beach', one resident insists at a community meeting: it is a place where everyone leaves traces of their history, intersecting with the history of others; equally, however, they might assert a claim on this liminal space.

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All of these transitions are being mapped out in this one small community, defined by voluntarism and by their choices in living on this margin of their society. But through these negotiations flow the currents of social change as these people work to define their place and their environment.<sup>82</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Stephen Dovers, 'Australian environmental history: introduction, review and principles' and Eric Rolls, 'More a new planet than a new continent' in Dovers (ed.), *Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases*, Melbourne, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See G.P. Walsh, 'Benjamin Boyd', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 1, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 140-42.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Bill Insch, Rocky Hall, 19-20 December 1997; Steve Elias, 'Southern Comfort', *Simply Living*, vol. 2, no. 2, n.d., p. 40; Lyndsay Gardiner, 'Eden-Monaro to 1850: A Regional History', M.A. thesis, Canberra University College (now Australian National University), 1951.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Drew, *The Coast Dwellers: a Radical Reappraisal of Australian Identity*, Ringwood, 1994, p. xiii; Resource Assessment Commission (RAC), *Coastal Zone Inquiry: Final Report*, Canberra, 1993, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> NSW Department of Planning, *Lower South Coast Regional Environmental Study: Draft Regional Environmental Plan*, Sydney, 1991, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Drew, *Coast Dwellers*, p. 142; 'The Robin Boyd Award', *Architecture Australia*, vol. 74, no. 8, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> RAC, *Coastal Zone Inquiry*, pp. 358-59.

<sup>8</sup> RAC, *Coastal Zone Inquiry*, pp. 383-85.

<sup>9</sup> NSW Office of Youth Affairs, *Local Area Youth Profile: Eurobodalla*, Sydney, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial, *Bega District News*, 3 January 1968; 'Housing Poverty', *Ear to Ear* (Eurobodalla Community Radio Bulletin), no. 11, 1984-85, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, Sydney, 1965, p. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Landa, *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 144, 21 March 1979, p. 2881.

<sup>13</sup> NSW Coastal Policy: *A Sustainable Future for the New South Wales Coast*, Sydney, 1997, pp. 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> See David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford, 1996, ch. 1, and Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, London, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, London, 1970, pp. 168-70.

<sup>16</sup> See Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*, New York, 1987, pp. 168-170; Robert G. Healy, *Protecting the Golden Shores: Lessons from the Californian Coastal Commissions*, Washington, 1978, pp. xi-xii, xx.

<sup>17</sup> See J.A. Steers, *The English Coast and the Coast of Wales*, London, 1966, pp. 17, 149; Countryside Commission, *The Planning of the Coastline*, London, 1970, pp. 4-5, 8; James Walvin, *Beside the Seaside: A Social History of the Popular Seaside Resort*, London, 1978. This attitude was neatly summarised by Paul Theroux, concluding *The Kingdom by the Sea*: 'The endless mutation of the British coast wonderfully symbolised the state of

the nation. In a quiet way the British were hopeful and, because in the cycle of ruin and renewal there had been so much ruin, they were glad to be still holding on – that was their national mood’ – Theroux, *The Kingdom by the Sea: A Journey around the Coast of Great Britain*, London, 1983, pp. 301-302.

<sup>18</sup> Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate, *Report of the National Estate*, Canberra, 1974, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> See correspondence relating to the policy statement, and drafts, in the Australian Conservation Foundation Papers (ACF), Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University, N134/755.

<sup>20</sup> ‘New Technique Found for Conserving Australia’s Surf Beaches’, *ANU Reporter*, vol. 6, no. 8, 1975, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>21</sup> This cycle was identified in a range of later enquiries dealing with beach recession and coastal inundation. A 1983 report, dealing with erosion at Bermagui, between Moruya and Eden, identified a 50 year cycle of recession, aggravated by a period of severe ocean storms from 1963 onwards: NSW Department of Public Works, *Bermagui: Beach Recession Study*, 1983. See generally E.C.F. Bird, ‘Man’s Response to Changes in the Australian Coastal Zone’, *Resource Management and Optimization*, vol. 4, no. 3-4, 1987, pp. 224-231.

<sup>22</sup> See D.W. Rawson, *The Politics of Eden-Monaro*, Canberra, 1958, pp. 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> See the records of the Annual Meeting of the South Coast Pollution and Environment Council, 11 March 1976, held at Waterside Workers’ Federation – South Coast Branch Papers, Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University, Z429, Bix 36 D142/2/2. John Murray, ‘The Illawarra Escarpment’, statement from South Coast Conservation Society, 1 May 1983, held at ACF Papers, N134/1590.

<sup>24</sup> See Theo Van Dugteren, ‘A Steelworks for Jervis Bay?’, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1971, pp. 2-6; Department of the Capital Territory, *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation Inquiry into the Industrial and Urban Development of Jervis Bay*, Canberra, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to *Shoalhaven-Nowra News*, 19 July 1972.

<sup>26</sup> Les Murray, *Collected Poems*, Sydney, 1991, pp. 122-130.

