

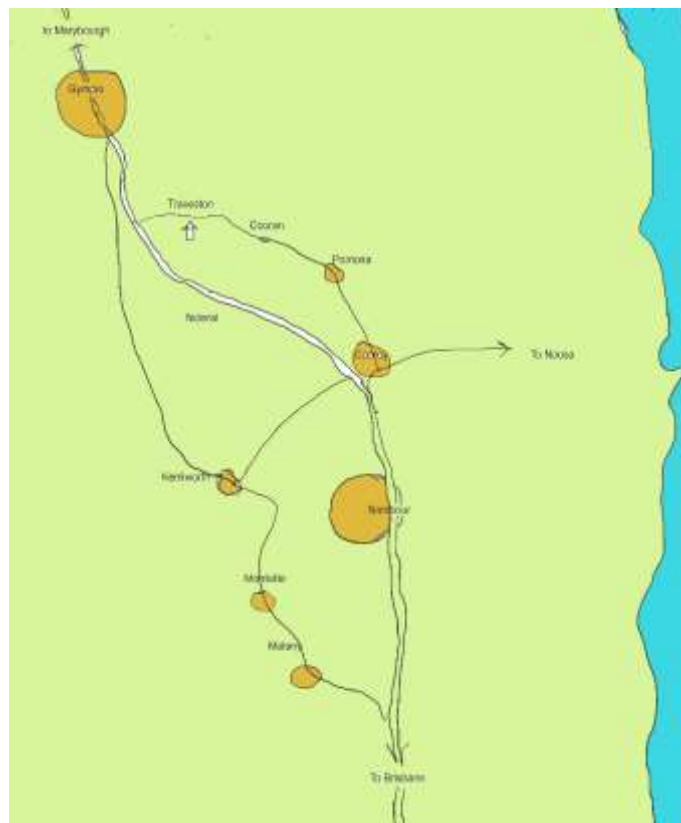


## Chapter 12

## Going Loopy / Alienation and custodianship (Traveston)

Michelle and I began looking for some land where we could grow things. We were not wanting to leave The Gap but were seeking somewhere nice to develop a food garden and where perhaps we would eventually retire to. We were thinking around a 5 acre block. Our main focus was on good soil with good water, if there was some accommodation that would be a bonus. We looked at some nice places around Maleny and Kenilworth but it was hard to find somewhere affordable and with good water. It became quickly apparent we would need to go further west or north to find something.

We were looking for a blank slate upon which we could design and plan an organic garden and place to live. I enjoyed looking at possible places imagining how each could be developed. The problem with most blocks we looked at was, not enough water. We learnt our lesson from Ropeley. Some established fruit trees would have been a bonus. I was also attracted to somewhere with established hoop or bunya pines just because I like them. I had planted many over the years, and it would be nice to be close to ones that were older than me.



When we found the Traveston property Michelle was less keen, it was further away and a much bigger and more expensive block than we had planned. It had 1500 macadamia trees and we definitely had not sought out an established monoculture. There was no accommodation or sheds. More positively for Michelle and I it had two very large dams covered in waterlilies. It also had a large area planted out with established hoop pine trees. I had always liked

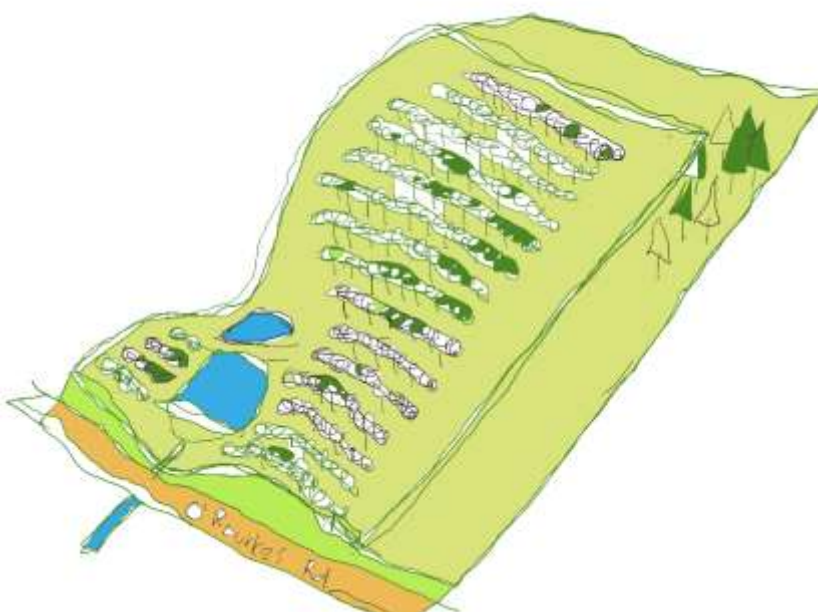




macadamias, particularly as they were a native to Australia and so they were a “good” thing to be growing. Converting this farm to organic production was a ‘good’ challenge. The block itself looked workable and attractive and there were nice views to the mountains. I could see the potential here and my enthusiasm slowly wore Michelle down. Dad and Mum were prepared to loan us the extra we needed to finance the sale and soon we owned a small macadamia farm.

