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A passionate partnership: understanding the origins and significance of John Sinclair's connection with K'gari (Fraser Island)

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Abstract

The paper explores the transformation of environmental activist John Sinclair, OA, from a conservative member of the Country Party, through a position of cautious conservationism, to preeminence as a leading environmentalist with some very significant achievements. This paper aims to show some correlations between his work and ideas and major strands of environmental education research. His allegiance to K'gari (Fraser Island) and the way in which he was able to learn from the traditional custodians, the Butchulla people, and other leading environmentalists is described in this paper through his own memoir writing and the viewpoints of informants interviewed by the author. John Sinclair's profound connection with K'gari, how it was formed and sustained, and its historical and environmental consequences make a remarkable story of a modern citizen turned activist. The development of John Sinclair's ideas and practice show interesting parallels with the development of both environmental activism and environmental education in Australia. The story has importance in a range of areas connected with environmental stewardship and environmental education.

Keywords: John Sinclair; environmental history; activism; conservation

Introduction

Australian environmental campaigns such as the Terania Creek forest blockade to protect old growth forests in northern New South Wales from Logging made world headlines in 1979. By 1982 the opposition to damming Tasmania's Gordon River engendered even more international publicity. Well-known media personalities such as nature-presenter David Attenborough were arrested in mass protests at the Gordon-below-Franklin. Tasmanian doctor, Bob Brown, emerged as a national figure who founded a new political party, the Australian Greens. Yet, predating both these campaigns was the David and Goliath struggle of a small-town adult educator against an American sand mining giant: John Sinclair versus Dillingham Murphyoers. Sinclair took a stand against the sand mining of K'gari (Fraser Island) as a young man in 1971 and for the next 48 years he worked unceasingly across many fields to preserve and protect the island. He formed partnerships with diverse groups including traditional custodians, conservation groups, political power-brokers, scientists and academics. The work and ideas of John Sinclair, in the course of his many-faceted actions for K'gari, reflect significant themes in environmental education research (EER) over the span of his life. Examples are provided of cases where he prefigured, pioneered or anticipated them.

K'gari, previously known as Fraser Island and, in earlier colonial times, as Great Sandy Island, is a place of outstanding natural beauty off the coast of Queensland at the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef. It is recognised as the world's largest sand island and has many unique ecological features including many perched freshwater lakes, tall rainforest, and many miles of golden beaches. K'gari lies in the traditional lands of the Butchulla people who profoundly enriched Sinclair's relationship with the island.

Author's Background and Purpose

As a high school student in Maryborough during the years 1969–1971, I experienced the community division caused by hostile rhetoric employed against conservationists by business leaders, local media and public figures. My own family were friends with the Sinclair family, a relationship which probably began when both our grandfathers were employees of the Maryborough Railways. My ongoing relationship with John Sinclair included trips with the Field Naturalists as a teenager, a Go Bush Safari when I took my teenage son, Rowan, on a 10-day adventure under his leadership, working on the Cooloola BioBlitz of 2018 and a period of collaboration in Fraser Island Defenders Organisation (FIDO). An insight into his character came when he offered me a special rate for my son, because he 'couldn't let a grandson of Jock's miss out on experiencing Fraser Island'.

During Sinclair's last years I worked with him with the aim of telling his story in a way which would share historical perspectives and campaigning experience with the environmental protectors of the future. To this end, he was working hard on his memoir, *Becoming Fraser Island's Bulldog*. This manuscript, although as yet unpublished, was shared with me. I draw on it for some of the quotes in this paper. He died on Feb 3 2019.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative research techniques, drawing on existing writings by and about Sinclair, and adding information through interviews with friends, colleagues and family members. The ethical approval process required letters of support both from the Sinclair family and the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation (BAC). Both support the research. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews including open-ended questions were analysed. Themes which emerged from the transcripts were placed into categories according to the principles of Grounded Theory, a technique which Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.35) suggest is particularly well suited to dealing with qualitative data of the kind gathered from semi-structured or unstructured interviews, from case-study material or documentary sources. Typically, these kinds of inquiry generate large amounts of data, which accumulates in nonstandard and unpredictable formats. Using the memo and categorisation techniques from grounded theory, I was able to identify recurrent themes in the material from the interviews. Some of these have particular relevance to environmental education, and I have selected five broad themes in environmental education which emerge from the research on Sinclair's life and achievements. These are