<sup>27</sup> For an early study of these patterns, see Bruce Ryan, ‘The Dynamics of Recreation Development on the South Coast of New South Wales’, *Australian Geographer*, vol. 9, no. 6, 1965, pp. 331-345.

<sup>28</sup> See P. Fitzwarryne, *Holiday Homes in the South Coast Study*, CSIRO Technical Memorandum 76/22, Canberra, 1976. By 1975 it was estimated that 44 per cent of housing in Eurobodalla Shire, based at Moruya, was owned by non-residents.

<sup>29</sup> *Eden-Monaro Grand Round Tour*, Sydney, 1911. The intestines, it was explained, ‘generate a considerable heat, notwithstanding the fact that it may be several days dead – in fact, it needs to be a few days dead to be effective’.

<sup>30</sup> NSW Government Tourist Bureau, *The South Coast of New South Wales*, n.d. but probably 1930s. This pamphlet offered many such profiles of ‘resorts’, and extensive information on ‘motor’, coach or steamer services. See generally Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, ch. 7.

<sup>31</sup> William J. Dakin, *Australia’s Seashores*, Sydney, 1952, pp. vii, 3, 54, 99, 346.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *The Myth of the Beach: Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand*, Melbourne, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: A Life*, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 193-94; and generally Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Clinton, Mass., 1976, ch. 5.

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- <sup>34</sup> Griffith Taylor, 'The Geography of the South Coast' in Jean Stranger (ed.), *The South Coast of New South Wales*, Brisbane, 1964, p. 104; Stanger, Introduction, p. 1; Roland Robinson, 'What the South Coast Means to Me', pp. 115-116.
- <sup>35</sup> On this point generally, see Stephen Bourassa, *The Aesthetics of Landscape*, London, 1991, pp. 5-7.
- <sup>36</sup> National Trust of Australia, *Illawarra Region Landscape Survey*, Sydney, 1976, pp. 2, 5, 7.
- <sup>37</sup> See Fitzwarryne, *Holiday Homes*, p. 7.
- <sup>38</sup> National Parks and Wildlife Service, *Murrumbidgee National Park: Draft Plan of Management*, Sydney, n.d. but probably 1977, p. 9.
- <sup>39</sup> R.F. Brissenden, 'South Coast Midden', *Sacred Sites*, Canberra, 1990, p. 15.
- <sup>40</sup> R.F. Brissenden, 'By the Shore', *The Whale in Darkness*, Canberra, 1980, p. 4.
- <sup>41</sup> See especially 'Zoology AO1'. 'The Whale in Darkness' and 'South Coast Work-site' in Brissenden, *The Whale in Darkness*, pp. 8-11, 13, 71.
- <sup>42</sup> This survey of Coastwatchers is based on several files of the organisations activities, kindly made available to me by Rosemary Brissenden.
- <sup>43</sup> See R.B. Walker, 'Fauna and Flora Protection in NSW', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 28, 1991, pp. 17-28; Tim Doyle and Aynsley Kellow, *Environmental Politics and Policy Making in Australia*, Melbourne, 1995.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Nadgee 1963', *National Parks Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1963, p. 11.
- <sup>45</sup> Allan Fox, 'Budawang Wildlife' in *Pigeon House and Beyond: a Guide to the Budawang Range and its Environs*, Sydney, 1982, pp. 250-51.
- <sup>46</sup> Extract from *Nature Conservancy News* (USA) reproduced in *National Parks Journal*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1961, p. 4; 'The Nature of Nadgee', vol. 2, no. 7, 1962, p. 10.
- <sup>47</sup> 'September in the Fire', *National Parks Journal*, vol. 4, no. 9, 1962, p. 1.
- <sup>48</sup> See generally Geoff Moseley (ed.), *Australia's Wilderness: Conservation Progress and Plans*, Melbourne, 1977.
- <sup>49</sup> K.D. Cocks and M.P. Austin, 'The Land Use Problem and Approaches to its Solution' in M.P. Austin and K.D. Cocks (eds.), *Land Use on the South Coast of New South Wales: A Study in Methods of Acquiring and Using Information to Analyse Regional Land Use Options*, Canberra, 1978, pp. 1-2. Interviews with Mike Austin, CSIRO, Canberra, 30 July 1996, and Doug Cocks, 1 August 1996.
- <sup>50</sup> See generally J.M. Powell, *An Historical Geography of Modern Australia: The Restive Fringe*, Cambridge, 1988, ch. 7.
- <sup>51</sup> K.D. Cocks, J.R. Ive, J.R. Davis, I.A. Baird, 'SIRO-PLAN and LUPLAN: an Australian approach to land use planning', *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1983, p. 333.
- <sup>52</sup> K.D. Cocks, R.R. Ive and J.L. Clark (eds.), *Forest Issues: Processes and Tools for Inventory, Evaluation, Mediation and Allocation*, Canberra, 1995, esp. pp. ii, v, 15.
- <sup>53</sup> Richard and Val Routley, *The Fight for the Forests: The takeover of Australian forests for prices, woodchips and intensive forestry*, Canberra, 1975, esp. pp. 100-106.
- <sup>54</sup> Institute of Foresters of Australia: Policy Statement, 1975, and Forestry Commission of NSW, *Woodchips from Eden*, n.d., held at Australian Conservation Foundation Papers, Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University, N134/3087; letter from 'Concerned Residents', *Bombala Times*, 19 December 1988.
- <sup>55</sup> 'Great Forest Walk', *Total Environment Centre Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1986p. 3; Chris Dunstan and Mike Morison, in Damian Lucas and Marita Fraser (eds.), 'Easter of Eden', *Honi Soit* (University of Sydney student newspaper), no. 5, 4 April, 1989, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, reports in the *Australian Financial Review*: 'The woodchip deals – just another cheap pulp story?', 12 February 1974; 'The threat to Australian forests', 2 May 1975; also, for north coast parallel, see Ian Watson, *Fighting Over the Forests*, Sydney, 1990.