### The farm

Reading up on growing macadamias we discovered a basic income could be made from about 5000 trees. We hoped our 1500 trees would provide a good part time income particularly if we could sell organically. Given we were only going to be there part time it seemed a reasonable number of trees for us to manage. What we did not factor in



was the extra labour that would be involved not only because we were growing organically but also because we were at such a small scale which did not warrant bigger more costly labour saving mowers, harvesters and other machinery.

We quickly needed to learn about how to look after macadamias and to find the required machinery as the farm came with none. It was a quick, steep learning curve, as we were going to need to be ready by harvest time in a few months. We began to chase down some second hand machinery.

As soon as the contract settled we started both going up for the day taking up any potentially useful resources from POD farm and from home. We eventually settled in to a routine where I would drive up Tuesdays and Michelle would catch the train up on Wednesday evening and we would both drive back on Thursday afternoon. Matt was now living in a share house, but would come back to our





home in The Gap on Wednesday nights to be with Ella who was in year 12 at this time.

Initially I spent longer stints at Traveston by myself, building sheds and getting started on looking after the trees. This meant sleeping out in the open on the ground or in the car if it was wet. I quite enjoyed this. Going to sleep on the ground and waking to the morning sun created a strong connection with the land. I enjoyed watching the stars at night and the thousands of flying foxes that flew overhead. As soon as it was light I would start work and keep going until it was too dark to continue. I would go to sleep thinking about all the jobs that needed to be done the next day but also imagining a design for a house on the block.

I have always been a frustrated architect and quickly designed a very interesting house that would have fitted in very well in amongst the macadamias. It only needed a small amount of land area but was tall and would have risen just above the tops of the trees to have a 360 views of the lovely surrounding hills and mountains. With this plan in mind I also designed sheds and other out buildings that were in keeping with this design. I built a small timber and iron 3 x3m shed, small enough to not need council approval, but which would become the first part of the future bigger shed.



This shed was just big enough to house the dehusking machine. Fortunately Tom our next door neighbour in Brisbane, was able to give me step by step advice as to how to build this shed properly. He also loaned his generator so I could run the dehusker while we organized to get electricity to the site. In the small crawl space above the machine and under the roof I built a platform where we would sleep. Sleeping in this open loft a couple of nights a week was a step up from a rug on the ground but was still in strong contrast to the luxury of my home in the city.



We began to transition the farm to organics straight away. The traditional way macadamias are cared for is to spray "Round Up" under the trees to kill all weeds and vegetation to leave bare earth so that the nuts can easily be







harvested once they fall to the ground. After a very short time of us not spraying, this area was completely overtaken by a dense mat of 50cm high cobbler's pegs. Initially we tried to hand weed but it was quickly apparent that this was far too slow. We purchased the largest push mower we could, to keep the weeds short. Around this time we also visited a farm in northern NSW where they grew a special grass under the trees and used sheep to keep the grass mowed. This sounded like a good plan except that we would need to be there



full time to put the sheep in each night to avoid attack from wild dogs. It remained a future hope to adopt this system. The grass idea was very quickly taken up and we planted out a small patches of sweet smother grass between the trees.

12 months later the grass had completely spread to cover up the soil. We had upgraded to a good ride on mower and Michelle quite enjoyed mowing under the trees. To make this process work we also needed to prune the lower branches of the trees so we could more easily mow underneath. This pruning was done in the off season, and took 2 seasons to finish all the trees.

Looking after the trees mainly involved improving the soil. I would regularly deep rip between the rows of trees to improve the drainage and water retention in the soil. We also brought in semi-trailer loads of chicken farm waste to make our own compost to spread under the trees. We organized a soil test to develop a macadamia specific organic fertilizer for our ground which we purchased from a local company. Through our next door neighbour (who also had macadamias) we found a big macadamia farmer who did not reuse their husks from the harvest. I organized a small tip truck from my Dad's business for a week each year and I would do about 20 trips with loads of this husk compost, (probably about 10 ton). This compost looked fantastic and I later read it was the very best fertilizer for macadamias. I installed a pump at the dam so we could irrigate when things got dry. I also used a foliar spray (mixing seaweed and fish fertilizer) covering a quarter of the area of trees each week so all the trees had foliar fertilizer every month. Slowly the trees improved and put on good growth. Our yield increased steadily each year.