1. Place attachment
2. Learning from traditional custodians
3. Direct immersion in nature
4. Honouring affective connection
5. Development of an ecological identity which ultimately took precedence over social expectations (Plumwood's concept of the Traitorous Identity).

Attachment to the Homeland

This paper will explore how connection with place sustained John Sinclair's activism and how his work influenced, and was influenced by, various strands of environmental education theory and practice. Sinclair felt a lifelong commitment to Butchulla Country, which includes K'gari, the Sandy Strait, Hervey Bay and Maryborough, where he was born in 1939. He recalled Maryborough as a wonderful place to grow up, with bushland nearby and lots of freedom tempered with clear family responsibilities for small chores and errands. His autobiographical writings confirm a love for natural places fostered by membership of the Boy Scouts, holidays on his uncle's farm and fishing trips with his father.

I relished roaming through the wallum scrublands . . . with my mates and making compass traverses of the wilder bush areas some distance from the town (Sinclair & Corris, 1994 p. 16).

Plumwood (2008) critiques place-based attachment if it is not able to generalise beyond a specific location.

It may be vital to love, but individual love for place is unlikely to be innocent, may register false consciousness and be exercised at the expense of other places, so fostering individual attachment must be incomplete as a strategy (2008, p. 3).

After graduating from Gatton Agricultural College in the mid-1960s, Sinclair worked for Queensland's rural youth programme, an organisation aimed at overcoming the disadvantages suffered by young people growing up in rural and remote places. Travelling long distances between the small towns of Queensland, making connections in rural communities and developing skills in planning and resourcing was an experience which helped him to appreciate place beyond his youthful frontiers.

Stevenson (2011, p. 50) notes that post 2000, attention to the idea and value of place-based education and pedagogy gained greater prominence in EER. He notes 'the power of the nonhuman world to emotionally transport and spiritually transform us' and concludes by articulating the need to re-connect environmental education scholarship to the passion for place.

If the unique characteristics and beauty of Australian landscapes are to be sustained for future generations, then EER might draw more extensively and intensively on place attachments (Stevenson, 2011, p. 53).

Writing with co-author Peter Corris in 1994, Sinclair provides a visceral analogy for connection with place.

Maryborough is in my blood and in my gristle and this helps to account for the traumatic effect the struggle over Fraser Island had on me and my family (Sinclair & Corris, 1994 p. 14).

The next step in Sinclair's career took him more explicitly into education, when he was appointed to a role in Maryborough's Adult Education office. This role had previously been inaugurated, and previously held, by Jack Pizzey, leader of the Country Party and, briefly, Premier of Queensland. Sinclair had married and was happy to work in his hometown where he could link up with social groups which had been formative in his childhood, such as the Scouting movement. In the generous spirit of *bonhomie* which characterised his life, he went above and beyond the demands of his role, setting up a debating club, an evening literacy group, taking on a scout troop and volunteering in various capacities for the Show Society and other community groups. He

supported his parents with their house, Talinga, on K'gari and was happy to see his young children playing in his own childhood happy places (BFIB, p. 5). It was here that he inadvertently developed his first support base among the bush-walkers, bird-watchers and nature lovers of the region. With the local Field Naturalists, he organised regular and frequent camping trips and weekend walks to wildflower meadows, creekside beauty spots and birdwatching sites.

