The Symbolic Politics of Belonging and Community in Peri-urban Environmental Disputes: the Traveston Crossing Dam in Queensland, Australia

Kim de Rijke
The University of Queensland

ABSTRACT
This paper examines a recent dispute generated by the Queensland State Government proposal to build the Traveston Crossing Dam on the Mary River in southeast Queensland, Australia. It is particularly concerned with the ways in which interrelated issues of belonging, community identity, and social diversity were negotiated during the anti-dam campaign. As an unusual alliance of farmers, environmentalists, urban retirees, some Aboriginal people and others, it takes a view of the anti-Traveston Crossing Dam campaign as a fluid network of people and approaches the notion of community identity as the symbolic construction of similarity. Locally specific, the paper describes pertinent aspects of community politics in the context of rural socioeconomic change, and the mobilisation of heritage. With regard to local senses of belonging, it also discusses the involvement of Aboriginal people during the campaign. More broadly then, this paper attempts to make an ethnographic contribution to the study of environmental disputes and the politics of alliance in peri-urban areas of settler-descendant societies such as Australia.

Keywords: environmental anthropology, environmental dispute, belonging, community, dams.

INTRODUCTION
The issue of belonging in settler-descendant societies such as Australia has received significant anthropological attention in the last fifteen years (e.g. Dominy 1997, 2001; Gressier 2008; Miller 2003, 2006; Mulcock 2007, 2008; Read 2000; Strang 2008; Trigger 2008a, 2008b; Trigger and Mulcock 2005). While settler-descendants in the southern Highlands of Australia have been described by Dominy (1997: 251) as ‘alpine indigenes’, the focus in much of the literature is on the processes through which forms of belonging are conceived or asserted. Such forms are often contrasted, or at least compared to some extent, with notions of Aboriginal belonging (see e.g. Dominy 2001; Findlay 2008; Read 2000; Trigger and Mulcock 2005). As Mulcock (2008: 184) mentioned, ‘Indigenous belonging in this sense has increasingly come to provide an inevitable point of reference and comparison for non-Indigenous populations in settler societies’.

In this paper I examine a recent dispute generated by the Queensland State Government proposal to build the Traveston Crossing Dam on the Mary River in southeast Queensland, Australia. It is particularly concerned with the ways in which interrelated issues of belonging, community identity, and social diversity were negotiated during the anti-dam campaign. While
Aboriginal people played an important role in large public campaign events, the day-to-day management of the campaign was largely the concern of non-Indigenous local residents, particularly those I broadly categorise as relative newcomers and longer-term primary producers. As a result of colonial dispossession, violence and forced removals, Aboriginal people now form less than one per cent of the total population in the Mary Valley, the area about 170km north of Brisbane in southeast Queensland that was to be inundated by the proposed dam (see Map 1). As I will demonstrate further below, the resulting absence of local contact between settler-descendants and Aboriginal people over the last century was a factor important to the way their relationships developed during the campaign.

Because of the mutually reinforcing decline in local agricultural production, increasing subdivision of farms, rising land prices and the influx of large numbers of (often semi-retired) urban residents to the Mary Valley over the past three to four decades, I classify the region as peri-urban rather than rural, even though it is commonly described as a rural region, or ‘rural hinterland’ in planning documents and regulatory frameworks (on processes such as counter-urbanisation, amenity migration and the development of ‘exurbia’ see e.g. Cadieux and Hurley 2009; Mitchell 2004; Taylor 2009; Walmsley, Epps and Duncan 1998). Historically famous for its timber resources, bananas, pineapples, rich alluvial river flats, milk, and butter, since the 1970s the Mary Valley’s main attraction has been lifestyle blocks and hobby farms for urban residents. As I will illustrate with various juxtaposed fieldwork examples and quotations below, a sense of tension between the agricultural past and the peri-urban present pervaded the symbolic politics of the campaign, particularly with regard to assertions of authority, belonging, and the articulation of community.

In this paper I approach the notion of community identity as the symbolic construction of similarity (Jenkins 1996: 104, 107) which, in the context of the campaign and significant social diversity in the Mary Valley, simultaneously involves the ‘suspension of internal distinction’ (Edwards 1998: 154). In his work on community and belonging in Britain, Cohen (1985: 118) argued for the analysis of symbolic politics, as ‘people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent for identity’. The articulation of community, then, can be understood as a complex relational process, informed by both wider power dynamics and intricacies internal to the collectivity (Cohen 1982: 12). As an unusual alliance of farmers, environmentalists, urban retirees, some Aboriginal people and others, the symbolic politics of similarity and difference were indeed relevant to the anti-dam campaign, and it is with the internal intricacies that this paper is particularly concerned.