In the off season, when harvesting had finished we still needed to mow and fertilize, but it also gave time to plant other trees. We started a small orchard with about 50 fruit trees and also planted about 1000 native shrubs in rows wide enough to mow between with the tractor slasher. The rows followed the contours of the land on all the spare land and these would eventually become hedges of native trees. I thought these hedge rows of natives would look terrific once the shrubs had grown complementing and softening the straight rows of macadamias, but they were mainly there to create a habitat for small birds, to do pest control in the macadamias. As part of our organic pest control we introduced wasps to help control a key insect enemy. We purchased some steers to help keep the grass down in the timber tree paddock and built two new small dams for their drinking water.

We were slowly shaping the farm to be more productive, more sustainable. It was also going to be very attractive with all the wasted weedy areas being replaced by native shrubs.

### The shed

We got council approval to build a bigger shed and Tom took on the project. The shed had a big area for sorting and storing nuts, an area under cover for dehusking and an undercover area for storing machinery. We installed a composting toilet in an attached outhouse. Once the shed building had been ticked off by Council we made a kitchen ourselves from silky oak slabs that we had cut from a tree that had to come down at Mum and Dads. We built ourselves another 3 x 3 shed which became our shower area, and a big covered area that connected to a barbeque and pizza oven. The shed had a loft area big enough for a double bed where we could sleep. It also provided terrific views to the east. The shed was very comfortable. I still wished I could have build what I thought was going to be a very interesting house, but my “grand design” no longer seemed necessary. This was convenient since we did not have any money for the build in any case.





Once Tom's contribution to the shed was finished we started developing a large veggie garden around the house. The soil was very good. It was different to the loamy soil of Payne Rd. It was a very sticky clay which made it hard to dig and meant it would have poor drainage. Clay soil however is very fertile. We made mounded beds to help the drainage and soon the garden was very productive. Michelle particularly enjoyed the gardening. We got geese and built an island for them in the big dam so they would be safe when we were away. We built a secure chook pen with a system so they could be feed and watered even if we were away for weeks at a time. We planted native trees at the front of the shed and the wattles grew very quickly.



We had both now invested a great deal of ourselves in to the farm and its buildings and gardens. I was working hard and long hours, but it was very satisfying. I again found myself looking out windows from the shed planning and imagining new projects and feeling good about what we had accomplished.







We both loved this land and our gardens but at the same time living away from Brisbane part of the week did change our plans. The experience made us realize that we did not want to retire here fully. We had too many connections in Brisbane to family and friends we wanted to maintain. Most of all we wanted to stay close to the kids.



Back in Brisbane we were still running a small informal organic fruit and vegie buying group. I was playing soccer and painting one day a week. Michelle was working as a community worker at Nundah a couple of days a week. So we realized our time at Traveston was probably going to be just a few days a week. We were going to be part-time remote farmers. This further affirmed that we would not need to build a proper house. My 'grand design' would be unfulfilled. It also meant sheep to prune the trees and mow the grass for us would not really be possible.

### The down side

I really liked this farm and the surrounds. I liked restoring the trees to health and planting out and caring for the rest of the block. I was really looking forward to seeing all the trees grow and the whole farm take shape. I would often imagine how it was all going to look in 5, 10 or 20 years' time. It felt like it was all a good plan. I felt we had a really good plan for every part of the whole 40 acres, and we were well on the way to beginning the improvement of all areas.

Of course, it was not all plain sailing, the most difficult parts for me were the viability, routine and isolation.

### Viability

There was nowhere to sell or process organic Macadamias locally. We would need to crack, package and sell our nuts ourselves, which we did at Northey St City Farm Farmers Market. We purchased a small hand driven cracker. This was fun initially but also took a lot of time and we were only going to move a very small fraction of our crop this way. Consequently 95% of our crop was sold in





to the conventional market. Suncoast Gold was a local macadamia farmers' co-op which we joined and supplied. This was very useful as they took whatever we could supply and they were also a good resource for information about growing macadamias. Our trees were still fairly young and we hoped that by the time we had a big enough crop, we would be able to get Suncoast Gold to keep our nuts separate and process them organically for us. The Suncoast Gold farmer rep had indicated this might be possible. When we bought the farm macadamias were being sold to Suncoast Gold at \$5/kg. Unfortunately this dropped to \$3.50/kg for our first 3 years of supplying to them which greatly reduced our expected income. The hourly rate for all our work, turned out to be not very good at all and so it would take a long time to recover our costs. This discouraging and I felt bad that we had only made very slow progress in repaying the loan from Mum and dad.