Beyond the backyard: altruism — care for places not directly connected

Being able to generalise from the particular to the universal, to extend love of local place to other natural places, became a big theme in Sinclair's life. At first, he was focussed on the dangers posed to K'gari and used his communication skills with the aim of helping others care for this particular place. His instigation of a lift-out featuring beautiful pictures of scenic places on K'gari in the nationally distributed *National Times* in 1974 was influential in generating a feeling of national pride and stewardship. Plumwood, however, warns of the dangers of exclusive love for local place. Attachment to what she terms 'The One True Place' (2008, p. 4) is no guarantee of protection of other places, and certain modes of attachment may even require the degradation of other places.

The British Royal Family loves Balmoral, and they see to the protection and improvement of this place, but their care is made possible by the fact that they have their money invested in a swag of companies that are despoiling systematically other people's places, and relations of power embedded in the commodity ensure that they need neither know nor care about those places (Plumwood, 2008, p. 4).

Sinclair's campaign for K'gari took place concurrently with the rise to power of the Whitlam Labor Government. He became chair of the newly formed FIDO in 1971. Coming to office in December 1972, the Whitlam government set about implementing a raft of reforms that had become seriously overdue during the long years of the Menzies conservative government. Their instigation of the National Estate, a register of places of high environmental and historical value, reflected a readiness in some sections of Australian society to safeguard a collective heritage. Sinclair wasted no time in taking Australia's first environment minister, Dr Moss Cass, on a whirlwind tour of 'Fraser Island', including all the beauty spots and swimming in the iconic Lake Wabby. Sinclair recalled:

After completing an aerial survey of the island, Moss landed on the beach near Wabby Lakes to rendezvous with the waiting media and me. After enjoying a swim in Lake Wabby and knowing that he was in a beautiful lake covered by sand mining leases and new applications stretching more than a kilometre in almost every direction, Moss was almost instantly urged into determining what he could do about protecting this precious site and the rest of Fraser Island.

The film crew gained some wonderful background as we went on to Lake McKenzie and Central Station on a clear warm sunny day. That visit helped change the fate of Fraser Island. When the Four Corners Program went to air showing Moss against a backdrop of stunning Fraser Island, we won even more public support (Sinclair & Corris, 1994, p. 86).

Sinclair's tactical sense in seizing the opportunity to display the beauty of K'gari to a national audience helped ensure that K'gari was the first place to be inscribed on the National Register (Sinclair & Corris, 1994). His instigation of a lift-out featuring beautiful pictures of scenic places on K'gari in the nationally distributed *National Times*, was influential in generating a feeling of national pride and stewardship of special places.

In conversation in 2018, Sinclair told me that he was always connected in the public mind with 'Fraser Island', but that an equally effective action for the environment was an epic 300 km canoe trip through the Kimberley along the Fitzroy River during the wet season. At the 2019 memorial service for Sinclair in Brisbane, Willigun (Joe Ross), the Bunaba man from Western Australia who sparked the whole venture, recalled this conversation in a very entertaining way, using his talent for imitating voices.

'I asked him for help because they were going to dam the Fitzroy River to grow cotton in the Great Sandy Desert'. He said, (here Willigun perfectly reproduced the deep baritone of Sinclair), 'Yes, I can help. We'll get Bob Brown and do a photographic odyssey'.

'You'll get Bob Brown? Isn't he a famous senator?'

'Oh yes, he'll be up for it'.

'And blow me down, Bob Brown came over and we canoed along the river and got a heap of brilliant photos. When we got back the photos said it all the and the scheme was dropped without one demonstration or arrest'.

This anecdote indicates both that Sinclair *was* able to generalise from the local to the remote, and that he had the trust of a broad cross-section of people, from Aboriginal activists to federal senators.

Importance of role model of a principled person to Australian society

The literature around factors predisposing individuals to environmental activism often includes the work of Chawla (2006, 2007, 2015) who examined common experiences shared by those who work to protect nature. Chawla (2015, p. 26) interviewed environmental activists in Kentucky (USA) and Norway. She found the most frequently cited early formative experiences were positive experiences of natural areas in childhood and adolescence and the presence of adult role models who helped interpret the natural environment.