I start with an outline of the dam proposal and the formal organisation of the anti-dam campaign. This outline introduces the key social characteristics and strategies of the anti-dam alliance examined further in the section on rural change, belonging, heritage, and symbolic politics. In the context of belonging and alliance I also examine the involvement of Aboriginal people. I subsequently describe the emergence of regional ecological heritage as a unifying trope in the campaign. In that order the paper aims to make an ethnographic contribution to the study of environmental disputes, and the symbolic politics of unusual alliances in peri-urban areas of settler-descendant societies such as Australia.

THE DAM

On Thursday 27 April 2006, during a drought that was causing increasing levels of water restriction and a sense of water crisis in the metropolis of Brisbane (Troy 2008), the Queensland Premier Peter Beattie and his Minister for Natural Resources, Mines and Water Henry Palaszczuk released a joint ministerial statement. They announced they had visited the nominated ‘Traveston district’, about one hundred and seventy kilometres north of Brisbane, for the location of a ‘Mary River Dam’ (see Map 1). The proposal to secure additional drinking water was described as ‘essential for the south east corner of our State – especially the [local] Cooloola region as well as the burgeoning Sunshine Coast [immediately north of Brisbane]’.
By the time of the release, telephones were already ringing frantically on the farms and residential properties in the Mary Valley. Local radio had brought news of the unexpected visit by the Premier, and his helicopter tour above the Mary River with the local Mayor. The message of a large dam on the river in the ‘Traveston district’, even though that name was confusing because the town of Traveston is a number of kilometres to the east of the river and among local residents not generally associated with it, was quickly interpreted as a reference to one of only a few publicly accessible places on the river, Traveston Crossing, locally also known as ‘Travie Crossing’ or just ‘Travie’, the old river crossing and swimming hole long used by Mary Valley residents for recreation and public enjoyment.

The proposed Traveston Crossing Dam, including surrounding towns.4
The immediate local questions about flood maps and the impacts on properties and livelihoods were unsurprising, but the joint Ministerial Media Statement added only information of a techno-managerial nature with the comment that the dam’s ‘projected storage capacity’ was estimated at 660,000 megalitres, possibly covering an area of 7,600 hectares, and intended to ‘boost Queensland’s water supply system’. As a result, the expressed commitment that the State would ‘obviously work closely with the local community throughout any process’ had in the view of locals already been undermined (Hales 2009).

Echoing provocatively but perhaps unwittingly the history of nearby Gympie, ‘the town that saved Queensland’ when its goldfield had provided much needed finance to the struggling young Queensland State in 1867 (Edwards 2008), and the words of the local Kandanga dairy farmers in 1952 who spoke of water as ‘an article more precious than gold … [to] be locked and reserved as a servant of man’, Beattie referred to the need for liquid gold (see also Hill 1946 on irrigation history and turning ‘water into gold’). More drinking water was needed because ‘ensuring we had adequate supplies to support population growth and development was one of the great challenges the [Queensland] State faced’. The Government’s challenge to simultaneously support development and manage the available natural resources was hardly new. Rather, the Mary Valley is both environmentally and socio-economically best understood within this important historical theme of the region and Queensland more broadly (de Rijke 2012). The metaphors of development, however, carried little weight with those urban residents who had moved into the region for lifestyle purposes since the 1970s.

Picking up their address books after they heard the news, local residents first called those they knew best: neighbours, close friends and family. That day, it seems, everybody knew; the time and place of receiving the news graphically etched into many minds like a JFK or 9/11 moment. Existing social networks were called upon, and groups of people met separately the next day. As the town of Kandanga appeared most heavily affected, a rally was held at the Kandanga Oval a few days later - the best attended event in the town’s history - and in a short time the Save The Mary River Coordinating Group Incorporated (STMRCG) was formed. Locally referred to as ‘Save the Mary’, the scene for a conflict that was to last three and a half years was set.

THE CAMPAIGN: MANAGING DIVERSITY

The campaign was led on a voluntary basis by a small group of activists who together formed ‘the Committee’. As a legally incorporated entity, the organisation’s formal members also elected a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer at Annual General Meetings. The Committee changed somewhat in the first two years but during the course of my fieldwork during 2008-2009 it was remarkably stable in personnel. Of the 17 committee members, only two had grown up in the Mary Valley. The average age of the committee members was about fifty-five, with nearly half of the group at or close to retirement. The average length of local residency by those not raised there as children was just under fourteen years. Interestingly, sixty-five per cent of the members did not reside on a property directly affected by proposed inundation or buffer-zoning, and although just over half the Committee had backgrounds involving some form of primary production, none was a full-time farmer unsupported by off-farm income. Apart from one couple, none had extensive prior experience in community activism of this kind.

Since its inception in 2006, the Committee had developed into different ‘teams’ based on individual interests and skills: the website team, media team, sign writing team, Info Centre team, technical team, legal team, election team (when relevant), and an events coordinator since 2009. This was a significant organisational aspect of the campaign, for it allowed a variety of local skills to be utilised. It also provided room, as one retired hobby farmer on the committee put it, for both the ‘workers’ and the ‘brains’; those who applied scientific reason to overturn the proposal, and those who ‘just wanted to shoot the bastards’.