<sup>57</sup> See Angela Rymer, 'Environmental History of Waratah Creek Catchment, Coolangubra State Forest, NSW' in John Dargavel and Sue Feary (eds.), *Australia's Ever-Changing Forests II*, Canberra, 1993, pp. 105-128.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Raymond, 'Woodchipping: Can We Afford It?', Opus Films, Sydney, broadcast on Channel 7, Sydney, 30 August 1978: transcript in ACF Papers, 2200: I.

<sup>59</sup> Forestry Commission of NSW, *Woodchips from Eden*, p. 8; 'Concerned Residents', *Bombala Times*.

<sup>60</sup> See correspondence at ACF Papers N134/3322, Box 143F.

<sup>61</sup> See discussion papers in 'SEFA: Evaluation and Meeting Papers: Part One', held at ACF Papers 2470/0111 and 2228 II.

<sup>62</sup> Memo from Bill Hare to Roger Smith, ACF Project Officer, 11 June 1985, at ACF Papers, N134/3323.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from John Herrick to Roger Smith, 115 January 1985, ACF Papers, N134/3323.

<sup>64</sup> Report of the Joint Scientific Committee, *Biological Conservation of the South-East Forests*, Canberra, 1990, pp. ix, 277-278; see also correspondence on the Joint Scientific Committee's Report held at ACF Papers 2470/0111.

<sup>65</sup> See the endorsement of L.T. Carron's 1985 study, *The Forests of Australia*, which advanced this proposition: *Biological Conservation of the South-East Forests*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>66</sup> See letters from Gerhard Wiedmann (9 January 1998) and Mark Blecher (20 January 1998) in the *Bega District News*.

<sup>67</sup> 'Being There ...', *Forests Bulletin*, December 1997, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> See *Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Board, 1963-64*, Sydney, 1964, p. 5; and generally Brian Egloff, *Wreck Bay: An Aboriginal Fishing Community*, Canberra, 1990.

<sup>69</sup> James H. Bell, 'The Economic Life of Mixed-Blood Aborigines on the South Coast of New South Wales', *Oceania*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1955, p. 199. See generally R.G. Castle and J.S. Hagan, 'Dependence and Independence' in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Marcus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, Sydney, 1978, pp. 158-171.

<sup>70</sup> Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales 1770-1972*, Sydney, 1977, pp. 307-308.

<sup>71</sup> *Annual Report of the Aborigines Protection Board, 1955-56*, Sydney, 1956, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> These stories have featured prominently in publications that map out the Aboriginal experience of place and of European colonisation. See for example: Eileen Morgan, *The Calling of the Spirits*, Canberra, 1994, and Jillian Taylor, *Bangu: The Flying Fox*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994: this last is a children's book, based on a 'dreamtime story of the Yuin People of Wallaga Lake'. The motto of the story runs: 'Because you keep changing sides and letting your mob down you'll end up as lonely as Bangu the Flying Fox' (p. 24).

<sup>73</sup> Thomas to Neville Wran, 21 March 1979, AIATSIS Library pMS 3020.

<sup>74</sup> Australian Heritage Commission, *Sites We Want to Keep*, Emu Productions, 1988.

<sup>75</sup> Denis Byrne, *The Mountains Call me Back: a History of the Aborigines of the Far South Coast of NSW*, Sydney, 1984.

<sup>76</sup> See generally Egloff, *Wreck Bay*.

<sup>77</sup> Gubbo Ted Thomas, *Darama is Working*, n.p., 1980, AIATSIS Library pMS 3494.

<sup>78</sup> University of Wollongong Study Group, *Wallaga Lake: A Report on its Condition, Use and Development Potential*, Report for Mumbulla Shire Council, March, 1979, 7.1.

<sup>79</sup> See Peter Read, 'The look of the rocks and the grass and the hills', *Voices*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1992, p.

13. This essay presents a very powerful account of the ways in which one dairy farmer on the south coast reflects on his own farming practice, the social history of the region, and the meaning the landscape has for him.

<sup>80</sup> Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Humanity and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1967.

<sup>81</sup> This was the title of the 1991 Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts.

<sup>82</sup> This survey is based on interviews with Rod Braddock, President of the Congo Community Group, on 13 March 1997 and 12 February 1998, and on the files of the Group he kindly made available to me.