By August 1987 a legal case against Premier Joh Bjelke — Peterson had forced Sinclair into bankruptcy. A reporter from the current affairs programme, *The 7.30 Report*, conducted an interview. On the programme, the financial predicament faced by John Sinclair was broadcast nationally. Soon afterwards he began receiving letters of support. One which particularly touched him read:

I am a middle-aged grandmother and will probably never see Fraser Island for myself, but it is of great importance to me that these beautiful places of our heritage remain for coming generations to enjoy and treasure (Sinclair & Corris, 1994, p. 164).

Sinclair analysed the themes in more than 2000 letters and found three main sentiments: congratulations on stepping up for a cause, fondness for Fraser Island and disgust for the Premier and his cronies. Along with the letters came donations large and small. In fact, Sinclair received twice the amount he owed and was able to pay off his debts and donate a substantial war-chest to FIDO. Sinclair had become a role model for Australians for taking a principled stand and sticking to his ideals.

Learning from and with Traditional Custodians

The 2008 Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) set out the agreed national purpose of education to deliver high-quality outcomes regardless of cultural, linguistic and economic background. This suggested a social justice agenda. Thornton, Graham and Burgh make an explicit

connection between environmental sustainability and Indigenous knowledge in the process of decolonisation.

Indigenous philosophies, which have much to offer regarding ways of knowing, being and doing that have been largely absent from curricula, are vital to redress this issue. Education must be a site for . . . rethinking if we are to change the culture that has structured our unsustainable habits and habitats. Decolonisation, then, is a necessary part of environmental education (Thornton, Graham, & Burgh, 2019, p. 244).

Plumwood (2008, p. 4) and Thornton et al. (2019, p. 246) refer to the words of 'Big Bill' Neidjie a Gaagudju culture leader popularly known as Kakadu Man.

You got to hang onto this story because the earth, this ground, earth where you brought up, this earth he grow you' (1989, p.166).

Plumwood notes that the piece of ground that 'grows you' would also usually be identified by indigenous people as 'Country', the place of one's clan or community, and is connected to other Countries in various cross-cutting ways (2008, p. 4). Thornton et al point out that Neidjie's wisdom reflects a view of nature and place as, to a much greater extent than in western culture, an active agent in and co-constituter of our lives, but involves a social process in which the energy of others is invested.

An important contribution to Sinclair's lifelong allegiance to K'gari came through his relationships with Butchulla people. This worked into his life in three ways. The first circumstance which formed a link with the Butchulla happened before he was even born, when in 1935, newly weds Charlie and Beryl Sinclair went to the small holiday village of Happy Valley on K'gari for their honeymoon. Henry 'Banjo' Owens was a colourful personality, bushman and athlete, described by Woolley (2017) as 'principal guide', who offered to show the young couple the wonders of the island. They eagerly accepted and soon became firm friends. It was an ongoing friendship with the Owens family which resulted in John Sinclair later spending illuminating time as an adult on the island with Banjo's younger brother, Isaac.

Secondly, John Sinclair's work as an Adult Education officer in the region fostered a mutually supportive relationship with two Butchulla siblings, Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller. Glen Miller, Olga's son, recalls:

It was the Adult Education department that sponsored the Maryborough Writers Group and that's how John and Uncle Wilfie and Mum came to meet. Uncle Wilfie and Mum were both members of the Maryborough Writers group.

Glen's uncle, Wilf Reeves, confided to Sinclair that he wanted to write the traditional stories his father and grandfather had told in his childhood, using the name *Moonie Jarl*, meaning *storyteller*. John encouraged the project.

I honestly believe that John Sinclair played a fairly major role in convincing them that they did have enough stories to create a book. All the stories were written by Uncle Wilfie. He wrote them out long hand and Mum typed them up for him. Mum had a little portable typewriter and she did it all on that little portable! Mum's other contribution was that she did all the illustrations. I feel John Sinclair played a major role in getting it ready to print. I suspect he even found Jacaranda Press for them.