Once a week the Committee held evening meetings around a large table on the concrete
slab veranda of the Kandanga ‘Info Centre’, a former pineapple storage shed at the railway station, owned by Gympie Regional Council and offered to the organisation by the lessee Friends of Kandanga free of charge. It was termite-affected and roofed with asbestos, issues the ‘workers’ through their local contacts in the building industry eventually had to take care of in 2009. The Info Centre, staffed and open to the public seven days per week, was the headquarters of the campaign, with most space effectively used to display information about the dam proposal, and the detailed arguments of the campaign against it. It included a small office, kitchen, and an area with merchandise such as books, stickers, T-shirts and so on. It was also where tourists on board the Gympie steam train, the Mary Valley Rattler, were welcomed and informed, very effectively as I observed on numerous occasions, about an array of possible letters and petitions to sign during their stop-over.

During summer days it could be oppressively hot inside, while in the winter of 2009 a number of outside committee meetings were conducted in below-zero temperatures. Yet every meeting I attended was conducted in a friendly but determined fashion: the minutes of the previous meeting were discussed and moved as an accurate record, subsequently seconded, and followed by a raising of hands from all those in favour. The minutes and meeting agenda were generally distributed via email by the President during the day of the meeting, and the agenda was followed strictly, with interjections regularly deferred to later agenda items in which they could thematically be discussed. I was struck by this defined conduct, which appeared to compare favourably with a corporate management meeting (e.g. Davidson 1997; Nixon and Littlepage 1992; Ward and Handy 1988). Moreover, the former President Kevin Ingersole, a retired Chief Executive Officer previously based both in Sydney and Melbourne, and much experienced in the conduct of the corporate management world, regularly received corrective comment if, as the Chair of the meetings, he did not accurately follow the required procedures to avoid the possible liabilities described in the organisation’s Constitution.

STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVISM

From the first planning meetings immediately after the announcement, Kevin Ingersole, the retired business manager and second President, had argued for the articulation of a concise objective, particularly in order to retain focus and to enable a differentiation between those proposed actions directly linked to the objective, and those unworthy of precious activist time. His formulation of the objective was often read out at public meetings: ‘to benefit the South East Queensland community and the environment, cause the Queensland government to overturn its decision to build a dam on the Mary River now or at any time in the future’. Such a formulation was part of his strong assertion that the organisation should follow the ‘rule of engagement’ he had used as a Chief Executive Officer and business management consultant:

I like objectives and strategies. … I sensed in the Valley a lot of tough smart people; but they didn’t understand the rule of engagement. People were calling for blood. If I had been a fourth generation farmer I’d want to drive a cattle truck over the top of them [i.e. the proponents]. [But] I’d seen bureaucrats [before]. … I wanted from day one to be credible: dispute facts, [undertake] analyses, recruit independent experts, always tell the truth, no forbidden topics.  

This position led him and other prominent activists to regularly use their revealing slogan: ‘we are about facts and data’. Their reliance on science and claims of impartial truth worked to avoid an emotional and more radical charge they feared of creating ‘redneck’ or ‘NIMBY’ (not in my backyard) public images. It also facilitated engagements with bureaucracies, both governmental and otherwise, since it followed defined processes of submissions, petitions and inquiry, particularly those related to the Federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act. It was against the regulations of this Act that the proposal would
be weighed, and ultimately rejected, by the Federal Environment Minister in late 2009. As Hutton and Connors (1999) had observed in the Australian environmental movement more generally during the 1990s, the campaign operated within a limited set of parameters. That is, in contrast to earlier protests and disregarding some of the confrontational practices that persisted (by Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace for example), they found the environmental movement had ‘become more of a lobby group within a well-defined institutional framework for policy development’ (Hutton and Connors 1999: 264). This pragmatic, relatively conservative mode of operation however, and particularly the reliance on scientific knowledge, were hardly accepted without local comment.

Rather, as the dam proposal and the campaign against it developed, the ‘best science’ was claimed by both proponents and opponents of the dam, such claims bringing into doubt the integrity of scientific knowledge itself (c.f. Yearley 1996, 2000). In 2009, after three years of campaigning, the organisation’s official, yet marginal, reference, in an internally distributed strategy document, to blockades was a complete novelty, and an indication that the bureaucratic avenues of resistance were all but exhausted. Unlike in other reported environmental conflicts in Australia over the past few decades (e.g. Peace (1999) on logging in New South Wales, Hutchins and Lester (2006) on the Franklin River dam dispute, Trigger and Mulcock (2005) on the southwest forest disputes), I never heard a serious public discussion about such possible action during my fieldwork. There was hesitation to entertain such ideas, since it was thought to allow the more confrontational attitudes, which had been carefully suppressed so far, to radicalise the course of the campaign. Reflecting sentiments in the Valley however, the Committee itself was divided with regard to blockades, with a minority of members of the opinion only privately expressed that their objective to stop the dam required ‘facts and [blockades with] cattle trucks’.