### Routine

The macadamia harvest demanded a certain circular routine. Each week I would harvest a quarter of the trees with our hand pushed harvester and then de-husk them, putting them all in to water to float off the immature ones and then dry the good ones ready for sorting by Michelle when she arrived Wednesday evening. At the end of the day's sorting I would take a bulk bin with a few hundred kilos of nuts to Suncoast Gold in Gympie . After harvesting, the whole area, I would need to be mowed short to ensure it was ready in 4 weeks time for the next harvest. Michelle would often do the mowing while I took the nuts to Suncoast Gold. I would also foliar fertilize a quarter of the area with a spray rig on the back of the tractor each week.

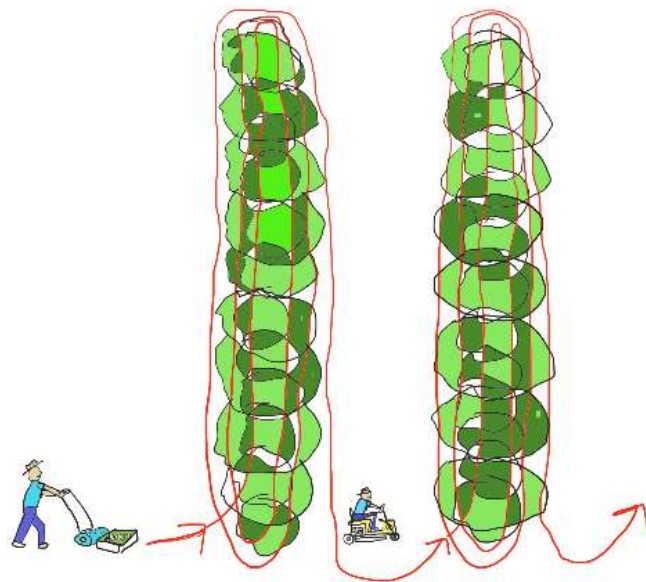
After 4 weeks we had harvested, mowed and fertilized all the trees on the property and then be back to the original trees and the whole process would be repeated again. This circuit would last the 5 months of the harvest season. There was always plenty to do and it would involve very long days from dawn to dusk and also sorting at night time. . In the off season we would still mow and fertilize a quarter of the trees each week. I was effectively doing a 40 hour week in 3 days and Michelle a long day and a half as well.







The harvesting process involved going around and around a row of trees with a hand push harvester starting on the inside line of the trees and moving outward until all the nuts were up off the ground. Mowing similarly involved more loop the loops. I began to understand the notion of going 'stir crazy' or 'loopy'. While there is some mediative qualities to repeating the same actions over and over again, I also found that my thinking would become very circular with the same ideas circling around in my head. Often the same idea could be set off by reaching the same position on the circle. The circular thinking could sometimes get out of control, particularly if it was a negative thought. For Michelle sitting at the sorting table was mind numbing as she watched nuts roll by for hours, looking for holes or some other defect. De-husking was also a very repetitive process.



It was always very nice to break the routine with some other more creative jobs like planting trees or working in the vegie area.





## Isolation and distance

Part of me enjoyed being by myself a couple of days a week. My life was very simple, get up, work, short breaks for lunch and dinner, more work at night and then sleep. I had plenty of time to think and reflect as I worked. While I would see neighbours very occasionally, to give them a hand, most weeks I would be by myself for 2 days till Michelle arrived. For an anxious person there was plenty of opportunity to think about what could go wrong. What if I had an accident and there was no one else around?

It was mostly fairly safe terrain for the macadamias but one section was planted on a very steep slope and turning at the bottom could be a bit challenging. I also regularly slashed weeds on the slopes where it was too steep to plant macadamias. The tractor's brakes were not always the best and there was some hairy occasions from time to time, trying to slash on this steeper ground. I had heard in the news of plenty of farm accidents with tractors and farm machinery. Despite this awareness, invariably you try to just get a bit more of the hard to reach areas, going a bit further each time until a minor slip of the Tractor sideways reminds you that rolling the tractor would not be a good thing to do. With other machinery, you get in a routine and perhaps distracted by something else it is always easy to put your hand somewhere it should not be. I had a few frights here and there which made me be more careful, for a while. On one occasion I had to get a tow truck driver to help me get the tractor off a dam wall. I was trying to cross when it started to tip over, fortunately I was able to stop quickly and get off before it tipped.

