

Wild Law Spreads like Wildfire!

Australia's first conference on Wild Law

A report by Liz Rivers¹

“The future is not somewhere we are going, it is somewhere we are creating”

In October 2009 Australia held its first conference on Wild Law. Attended by over 60 participants, representing every state in Australia, and greatly influenced by the annual UKELA Wild Law weekends, it was a resounding success. The participants included a mix of students, lawyers, civil servants, activists and educators.



Delegates at the Australian Wild Law Conference

I was privileged to be invited to deliver the keynote address, giving an overview of Earth Jurisprudence (the philosophy on which Wild Law is based) and an update on developments in this field around the world. I commented that I felt like an Olympic torch bearer, carrying the flame across the world and connecting the existing Wild Law network with the flame in Australia, so that we are all connected and the network is enlarged and strengthened.

The event was the brainchild of Peter Burdon, a student who is currently doing a PhD on Earth Jurisprudence at Adelaide University, Department for Law, Society and Religion. It was organised entirely by a volunteer group from Friends of the Earth Adelaide, with sponsorship from the University. I was impressed with how this group pulled off such an ambitious project so successfully. I was also pleased to be able to share with them what we have learnt at UKELA from hosting our own Wild Law events for the past five years, and they drew heavily on our methodology and ethos when planning their own event.

Range of contributions

Peter was successful in engaging an impressive variety of presenters to input on a range of topics. Presenters were drawn from academia, government, NGOs and other activists. We heard about:

- Rights for nature
- Nature as property
- Earth Jurisprudence and Science
- Economics
- Aboriginal perspectives on Earth Jurisprudence
- Wild Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution

Dr Greg Ogle of the Wilderness Society told us about activists' unsuccessful attempts to mount a legal challenge to the construction of the largest paper mill in the southern hemisphere in a wilderness in Tasmania, which demonstrated very clearly the inadequacies of our current regulation systems. He observed that sustainable development is currently interpreted as pushing the system to its limits, but as long as those limits are not exceeded we still judge the system to be “sustainable”. This is very different to genuinely living in harmony with nature.

Dr Nicole Rogers commented that what we call “environmental law” is really development law – it is not primarily about protecting the environment.

We also heard about the “de-growth” movement and challenges to the growth model of progress. I was surprised to learn that as early as the 1840s the philosopher JS Mill posed the question: “towards what end is society tending by its industrial progress?” The question is just as relevant and even more urgent today.

Where the Wild Things Are

¹ Liz Rivers is a member of the UKELA Wild Law group and has been involved with planning and facilitating UKELA Wild Law conferences and workshops since 2004. A former commercial lawyer, she works as a mentor and coach to leaders in the sustainability field as well as being a speaker and thought leader in the field of Earth Jurisprudence.

I particularly enjoyed a presentation by Dr Nicole Rogers of Southern Cross University, New South Wales on cultural perspectives on “wildness” by reference to the 1963 children’s book “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak! She read the story to us and then drew out some of the underlying assumptions it makes such as: wilderness is something that needs to be controlled and subdued, wilderness is seen as separate from civilisation, it is a place where there are no other human beings and it is a place where white people go to play. It was fascinating to have these assumptions drawn out and brought alive by reference to an apparently very simple and much-loved children’s story.

Indigenous perspective

Earth Jurisprudence draws heavily on indigenous wisdom. One of the very interesting aspects of doing a workshop such as this is that in Australia the juxtaposition of indigenous perspectives (Aboriginal) and “first world” attitudes is very sharply defined, unlike in Europe where our dominant culture has evolved over millennia. There was a very lively breakout session on Aboriginal perspectives, led by Rebecca Butler, who attended the UKELA wild law weekend in 2008, and works in the field of aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Mind and Body

The event took place in the Adelaide Hills, in an outdoor activity centre, and in time-honoured “Wild Law” fashion we spent time in nature as a way of integrating the ideas we were listening to indoors. We were led in exercises designed to reconnect us with our senses and our natural surroundings. I loved connecting with the Australian trees and plants, and noticing the differences from European flora.

One of the most delightful features of the weekend was that the catering was all done by Friends of the Earth volunteers. On Saturday evening they prepared a “bioregional banquet” where all the food was sourced locally. The head chef read out a list of ingredients and their sources before we tucked into our feast. I felt deeply touched by the effort and care which had gone into sourcing and preparing this meal, down to rosemary from a neighbour’s garden and eggs from the chickens kept in the chef’s back yard! It was both ethical *and* delicious.

Declaration

On Sunday morning a group worked on a declaration as follows:

“We the participants of Wild Law, declare that the perceived separation between nature and human beings is a fundamental cause of the current environmental crisis. Our law reflects this by treating nature as property and in restricting rights to human subjects. We contend that law needs to transition from an exclusive focus on human beings and recognise that we exist as part of a broader earth community. We recognise that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily of objects to be used. Each component member of the universe is thus capable of having rights.

In many diverse ways we commit to evolving law so that it protects the natural world from destruction and cultivating Wild Laws that are consistent with the philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence.”

The start of something big?

By the time we came to the closing circle, friendships and deep connections had been made. Many reported on feeling inspired, plus a sense of relief in meeting like-minded people and a resolve to go back to their workplaces and communities and explore ways to put these ideas into practice. I was struck by how similar the atmosphere was to events in the UK, and once again felt very grateful to be part of this global movement. I reflected that Amnesty International started in a kitchen in London in the early 1960s and now has 2.1 million members worldwide. Are we starting a similar social movement?

Next steps

In addition to organising the conference, Peter Burdon has also arranged for a book to be published on Earth Jurisprudence by Wakefield Press in Adelaide. It will be a collection of essays by all the leading thinkers in this field. With over 30 contributors, it is due for publication in October 2010. The plan is to make the Wild Law Australia conference an annual event (possibly hosted by different Friends of the Earth groups around Australia), with the next event coinciding with the launch of the book.

My favourite quote of the weekend was from participant Alessandro Pelizzon, a PhD student:

“Earth Jurisprudence is to law what quantum physics is to science.”