However, because the leadership was made up of self-ascribed ‘good’ (i.e. non-confrontational) people who wanted to appeal to mainstream society, they refrained from such tactics, and the President regularly reminded them to never use derogatory terms during public events or in the media. Their attitude was illustrated in August 2008, when a local resident painted ‘SCAB’ on the road outside a local BandB because they had accommodated people associated with the dam. The President and Vice-President went there personally the next day to assist in the removal of the graffiti, and to sincerely apologise for the ‘unacceptable conduct’ on their supporters’ behalf.

While the confrontational aspect of the Franklin River dam dispute was largely set aside, several other aspects of it were important to the campaign. Firstly, Australian Greens Senator Bob Brown, who was the public face of the globally significant Franklin River dam protest, made appearances during gatherings at the proposed Traveston Crossing Dam site. His presence and support were public attempts to draw parallels between the two disputes and to increase the national and international profile of the anti-Traveston Crossing Dam campaign. Secondly, the use of yellow ‘No Dam’ stickers and signs was an amended reference to the Franklin River dam dispute. The amendment, however small, was a significant indicator of internal alliance politics: because local farmers and other members were not necessarily against water extraction projects (they generally supported the Borumba (irrigation) Dam on a nearby tributary of the Mary River), and certainly did not vote for the Australian Greens, the Franklin protest logo ‘No Dams’ became ‘No Dam’. In recognition of the significant difference, the committee at one time decided to have various merchandise accidentally printed in the plural discarded, and re-ordered in the singular.

While the alignment of social groups and internal distinctions was never complete or unchallenged, the leadership achieved a remarkable degree of consistency and cohesion. Additional to explicit strategies and ‘rules of engagement’, this achievement was also based, as I will demonstrate below, on the ways in which the leading newcomers negotiated more implicit issues of moral authority, belonging, and heritage in the context of profound socioeconomic changes in the region.
RURAL CHANGE, BELONGING AND HERITAGE: THE SYMBOLIC POLITICS OF COMMUNITY

We had our own church in Kandanga. I painted the boards with the Minister; had our own Mary Valley parish: Dagun to Kenilworth. Two representatives, I was one, the other was a school teacher in Kandanga. Done that for twenty years. … I was a fireman for fifty odd years (from 1946) and fire warden for thirty-five years. …Member of the Water Board for thirty years. …Member of the Hall Committee and School Committee. … My father was chairman of the Hall Committee at one stage. I was the last Trustee of the Public Hall Committee. When the piano was wrecked, in country areas we really frowned on those sort of things. The Detective-Sergeant from Gympie called: caught the culprit and asked: ‘What would you like to have done to him?’ I said: ‘Restitution. Pay for it.’ Done. … I was also a member of the PSGC, the Pineapple Sectional Group Committee, and QDO [Queensland Dairyfarmers’ Organisation]. (A retired second-generation cattle and pineapple farmer reflecting on community participation in 2009).

Newcomers, often with urban backgrounds, generally arrived with a somewhat nostalgic vision of rural belonging and community participation that included ‘knowing the mail lady by name’ or joining the local fire brigade. Such sentiments made reference to the higher degree of self-reliance of rural communities in the past, and concomitant practices such as those reflected in the quote above. Relative newcomers often expressed views of both community and the natural environment as treasured personal relationships to be (re)gained. Maintaining largely urban social networks and non-commercial use of their land, such views did relatively little to increase participation in diminishing town-based community activities. The focus rather, as one activist poem put it, was on the ‘precious patch’ (Coombs and Craig 2008: 27), the locus of a quiet and comfortable retirement among the greenery.

During the campaign, I observed public meetings in which such newcomers accorded a sense of local authority to the senior farmers whose families had been in the area for more than one or two generations. They were symbolically imbued with a sense of authenticity and superior belonging, representative of an enduring agricultural heritage and a steadfast rural community. Conversely, prominent activists and members of the campaign leadership would often clarify at the start of their public address, either explicitly or implicitly, that they had been in the Valley ‘two nanoseconds’, that they were ‘more a lifestyler than a farmer in the Valley’ and that previously they ‘didn’t know people from a bar of soap’. By offering such personal and honest backgrounds face-to-face, and by identifying as a newcomer in front of longer-term residents, they acknowledged and deferred publicly to those deemed to belong, which in turn assisted in obtaining their support.