The final product, *Legends of Moonie Jarl*, published in Reeves and Miller (1964), had the distinction of becoming the first book of Aboriginal stories by an Aboriginal author and illustrator to

be published in Australia. A girl guide leader and well-known identity around Maryborough, Olga Miller went on to write more stories based on Butchulla legends as well as prose and poetry. In 1976, she was encouraged by Sinclair to appear in person at the Fraser Island Inquiry and assert her family's unbroken connection to the island (Sinclair pers comm, 2018). For this Inquiry, Sinclair recorded oral interviews with other Butchulla people as well as other island residents who recalled the continuous residence of Butchulla people working in logging camps and fishing enterprises (Petrie, 1995, p. 32).

A third transformative relationship began when Olga Miller's niece, Shirley Foley, came back from Sydney, in Sinclair's view, to 'help him fight for K'gari' (pers comm 2018). Shirley embarked on a concerted campaign to gain native title for her people. Sinclair's research for the Fraser Island Inquiry provided valuable support for the claim. Shirley's daughter, Fiona Foley, is an artist, academic and author working actively to assert Butchulla culture and history through her arts practice and a number of recent publications (2018, 2020a, 2020b).

Sinclair was willing to listen to the less privileged voices from early days. When the Fraser Island Inquiry was convened in 1975, he realised that some voices would not be heard without his support. His family friendship with the Owens clan came into play. He recalled:

When I realized that there was a great dearth of information relating to Aborigines, I knew an old Aboriginal friend, Ike Owens, living in Hervey Bay who could help. He was a shy Butchulla man with a very strong connection with Fraser Island. Although he was unwilling to appear before the Commission in Brisbane, I recorded our interview. From the transcript of his replies I was able to draft a written statement he that he agreed should go forward as a submission to the Inquiry. I did a similar thing with another Aboriginal woman Ethel Richards (Sinclair & Corris, 1994, p. 131).

This gives a glimpse of Sinclair's significant contributions as an historian. In his words below, we see his inclusive intent.

Having begun the process of collecting oral history for the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry I appreciated that many of the people who had valuable memories of the island were already of an advanced age and it was important to capture these memories I hit on the idea of conducting a veteran's tour to bring together people with the longest experience of Fraser Island. We had former forestry officers and forest workers, old bullockies and barge operators as well as Ike Owens and Ethel Richards to provide an Aboriginal perspective (BFIB, p. 25).

The event provoked some valuable linguistic information from Isaac Owens.

I can remember the old men stirring before daylight and yarning away discussing how the bullockies used candles before daylight to track which way their bullocks had headed when they were turned loose each evening, so they could be brought back to be yoked up for another day's work. Sid Jarvis told how sometimes they went towards Second Creek and sometimes they went towards First Creek. Then another voice from the bed of the usually laconic Ikey Owens chimed in, 'We used to have perfectly good Aboriginal names for those creeks. I think it is silly that you now call them First, Second, Third and Fourth Creeks'.

In his subsequent appointment to the Place Names Board, Sinclair made sure the original Butchulla names, *Gerrawea*, *Govi*, *Taleebra* and *Tooloroo* were added to signage and maps.

Direct Immersion in Nature

When UNESCO launched the Decade of Sustainable Development in 2004, Sinclair had already been running an eco-tourism business since 1989. Birdsall and White (2020, p. 198) point out that place connection must generate an authentic concern for the wellbeing of that place and all its inhabitants through lived experiences and hands-on engagement. Ferreira, Ryan, and Tilbury (2006) stress that pedagogies consistent with Education for Sustainability learning must involve real-life, hands-on, sensory experiences.