It was hard being a long way from Brisbane, we both felt bad about all the petrol we were using getting to and from the farm. While we had a few friends visit, had it been closer to Brisbane it would have been a lot easier to share the place with others.

I was always very pleased to pick up Michelle from the Pomona railway station on Wednesday evenings. It was terrific when Matt and Ella came for a visit. Macadamia farming was not the kid's thing, but I think they liked the beauty of the place and enjoyed the quiet and freedom of being away from the city. Matt particularly liked being able to take his mates there on weekends when we were back in Brisbane.

There were many great things I loved about the farm but the isolation, viability and routine were problems that needed to be overcome.





## The decision to sell

We had the farm for 4 years. We had pretty much planted out all the spare land with native shrubs, built all the required buildings, established the irrigation and finished pruning and other jobs to get the trees back up to scratch. The trees were gaining health and responding to their organic care. This meant we would soon be able to enjoy the off season more. Perhaps relaxing on the farm or exploring the local area more or heading to the coast for a swim. At the same time, harvest season was going to involve a lot more work, collecting, de-husking and sorting as the trees were getting bigger and more productive.

If we were going to be viable given the conventional macadamia price we would need to sell more directly ourselves in the organic market. This was going to take time back in Brisbane. Our part time farm was now looking more like a full time proposition. Michelle would often remind me this was not the sort of farm we actually looking for originally, and she began to question whether she could really face sorting nuts long term. I could see the potential misery for Michelle (and I) down the track with the very repetitive circular jobs, despite all the other great things about the farm. I could see things would have to change or we might have to sell in a couple of years. I started to think about investing in a wider mower and some better and bigger mechanical harvesting equipment that also de-husked at the same time. Nevertheless the future problems started serious talk about perhaps selling in the future.

My cousin Malcolm had been trying to sell his farm in the Lockyer valley for several years and it seemed if we wanted to sell in 3 years' time we perhaps should start trying to sell the farm straight away. I thought maybe while trying to sell, we might come up with other ways to reduce the boring aspects so as to avoid having to sell up.

The other factor that fed in to this decision was that Michelle had a diagnosis of breast cancer during these years and while the surgical treatment and radiotherapy was all successful, it did change my long term perspective. Michelle was never worried and she would say it did not affect her thinking. However, it did affect mine, I did not want Michelle having to spend her time on these unenjoyable jobs, particularly as she was not initially keen on the macadamias. It also crossed my mind as to whether I would want to be looking after the farm all by myself, if Michelle got sick again or worse.

So after thinking about all this for a few weeks, we put the farm on the market with the clear expectation it would take a couple of years to sell. I thought this







would give me time to resolve some of the issues. This seemed like a good plan, but unfortunately one week later we had a serious offer. This was not the plan!!! .... but the horse had now bolted. I had really expected that I would have a few more years here and time to find a way to avoid the boring jobs to stay longer and potentially forever. So it was all a bit of a shock and now I also needed to think about what I was going to do next?

The buyers seemed nice and promised they were going to keep the trees and the macadamias going. The wife was involved in a horse riding program for people with disabilities and she felt the rows of trees would be very suitable for this purpose. So we sold the farm feeling good that someone else would benefit from and continue our work. Unfortunately we heard they later divided the macadamia trees into paddocks knocking down most of the trees. The horses destroyed all our native shrub plantings. We could not bring ourselves to return and see the damage.

I was utterly devastated by this. Such a waste of all our hard work, particularly when we heard a couple of years later that they had split up and sold the farm. I was angry they had lied about their plans and felt like all our toil had been devalued and destroyed. I also felt bad for the trees that had been needlessly destroyed. I felt sad for them and me. All this reminded me of how our lovely garden in



Gatton was also destroyed by subsequent owners. Whenever we drive in the Lockyer Valley I am always very relieved when I can see from a distance that the Brigalow scrub is still there on our Ropeley property. Even now 30 years later I still feel would feel a tremendous guilt, loss, and sense of failure if these trees were ever removed. So it felt again that I had failed in my in my custodial duties to the land I was caring for. I regret selling to those people. It was devastating for me and the farm.

We have some photos of the farm and the trees on a notice board, and whenever I see them I still feel good looking at what we had built but also a sadness for what we left behind and a guilt for selling. I still regularly wonder what the farm would have been like had we stayed longer. I still miss the farm.





### Where to now?

In the years leading to this point I had been through some relative sudden changes. I was a social work student, a committed co-op worker, a community worker, a farm labourer, a Phd student, a family services worker, an academic, a part time academic, then an organic market gardener, a 'would be' artist and then an organic macadamia grower. What was I going to do now? Was I ever going to settle on a career?