Local support however was difficult to obtain if there was a suspicion of Government involvement. The community development organisation Mary Valley Connect, referred to as ‘Mary Valley Inc’ or simply ‘MVI’, created during the campaign in late 2008, is an example case. Having come under immediate fire at a public meeting in the Kandanga Hall over its funding by, and perceived relationships with, the State Government, the President of that new organisation tried calmly to alleviate those concerns, but he had already assessed his position: ‘I don’t have social capital. I’m always aware I haven’t been here long [i.e. 6 years]’, he said to me later. To maintain broad support, it was therefore important to the newcomers leading the campaign that direct and close links were upheld with those involved in rural production. Exemplifying the importance of leadership, the third and last President of the campaign, Glenda Pickersgill, was undoubtedly the most important person in this regard. As a second-generation Kandanga cattle farmer and environmental scientist, accomplished kayaker and at the forefront of regional ecological restoration efforts, she effectively embodied the unification of diversity during the campaign. Another member of the leadership was the driving force
behind a successful event that was perhaps of little significance to the outcome of scientific debate, but of importance particularly as a symbolic expression of local endurance and community cohesion within the campaign. It revolved around the horse, and its capacity to provide symbolic links between longer-term rural producers and urban newcomers.

Made redundant by motorised transport since the Second World War, horses are nevertheless numerous in the Mary Valley. In fact, the sheer number of horses kept in rural residential areas has required the production of State Government information websites, including warnings about the ‘absolute minimum space of 0.4 ha for each horse’, their environmental impacts particularly exacerbated where rural residential blocks are of an unsuitably small size and newcomers lack any prior knowledge or experience pertaining to the keeping of such animals (c.f. O’Keeffe and McDonald 1994; Buxton and Low Chow 2007).

Similar to Rikoon’s (2006: 200) description of local sentiments expressed in opposition to their removal as part of the ecological restoration plans by the National Park Service in Missouri:

Horses had critical historical and cultural importance as icons of regional identity, history and personal experience, and as core symbols of communities increasingly politically and economically marginalized.

Horses, particularly the ones considered ‘feral’, have been the subject of considerable debate and conflict also in Australia (c.f. Peace 2009, Cubit 2001, Symanski 1994) but in the Mary Valley there was general agreement about their status as a symbol of both contemporary rural living and previous farming heritage. These two aspects were visually combined into the scenic farm view which adorned the invitation for the 2008 Kandanga 1000 anti-dam horse ride through a number of farms in the Mary Valley (see Plate 1), the contact persons for which were all longer-term residents involved in cattle farming.

Plate 1: Invitation for the Kandanga 1000 Horse ride.
In terms of agriculture, the exhibition of regional agricultural achievement had historically taken place at the annual Mary Valley Show, held in the town of Imbil since 1919. It had its historical roots in the development of early agricultural enterprise, and as a regional development initiative, it was itself one of the earliest, most powerful expressions of an emplaced Mary Valley identity. The campaign could not go unrepresented at such a major regional event which continues to today. By 2007 however, only ‘a handful of large commercial operations interspersed with smaller scale part-time enterprises’ could be discerned in the entire Mary Valley (ACIL Tasman 2007: 38). While parts of the agricultural land in the Mary Valley had already been subdivided since the 1970s, the dam proposal resulted in the sale to the State Government of most fertile land along the river, further decreasing agricultural productivity as a result of halted or reduced operations. The future of local agriculture was not only the topic of much debate among the campaigners, but also among the dam proponents as evidenced by the unprecedented number of publications on the topic (e.g. Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, ACIL Tasman 2007, PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007).

Through events such as the Kandanga 1000, and their consistent presence at events such as local agricultural shows, the activists gave voice to a productive ideology in the context of a historically diminishing productive practice, a sense of longing and heritage that could be supported by both newcomers and farmers. Together on horseback, they expressed ways of being local, their shared but different relationships with animals and the natural environment the basis for emerging peri-urban identities and a negotiated sense of community and alignment among the anti-dam campaigners.

ABORIGINAL INVOLVEMENT

The alliance between farmers, environmentalists and urban newcomers was, it can be concluded, a precarious and carefully managed affair. The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in that alliance was far from straightforward, particularly because local interaction with Aboriginal people had been largely non-existent since the early decades of the 20th century. The tension this lack of interaction resulted in was apparent when Aboriginal people prepared to meet in Gympie on the 11th of August 2007 for the ‘Traveston Crossing Dam Authorisation Meeting’, a meeting to authorise the signing of an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) that would allow the project to proceed from the Indigenous perspective. Police had some concern not about the gathering of rival Aboriginal factions, but about the White anti-dam campaigners planning to protest against their agreement. One activist later commented with surprise:

I was disappointed. [The ILUA] knocked a hole in my understanding of their relationship to the land, I thought they’d had these connections with songlines, mystical… thought they wouldn’t swap their land for money.  