Sinclair's 2006 Go Bush safari on K'gari, experienced by the author and her son in 2006, was the quintessential example of this type of environmental education. It included an 11-day bush camping trek through various sites on K'gari, a whale-watching cruise from Hervey Bay and a tour of the architectural treasures of Maryborough. While camping on the island, discussions took place around campfire at night. Reflections on the journey, laughter and satisfaction at the day's achievements followed the exertion of the daytime walks and full sensory immersion in the sights, sounds, smells of the site. A journal was kept, and each evening participants would take turns at recording the day's events. This was shared with all after the conclusion of the trip. These experiences provided an intense environmental education process. Sinclair and his trusted helpers ran safaris to many places including Cradle Mountain National Park in Tasmania, Kakadu and the Kimberly.

Through the effective combination of direct experience of place and instruction from a respected authority, many participants of such safaris became active advocates for the island in their own fields, including formal education. Interviewee 'Claire' recalls camping on 'Fraser Island' as a high school student with her biology class led by an inspirational teacher who had visited K'gari with Sinclair. In this way, a huge ripple effect played out, with ever-increasingly numbers of people becoming aware of the beauty and appeal of K'gari.

Honouring the Affective Connection

When I began this project less than 3 years ago, I was told by supervisors that terms such as *love* and *passion* have no place in academic research as they are too emotive and lack impartiality. I returned to Sinclair's own words in my defence.

There's a whole lot of emotional reasons which predicate what we do and the choices we make in our lives. I think that applies equally to the protection of the environment. You really have to have that element of emotion. So, if you can get people to experience what you've experienced, they have a far better appreciation of the decisions which should be made (Sinclair & Corris, 1994, p. 92).

E. O Wilson's seminal book, *Biophilia* (1984) proposed an inherent desire in humans to relate to the natural world. Influential environmental thinker David Orr dared to use that 'I' word in his 1993 essay, 'Love it or Lose It'. Ideas flowing from this era are combining with newer theorists (Haraway, 2016; Barad, 2007) who argue for a more nuanced approach to our relationship with the larger-than-human world and the material base upon which we rely. Current debate among environmental educators and recent papers appearing in the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* (AJEE) reflect a greater acceptance of the emotive. Questions such as 'Where is the love in environmental education research?' (Blom, Aguayo, & Carapeto, 2020) have emerged from discussions at recent conferences, examining the relationality between people and other living organisms. The editors of AJEE Volume 36, Birdsall and White, point out in their introduction that:

Making connections not only involves cognitive learning but also affective learning. This dimension is seen by some researchers as the 'missing link' in education as it recognises

learners as ‘feeling-thinking’ beings (Bryan, 2020, p. 10). Connecting with nonhuman nature is regarded as the crucial shift that we humans need to make, so that we consider the consequences of our actions on other living things when we make decisions about our lives (Birdsall & White, 2020, p. 197).

Although Sinclair retained confidence in scientific evidence, and this extended into active partnerships with university research teams and departments, he steadfastly refused to accept that cold logic and rationality were the underlying motivators of pro-environmental activism. In a long interview with Trove’s Gregg Borschmann in 1996, John Sinclair recalled the emotional impact of taking the Fraser Island Commissioners to explore K’gari 20 years before.

I guess by the time the inspection had finished and the people had seen what was on the ground, I think they’d all fallen in love with Fraser Island (Borschmann, 1996, p. 91).

Sinclair’s outright denial that rationality and logic were lasting motivators for environmental activism echoes the trend in environmental education towards promoting an affective bond with natural places.

Ecological Identity Taking Precedence over Social Expectations: Becoming Traitorous

Much of the storm of personal vitriol directed against Sinclair and his family stemmed from a sense of betrayal from their previous perception of him as a Country Party member and supporter of the status quo. He felt the full consequences of this change of loyalties. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2002) argues for the need for environmental defenders to develop a ‘traitorous identity’ that would be able to obtain a view from both sides and to adopt multiple perspectives, by understanding one’s own situatedness in the relation between one’s own group and the other. She explains:

What makes such traitorous identities possible is precisely the fact that the relationship between the oppressed and the ‘traitor’ is not one of identity, that the traitor is critical of his or her own ‘oppressor’ group as someone from within that group who has some knowledge of its own workings and its effects on the life of the oppressed group.