My passion and interest in painting had been growing steadily since leaving Uni. Given my farming work had come to an end I felt a real opportunity to focus on painting. Could I make this a full time career? Maybe, like other artists I could paint and have a gallery at the same time? I quickly came to feel very positive about this option and decided this was the way to go. So while sad about leaving Traveston I did have a new direction in mind. There was some sense of relief also that I could have a break from all the long hard physical days at Traveston and from the 2 hour drive each week. I was now looking forward to being able to paint an extra few days a week.

### Insights

Our 4 year career as macadamia farmers started out of the blue and ended quickly and unexpectedly. These years were not really a time where I was actively trying to contribute to social change. Sure we were still actively supporting the organic movement and transitioning a piece of land to organic production, but overall we were much like all the neighbours who were trying to make a living off the land. All our energy was going in to the property and we had very little to do with the local community in the Traveston area. Despite all the hard work and very small financial reward we were actually more self-focused in this period, trying to establish a future lifestyle and income.

I did feel a congruence and consistency with our ideals in that we were living very simply at Traveston and working towards creating a sustainable farm where we would need less and less external inputs over time. However, once we decided we were never going to live there full time I felt bad about all the petrol we were using travelling each week. At times it seemed very crazy to be looking after land 2 hrs drive from our home in Brisbane.









We all need to nurture the land individually and as a society. In this context others are also part of the world, not separable from the world, and so it follows we need to nurture others also. Nurturing needs to be a generalized, globalized attitude. It is not about a piece, it is about the whole. In any case from another direction, to properly nurture the land also involves trying to encourage and assist others to do also. To help others feel the custodial responsibility and joy from this reciprocal relationship. Together we have a custodial duty.

This is what custodianship is all about. It is not just for a particular piece of ground, it is also for the planet as a whole. It is not a private thing it must also be a social responsibility. It is a responsibility that we need to pursue for our own survival, but it is also a rewarding commitment, giving purpose and meaning and connection. It orientates us to act and relate in certain ways. It encourages mutuality, co-operation and connection and discourages control violence and self-interest in all our relationships. Custodial relationships may begin with a particular bit of dirt, but can expand to the whole planet and also can start from particular people to becoming about everyone in general.

## **Alienation**

My connection to the natural world impacts on my emotional wellbeing and sense of self as a human animal on this planet. This connection is an undeniable part of our existence and yet most people it would seem fail to recognize this connection. This lack of connection or alienation from the world creates problems for them and the planet as a whole. I am always distressed when I see people drop litter on the streets or when I see people revving up their cars and burning rubber on the roads or spinning their utes in the dust. It's the same category of malaise I feel when I hear a business has cleared huge areas of trees or they are digging huge holes in the landscape in search of money. The alienation from the land means they are missing out on a very positive rewarding connection and I am sad for them but also frustrated as their actions lead to disastrous consequence for us all. If we don't all nurture the land we won't be nurtured. We need to help people overcome this alienation and to develop a conscious connection. A deep connection to the land must also involve a connection to the history of that land and the previous custodians.





Part of the problem of alienation from the land is that there is a tendency to be also alienated from others and from the labour of others. They are alienated from the history of a place and the history of things or objects.

Alienation from history – People from my generation often grew up thinking the history of Australia began with the arrival of Captain Cook. Our schooling encouraged an alienation from First Nations people and their engagement with the land for tens of thousands of years. This helped to create an ignorance from which we could feel better about our place and a way to justify our brutal invasion and attempted destruction of a people and culture. Alienation allows violence.

Alienation from objects – This form of alienation leads people to unknowingly fail to respect the work of previous owners or custodians. People will knock down a house to build a bigger one with no thought to the love, labour and toil that went in to building that house. People will level gardens that a previous owner may have spent years developing and caring for. There is no recognition of, or value placed on the previous emotional investment and toil. If they had such awareness, they might build on what came before, incorporating it in to future plans. Add to the actions arising from alienation, the problems arising from a need to be in charge and in control (which can justify starting from scratch and replacing everything in any situation) we have a society where the work of one generation is overturned by the next. This is clearly a very inefficient waste of resources.

Given our society is increasingly mobile, this creates a huge problem of waste, as successive owners trash the labour of earlier owners. This lack of respect or alienation for earlier work makes it harder to connect to country because people begin to believe everything they may do will be trashed by future people, so why do anything. Why care for the land if the next person is just going to ruin it. Everyone begins to think more short term. It then becomes even harder to develop a spiritual or deep connection to the land and so encouraging even more alienation. I feel like our society is in the vicious circle and this has been strengthening over the last few hundred years. We desperately need a renewed custodial attitude.