The stereotypical idiom of the ‘true Greenie’, and the notion that those who truly belong could not possibly sell their land, were applied with a conviction not equally directed at the local farmers who had sold their properties to the State. The Aboriginal signatories to the agreement were regularly described as ‘fake’, ‘bussed in from Melbourne’ or ‘bought out’ by amounts varying from a few hundred thousand to a few million dollars. This offensive critique, uninformed by social interaction, nevertheless resonated with the critique publicly expressed by those Aboriginal people who were also opposed to the proposal and, within a native title context at least, actively engaged in the politics of Aboriginal representation.

While the ILUA led most local residents to regard the role of Aboriginal people in the campaign as limited, in discussions about relations to land and forms of belonging Aboriginal
people did often provide what Mulcock (2008: 184) referred to more broadly as ‘an inevitable point of reference and comparison’. At a protest meeting on the river for example, a senior Aboriginal representative was introduced by Bob Brown as ‘the custodian of this land with a lineage going back beyond our imagination, and whose heart is wrapped in this land’. That position worked to consolidate support for those Aboriginal people willing to engage it. One Aboriginal representative for example knew the dispositions and sensitivities of the crowd, which included some people from the Mary Valley, when she asked about fifty campaigners - gathered with wine, cheese and intermittent cello and guitar music in the rainy courtyard of a progressive inner-city Brisbane bookstore for the *Love, Mary* book launch - to sing an Aboriginal frog song from the Mary Valley with her. They did so with gusto.

Settler-descendant expressions of belonging were generally informed by the experiential, practiced aspects of land and community. They included such themes as physical engagement with the land (both agricultural, recreational and ecological), the importance of ancestry, the marking and naming of the environment to tell stories both personal and social, knowing the particularities of the landscape, floods, trees, river flats and so on, the role of family places, personal relationships, and community commitment. In relation to a pre-colonial Indigenous landscape, ongoing claims to rights in land by contemporary Aboriginal people, and the conflicts which arose out of the signing of the ILUA, such themes invite highly sensitive questions for a settler-descendant society such as Australia. These include issues related to colonial dispossession, contemporary power relationships and inequality, notions of indigeneity, and forms of cultural appropriation.

In summary, the signing of the ILUA had left most campaigners despondent about the socio-political traction of Aboriginal relations to land. The President later admitted with some disappointment ‘it was never a show stopper’. Purposefully it may not have been, but the display of Aboriginal arguments against the dam at the Kandanga Info Centre was in the back corner of the building, marginal and almost out of sight. Aboriginal involvement, then, was largely ceremonial and restricted to public events. As I will demonstrate below, it was particularly in the public focus on endangered aquatic species that Aboriginal views of the world were given voice during the campaign.

**ECOLOGICAL HERITAGE**

For many long-term residents, opposition to the dam proposal was founded upon aspects of environmental engagement fundamental to their sense of belonging: labour, memories and detailed knowledge based on daily practice. In that regard, people pointed to locations where valued old shade trees had once stood along the river paddock, washed away during floods; places thick with the memories of family gatherings and carefree childhoods. Others proudly pointed to heavily timbered areas that were once bare or weed infested; the result of persistent and challenging manual labour. In such varied ways places are imbued with memories and historical significance, a significance which can be shared within a family, among a few individuals, or relevant just to a single individual. Alternatively, historical significance may be accorded to places by larger groups of people in terms of socio-cultural heritage. As alluded to above, heritage places in the Mary Valley generally reflect the past significance of primary production and the manipulation of the environment through constructions built with human labour: old barns, homesteads, community halls, the Mary Valley railway, timber bridges, and so on. As in other rural places in Australia (e.g. Waitt 2000; Winchester and Rofe 2005) primary production heritage in the Mary Valley has been subject to significant commodification over the past decades, particularly the result of reduced primary production itself and the consequent selling of heritage to attract tourists (see also Dominy 1997).

Shortly after its establishment, the anti-dam organisation had adopted the protected Australian Lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*) as its mascot. The lungfish is nationally listed
as vulnerable, and endemic only to a few rivers in southeast Queensland, including the Mary River. It was one of the last unusual Australian animals to come to the attention of European scientists in the second half of the 19th century (Robin 2005). Promoting a view of this fish as ancient, respectable and semi-human, the campaigners called their mascot ‘Wheezer the Wise Lungfish’. Two other endemic species, the endangered Mary River Turtle (Elusor macrurus) and the endangered Mary River Cod (Maccullochella peeli mariensis), figured as anti-dam symbols, but not as prominently. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists also referred to the lungfish as ‘Dala’, said to be the local Aboriginal name of the species accorded totemic and sacred significance by some. Aboriginal religious beliefs and non-Aboriginal interests in the river and the species that inhabit it were thus implied as coalescing.