Sinclair embraced such a traitorous identity when he chose to defend K’gari in opposition to many authoritative voices of peers, colleagues and fellow citizens. Tim Bonyhady, speaking on ABC radio’s Rear Vision Program in 2019, refers specifically to Sinclair as someone for whom love for place eclipsed all other allegiances.

There were cases, and John Sinclair of Fraser Island is an example, who I think started out with pretty conservative politics and were radicalised by their attachment to particular places which were at risk. When those people who had attachments to places and when they saw those places at risk, many people who otherwise had conservative politics became radicalised because they wanted to save them.

Thornton et al. (2019) further explore Plumwood’s concept of *Traitorous Identities*.

If environmental degradation is, as Plumwood contends, a problem that has an epistemic source in a dominant rationality, then to unravel the threat of ecological irrationality, we argue that educators must become **traitorous identities** (emphasis mine). Traitorous identities are created through reflection on . . . experiences that point to the need to revise our

‘conception of the self and its relation to the nonhuman other, opposition to oppressive practices, and the abandonment and critique of cultural allegiances to the dominance of the human species . . . Traitorous identities cultivate an ethical, ecological rationality and by extension ‘Place’, through constant reflection on the ways in which being traitorous habitually interacts with the environment and others, looking for experiences that lie outside of the dominant narrative (Thornton et al., 2019, p. 244).

Deeply felt connection with place made it a very painful wrench when political victimisation forced Sinclair and his family to leave their hometown after the Fraser Island Inquiry delivered its findings in 1976. An interviewee (code NR #1) recalled:

I can remember when we did a community advisory committee meeting on the island. John was sharing this whole idea of having grown up with the sons of loggers and the sons of fishermen, his association with K’gari and the time he spent on there, and how it came about that through his love of K’gari he created a situation where he was opposing those people. I know that it caused him a huge amount of distress when he had to leave Maryborough.

Personal costs to Sinclair for embracing the traitorous identity included sabotage of his career as a formal educator, personal vilification, threats and abuse, financial sacrifice, alienation from many friends and family members and decades of exile from his homeland. Until his last months he was commentating Sandy Strait boat cruises to raise funds to oppose a proposed coal mine that would impact the Sandy Strait, *Corrawinga*. Interestingly, he never seemed to have regrets.

The richness that my enduring Fraser Island campaign has added to my life more than offsets any of the negatives encountered along the way (BFIB, p. 142).

Discussion

Sinclair’s original world view was a human-centred one. Although he loved nature, his early writings reveal an anthropocentric concern for the ‘public interest’. In his editorial for the first issue of *Wambaliman*, the newsletter of the Maryborough and District Field Naturalists Club, Sinclair identifies as a conservationist. In possibly his earliest writings on the topic, in 1967, he declares:

Conservation is a word that gains more meaning every day. The destruction of native habitat and of so many native animals has alarmed the Rural Advisory Committee of the Maryborough Promotion Bureau. As a result, there are now active agitators calling for conservation of some natural forests throughout the Wallum.

By 1970, his concerns were broadening.

After 1969 I watched the Country Party drift rapidly to the right and become increasingly unresponsive or even hostile on environmental issues. By the end of 1970 I could no longer support the Country Party because of its obsessive support for mining in disregard for the environment (BFIB, p. 15).

Posthuman philosophy critiques Western frameworks of thought which portray nature as the ‘other’ or enemy. As a consequence of this separation of humanity and animality, Western theories have conceived nature as a presocial baseline from which human culture advances through stages of civilisation and enlightenment (Braidotti & Bignall, 2019). This leads to the measurement of human achievement in terms of advancing technologies and the assumption that societies with

superior technologies have a right to dominate others. This viewpoint also regards nature as a source of inert raw material freely available for human appropriation and exploitation.