I have felt aspects of this custodianship at Thomas St, Ropeley, Payne Rd and Traveston, but for a whole lot of reasons I have moved on from each of these relationships and commitments. Sometimes the new owners have failed to continue the nurturance. Traveston highlighted this problem for me. Private ownership is a problem, even if the new owner nurtures and builds on the work done there is no guarantee a future owner sometime won't reverse





all that has been done. Traveston led me to think that I should only put energy in to community owned land. As will be seen in the next few chapters most of my energy over the last 12 years has gone into projects on Brisbane City Council land, community land, but this is not a failsafe or easy solution either.

Before going forward let me look back at two ways in which this alienation and waste was avoided and a closer connection to the land was made possible. Australia has 2 very strong models for encouraging connection.

*The family farm* - From when Europeans first arrived in Australia and took the land for farming, it has been mainly organized as a family affair. Each generation has continued the work on the previous one. My great grandfather started the dairy farm at “Ringwood” near Grantham. Grandad added the citrus orchard. My uncle build new dams and extended the orchard. Each generation built on the work of the other adding new sheds, dams, windmills, pumps, fences. Each making things better for the next. Plans were often very long term with the goal to benefit not the current generation but the future ones. They would act with their children and grandchildren in mind. Their goal would be to improve the farm and its fertility. Fruit and nut trees would be planted to benefit the next generation.

There is a real efficiency to the family Farm and avoidance of wasted resources and energy. This also builds an emotional connection. The work of previous generations is all around. My mother always felt at home at Ringwood even 50 years after leaving the farm. I know my sisters and I also felt the same way. It was and still is a special place for us. I knew my grandfather died on the farm and I would be reminded of him when I looked at the old windmill, the slab shed or the saw mill. There is something very familiar and comforting for me walking in bare feet on the sand paths made by the tractor wheels over many of years. I can ‘in my mind’ still feel the path under foot and see my relatives walking in front of me down the orchard to pick oranges.

Unfortunately the family farm culture is now disappearing as bigger farmers swallow up smaller farmers and big corporations start to take over these bigger farms. The history gets lost. Goals become very short term. Knowledge is lost and things are planned from a board room without local knowledge and the labour and sweat of previous generations gets lost as managers reshape things in their own image. The goal now is to squeeze as much profit as possible so that the manager can look good before they seek a promotion to a new bigger farm. Farming is becoming industrialized, globalized and dehumanized.







*Aboriginal culture* - Before Europeans arrived we had the above custodial sentiments of the family farm on steroids. For Europeans while many developed a love and connection to the land, it was still there to be controlled for their benefit. For First Nation's people my understanding is that the attitude was very different. They are inseparable from the land. They come from the land, the land is the mother. The ancestors return to the land and become part of the flora and fauna and the landscape. Everything is imbued with their spirit and the spirit of the land is imbued in everyone. You do not experience God when you put your hands in the soil as I have suggested previously. For First nations people you are the soil, there is no separation, only connection. Custodianship is not a choice, it is part of living and being a person in the community. There is no space, language or mindset to even consider the possibility of control, domination or alienation.

Bruce Pascoe in his book "Dark Emu" helps to highlight how the Australian landscape has been transformed over 10s of thousands of years to create a nurturing landscape. There is no wasted energy with successive generations carefully continuing and building on the nurturing relationships and patterns of care previously established. People are very careful to not take too much, to leave plenty for next year and future generations. He shows the very careful management of the environment. Management is not the right word, stewardship is a bit better but I suspect the reality it is more entrenched in the culture and philosophy of the people, than these words allow.

The First Nations people transformed the environment through carefully listening and working with what was already happening. In contrast Europeans failed to see any of the abundance in front of them, wrecking fields of Murnong or yam daisy (a root crop) and trashing fields of kangaroo grass that was used for making bread for thousands of years. The small hooves of introduced animals trampling on the soft, fertile ground, compacting it ,which lead to productive species dying out. This was compounded by overgrazing, killing off the pastures that had been built up over thousands of years. Ploughing the soil to overcome the compaction then lead to the loss of topsoil through water and wind erosion. Over 12 inches of top soil from the Ropeley area is now in Moreton bay. It only took a hundred years for Europeans to totally wreck the work done by thousands of generations of first nation people.