While social relationships and impacts remained important to the internal operation of the campaign, by the time I started my fieldwork in 2008 the campaign’s public focus on the EPBC Act and impacts on protected species such as the Australian Lungfish had come to dominate any human concerns. This did not go unnoticed locally. A middle-aged woman who had grown up in the Mary Valley, and who ran a plumbing business with her husband, expressed feelings that were more broadly held about the use of this symbolic icon, particularly among those refusing to sell their property to the State:

Dala; I heard about it. Shame it’s vulnerable species that have to save us. Shouldn’t the community save us? Other than the Senate Inquiry [there was] no attention to social impacts. The environmental thing can stop this thing. It’d be terrific if lungfish, turtle and cod can stop this. A lot of people have sold [their properties to the State], that's not going to save us. ...The dam should have been stopped on social grounds. I feel at the mercy of environmental scientists. You can't fight what scientists say. We've got to leave it up to them; we don't have those backgrounds. ... All you can do is put your money towards it, hope someone else has got the answer."

It was, then, not without significance that in 2008 Bob Brown arrived in the Mary Valley on a horse drawn cart, a symbolic representation of rurality, and in his speech to protestors also referred to the Mary Valley with such terms as ‘farmland’, ‘food basin’ and ‘prime productive land’, while contrasting the (rural) Mary Valley residents with the [urban] people in Brisbane. In other words, symbolic representations of ‘wild nature’ (ancient lungfish and turtles) were mixed with other symbolic values made commensurate, namely those connected to rural Australian life and productive labour, in order to create ‘a sense of “community-ness” - a measure of unity and coherence, a sense of direction and purpose’ (Peace 1999: 152).

This sense however was contested and fluid. In a later interview for example, one retired farmer described the reason for his stoic acceptance of this event, at which ‘some people thought God had arrived’, as ‘media attention that furthers the cause’. The symbolic politics of community in other words included, but was not limited to, the construction of ‘rurality’ (self) as opposed to ‘urbanity’ (other), and a simultaneous de-emphasis of the local divides between conservative ‘rednecks’ and progressive ‘greenies’.

Worryingly for the environmentalists in the campaign, the majority of longer-term residents in the region had generally supported Bjelke-Petersen's conservative Queensland Country Party government from 1968 to 1987, which, as Powell (1991: 303) reminds us in his history of Queensland water management, ‘was usually prepared to brand the mildest environmental protest group as a communist-inspired, homosexual, drug-pushing threat to the security and prosperity of ordinary Queenslanders.’ The leading activists were sensitive to the divisive potential their environmental approach included, as one member explained:
Farmers are much more about land than species, definitely. We informed people about the facts, on how to win. Some people have said to me: ‘I don't give a shit about lungfish’. [But] critters are like children; they need our help, they don't have a voice. Farmers should support species; a duty of care; compassion too. Some people who don't care about species are involved. They’ve seen them on the river. I didn't know much about lungfish before, and little about turtles and cod.

The campaign, in other words, was an extraordinary event which brought about a degree of learning among the participants. Further, the sudden and intense interactions with previously unknown persons from the area, as well as the release of information locally mostly unknown regarding the global significance of local flora, fauna and ecological processes resulted in an unprecedented level of local interest which further strengthened activists’ resolve.

The focus on the river as a holistic ecological system inhabited by iconic species, simultaneously worked to broaden a historically more restricted definition of the Mary Valley. These developments, however, were hardly uniform for they were the subject of continuous debate, of negotiations that also need to be understood within the potentially debilitating uncertainty about the nature and timing of the ultimate federal decision; nobody knew when the end would come or what it would look like. Definitions of community, heritage, and place thus varied according to the context and the audience, as Bob Brown expressed when he closed his speech ‘in the Mary Valley, in Queensland, Australia, on Planet Earth’.

Symbolically then, the outcome of the campaign - the rejection of the dam proposal on the grounds of unacceptable predicted impacts on threatened species by the Federal Environment Minister in late 2009 - and the tension between identities based on primary production and those broadly based on a more recent appreciation of regional ecological heritage was reflected in the replacement of an old ‘Welcome to Kandanga’ sign in 2010. The new sign, including the Australian Lungfish, Mary River Cod and Mary River turtle, was an indication that primary production and agricultural heritage had become subordinate to the environmental interests of urban newcomers who had dominated the successful alliance politics of the campaign (see Plates 2 and 3 below). Ecological heritage had become the triumphant unifying trope of the campaign and the region more broadly.
As an unusual alliance between farmers, environmentalists, urban retirees, some Aboriginal people and others, there were considerable internal differences among the anti-dam activists in terms of political orientation, socioeconomic activities and environmental engagements. A conscious and concerted effort was made to contain the tensions these differences implied. Rational and pragmatic ‘rules of engagement’ were agreed upon, with structured meetings, agendas and plans determining the course of action. Teams were devised with responsibility for certain aspects of the campaign, including sign making, scientific analysis, Info Centre work, public events, and so on. This approach facilitated the symbolic construction of similarity (Jenkins 1996), and the postulation of a cohesive, seemingly unproblematic community. The notions of community stability, belonging and being local were informed by the socio-cultural values of agricultural production, physical environmental engagement, and emerging ecological heritage. At public campaign meetings, newcomers accorded a sense of moral authority to the senior farmers whose families had been in the area for more than one or two generations, and who were posited as representing this notional stability. Through such acknowledgements, newcomers strengthened their own position as community spokespersons, allowing for a pragmatic accommodation of social difference within the campaign.