Developing relationships with environmentalists such as Geoff Mosely, Judith Wright and Bob Brown accelerated Sinclair's understanding of broader environmental issues. Associates such as Professor Len Webb were among the first Queenslanders to take issue with the meaning of the term *conservation* when defined as 'wise use of natural resources' (Lines, 2006, p. 65).

Stevenson (2011, p. 53) examines whether a place-based focus can be an emotionally and cognitively engaging context for learning and a source for stimulating and sustaining a concern for the nonhuman world. He concludes:

If the unique characteristics and beauty of Australian landscapes are to be sustained for future generations, then EER might draw more extensively and intensively on place attachments. Maybe it is time for a similar inspiration to enable us to re-connect our scholarship to our passion for place that ignited many of us to originally enter the field of environmental education.

Sinclair's life traces a trajectory of interaction with environmental and sustainability milestones. In 1975, while environmental leaders were meeting in Belgrade, the name John Sinclair had become a household word in Australia due to a controversy over the approval of export licences for K'gari's mineral sands. In May of that year, each of Australia's national newspapers, *The Age*, *The Herald* and *The Australian* ran headlines about 'Fraser Island'. Just 2 years later, the world's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education was convened in Tbilisi, Georgia (USSR), by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in cooperation with the U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP). Meanwhile, in Australia, Sinclair had just received *The Australian* Newspaper's Australian of the Year award for his leading role in protecting Fraser Island. In 1990 he was honoured by the United Nations Environment Program by being named in the Global 500. In June 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, more than 178 countries adopted Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development. The following year, Sinclair was awarded the 1993 Goldman Prize for grassroots activism for the Oceania region.

Conclusion

The research reveals a lifetime of transdisciplinary activism which brought together the protection of special ecosystems with social justice. During Sinclair's long period of activism, his philosophy and environmental stance were changed towards a more nature-centred position. Such a philosophical shift was mirrored by changes in environmental education and environmental protection campaigns in Australia, and conversely, Sinclair's own work may be seen as influential in causing such progress. His work to bring K'gari to the hearts of all Australians justify a claim that he helped form a national environmental conscience. He employed an effective combination of immersion, authoritative instruction and open affection to share his passion for the natural world.

His work with the traditional custodians of K'gari was characterised by loyalty and mutual respect. In the spirit of decolonisation, before he ever heard the term, he was using what privilege he had as an educated white male to support and amplify their voices through publishing projects, Inquiry submissions and historical research.

Through his passion to bring the beauty and wonder of K'gari to the wider world, Sinclair motivated many others to act in her interests and demonstrated the potential for one person's vision to activate the conscience of a nation. The challenges and sacrifices exacted by his uncompromising 'traitorous identity' were always met with fortitude and creativity, and national and international recognition vindicated his stance.

I want to end on a call to action, as Australian Education Departments profoundly fail to support quality environmental education and its meaningful embedding in curriculum, that, as environmental educators, we must carry on this all-important battle to prepare the environmental stewards of the future. Environmental education, in the best sense of being deeply felt and productive of real-world action, is key to equipping future citizens with the mix of passion, competence and audacity that Sinclair exemplified. I want to end with more of the words of John Sinclair as he accepted the Goldman Prize for grassroots activism in the United States in 1993:

The greatest inspiration I have drawn on, though, has been the incredible Fraser Island itself. I have learned to understand, and to appreciate, and to love, this very special place. The world desperately needs beautiful places like Fraser Island to be preserved in perpetuity. The urgent need to stop the degradation of the global environment requires more and more local activism to address everything from maintaining the earth's life support systems to preserving the diversity of life on earth (Goldman Prize Ceremony, 2019).

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Ethical Standards. Research merit and integrity: The research is justifiable for its contribution to our knowledge of a historically significant relationship between a person and a place, with implications for future environmental protection.

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