My devastation at the loss of the Macadamia trees at Traveston pale in comparison to the experience of First Nations people. My anger, and despondency provide perhaps a sliver of their possible emotional experience of what happened to them. It is hard to imagine how a group of people not familiar





with the attitudes of control and domination and lack of respect for someone else's country, would have understood the actions of the first settlers. Part of their custodial concern would have been to also want to support and help these strange people, but they must have been incredulous about the settler's destructive selfish actions and their failure to consult with the custodians of that land and to follow established protocols when on country.

There is a very powerful story in 'Dark Emu' about a European explorer making first contact with a group of inland people. The explorers are exhausted, hungry and thirsty in what was for them a desert but climbing over a large sand dune, they came upon a large group of people in an established community of huts where everyone looked well fed. Obviously surviving very well in what seemed harsh conditions. The first reaction of the people was to bring coolamons of water for the explorers to drink, but also for the horses. The horse would have been a big animal never seen before which you think would be scary, however they could clearly see they all were distressed and needing water. Care and concern for everyone and everything.

Over the next 2 hundred years the European response has been the opposite. We failed to learn or build on what had been established in the land and then ignored, controlled, and killed First Nations people to make way for our own ambitions and plans. Now when facing ecological catastrophe in the form of fire and climate change, some people are beginning to think maybe there was something we could have learnt about being good custodians from the masters.

First nation's society and the family farm provide some direction for a renewed custodianship ethos, but the Traveston example highlights another part of the problem for the future which is actually the nature of private property.

*Private vs common property* – Private property almost by definition means nothing of our efforts on that property can be guaranteed. The new owner can do whatever. Whatever custodial feelings I have about Thomas St, Ropeley or Traveston there is nothing I can do to prevent new owner's actions. There are some brakes on private ownership like tree clearing laws, vegetation protection orders on certain trees and heritage listings for houses, but history shows, these laws have been ignored. Fines may be paid, but the trees and houses are gone.

National Parks have been an alternative response to protect various areas from more human intrusion and they have played an incredibly important role. This is not what I am seeking here. I want to find a way where the work on one





generation in managing and shaping the land is not trashed by the new owner. First Nations people left areas in the landscape that were in a way like National Parks where there was no fire stick farming, but in other areas they changed the landscape to create more grass/grain fields and corridors of trees to herd kangaroos for hunting. Creeks were dammed and fish traps created. Unlike Europeans first nations people with their custodial mind set were always careful to only take what was needed and to leave plenty for others and for the future.

Realizing “private property” was no way to ensure custodianship I began to think state and council land was better, or perhaps some sort of community trust which ensured a continuity of purpose through future generations. Beyond a legal mechanism to ensure that efforts to change to build sustainability in the landscape, a prerequisite for any long lasting and sustained change will be a change of attitude. We need to encourage a custodial relationship to the land to the planet and to each other. This means overcoming the mind sets of control, alienation and self-interest. This is no easy task. It is difficult to have a custodial orientation when surrounded by a culture of control, profit and private property.

## Conclusion

I had wanted to do a lot at Ropeley, but my grand plans were limited by the shortage of water. I had big plans for POD farm at Payne Rd but it was not our land. At Traveston we were able to improve and build the sustainability of the land, revitalizing the soil, doing away with artificial pesticides and chemicals. We replanted trees and increased the bio diversity on our farm. I was a better custodian this time until we made the decision to sell. Our negligence led to the future owners destroying the trees and all our hard work.

Finishing at Traveston, I wanted to focus more on my painting. I wanted to see if I could make an income this way but moreover I wanted to see how my art would develop if I had more time and space. This is the focus of the next chapter. I was still keen to keep looking after the land but in the future, I wanted our efforts to revitalize the land to be protected. The Yoorala St community Garden and the Balaangala garden have been 2 attempts in this direction and will be discussed in chapter 14 and 16.

I have a lot more to learn about being a good custodian of the land where ever I am, and I look to First nation’s culture for guidance. I feel custodianship is a lot more than just a set of good actions, it is also a very particular attitude. The actions without the attitude will still fall short. This attitude requires more than a







technical scientific appreciation it requires a real affection for the land. It is clear from the environment that species need to cooperate for survival. If any one species dominates too much it can lead to the collapse of the whole system. We need to shift from a goal of domination to one of mutuality.

The previous chapter lead me to the importance of finding somewhere to stand to take action. Somewhere where I had a sense of integrity. Traveston affirmed for me that that integrity must come from the ground, from the land. To challenge hierarchy you need to have your feet planted on firm ground, to be in connection and not alienated from the environment around you. Moreover you need to have a strong affection for the whole environment and for everyone to take the custodial responsibilities seriously.



Vs