Social differences – referred to by some activists as those between the ‘workers’ and the ‘brains’ - were also relevant to the focus of the campaign. That is, rather than the protection of (agri)cultural heritage or the consequences of the dam proposal in terms of social impacts, the campaign was publically largely focused on scientific environmental issues, particularly the survival of iconic endemic species such as the Australian Lungfish, the Mary River Turtle, and Mary River Cod. Opportunistically supported by farmers notwithstanding their concerns about ‘greenies’ and the esoteric nature of the scientific debates, this reflected the relevant legislation governing the approval process of the project. This process treats social impacts and cultural heritage issues as subsets of the environmental impact statement. Aspects of settler and Aboriginal heritage were thus rationally regarded by the campaign leadership as ‘never a show stopper’. When an Aboriginal party which asserted native title rights and interest to the area signed an Indigenous Land Use Agreement for the project to proceed, many settler-descendants were confronted with their own stereotypical imagery which portrays ‘authentic’
Aboriginal people as ‘true Greenies’ and ‘spiritual do-gooders averse to material things’ (de la Cadena and Starn 2007: 3). While previously largely unknown or ignored, the iconic species themselves came to symbolically link a local sense of belonging, community and heritage, shared in multiple novel and often uneasy ways by farmers, environmentalists, urban newcomers and those Aboriginal people also opposed to the proposal.

In conclusion, notions of belonging, community identity and heritage were particularly important to the internal operation of the campaign. Local negotiations of emplaced authority largely revolved around the symbolic importance of primary production and settler heritage, with only intermittent opportunities for Aboriginal people to assert and receive acknowledgement of local authority based on prior occupation and much longer-term connections with the area. While publicly largely focused on bureaucratic engagement, facts and submissions, environmental disputes in peri-urban areas such as the Mary Valley are thus informed by competing identities and relationships to land, and a concomitant symbolic politics which may potentially align not necessarily congruent values and practices in powerful and locally transformative moments of community protest.

NOTES

1. Anthropological fieldwork with a wide variety of Mary Valley residents, including open and semi-structured interviews as well as participant-observation, was conducted from early 2008 to the rejection of the dam proposal by the Federal Environment Minister in late 2009.
2. For studies of identity and environmental disputes see e.g. Opotow and Brook (2003), Satterfield (2002), Sjölander-Lindqvis (2008), Skewes and Guerra (2004).
4. This map is an adapted version of the map provided in the Traveston Crossing Dam Environmental Impact Statement Executive Summary (Queensland Water and Infrastructure 2007: 1-20).
5. Ibid.
6. The Gympie Times, 02 February 1952, p. 2
8. On the relationships between place, memory and trauma, see e.g. Dawson (2005) and Osborne (2001).
10. The role of information and communication technologies was important indeed, allowing for the fast dispersal and analysis of news, announcements and scientific data. A few hours after the public announcement of ‘the delay’ by Premier Anna Bligh on the 25th of November 2008 for example there were about fifty jubilant campaigners at Traveston Crossing. Other pertinent examples include the hydrological computer models built by activists qualified in engineering and mathematics.
11. Interview 29 January 2009
12. The focus of the campaign came to be on the following sections of the EPBC Act triggered by the Traveston Crossing Dam proposal:
Sections 12 and 15A – the World Heritage values of [downstream] Fraser Island;
Sections 16 and 17B – the ecological character of the [downstream] Great Sandy Strait Ramsar wetland;
Sections 18 and 18A – threatened species such as the Australian lungfish, Mary River cod, Mary River turtle and southern barred frog;
The Federal Environment Minister eventually approved the proposal with regard to sections 12,15A, 16, 17B, 20 and 20A, but rejected the proposal because of unacceptable predicted impacts on threatened species (sections 18 and 18A).
13. See de Rijke (2012) for a discussion of knowledge contests during the dispute, including a view of the anti-dam campaign as a ‘hybrid science-lay assemblage’ (Delgado 2010: 564).
16. Based on fieldwork interviews.
17. Interview 22 April 2009.
22. Interview 29 January 2009.
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23. This display was reportedly the initiative of a non-Indigenous nurse who had worked in Aboriginal communities.
24. Interview 02 February 2009.

REFERENCES


