

Submission to the Draft State Sustainability Strategy

- sustainability through culture and the arts
- ethics and developing a "sense of place"
- spirituality as part of building community values

*Hearts of Blue:
Sustainability and a Coastal Sense of Placeⁱ*

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Going to the beach was the excitement of the year. We would be driven to Midland Junction by horse and buggy, then by train to Perth and by tram to the end of the line at the old Osborne Park hotel. There we would be met by one of the older boys for the trip to the beach. The "plank road" was fairly smooth, but the "block" was very bumpy. To spare the horse, we walked up all the inclines, and there was great excitement when we came to the "hill with the bend", for then we knew we would see the sea.

--Rose Farringtonⁱⁱ

The sea is a field of miracles, a profusion of depths and mysteries...We are not sea people by way of being great mariners, but more a coastal people, content on the edge of things.

--Tim Wintonⁱⁱⁱ

For us living here at Waterman, our own little stretch of coastline is a delight. A walk on the beach, to watch the changing colours of the setting sun, at the end of the day, gives on peace, tranquillity and a sense of the infinite, that the ocean must have afforded people from the beginning of time.

--Patricia Hancock^{iv}

What is it about Australians and the sea?

--Robert Drewe^v

Introduction: Littoral Love

In his address to the *1994 Coast to Coast Conference* in Hobart, Robert Drewe questions the way the Australian “myths” of Landscape and Character contribute to the consciousness that “all goodness and wholesomeness resided in the country.”^{vi} Drewe then wonders what this “city-rejecting country bias of our culture” means for those who “reside in its geographical opposite, the coast?” Does this mean that the coast is a place of shallow urbanity and vulgar corruption, without beauty, depth, possibility and meaning?

Drewe thinks otherwise, and offers an alternative myth of the Beach for contemporary constructions of Australian identity. He claims that on 2 October 1902, when William Gocher—a “crusading” suburban newspaper editor from Manly—defied the law against daylight surf-bathing, a sea-change in Australian identity emerged. The “myth of the outback began to give way to the worship of the coast.” Since that time, Drewe concludes, “Like it or not, the coast has successfully captured the spiritual consciousness of contemporary Australians.”

When I first came to Perth, I wanted to learn all I could about what Australian theologians and spiritual leaders were writing in regard to the connection of people, place, spirituality and theological meaning. In all the material I read, the bush and desert figured predominantly as the

spiritual icons of these authors. For example, David Tacey maps the spiritual journey for non-Indigenous Australians as moving from the geographical and psycho-social “edge” to the red heart of the continent, the “sacred centre”.^{vii} But as I began listening to people talk about their own connections to place, I heard many people tell stories about the coast. In fact, people talk as if they are smitten by an acute form of passion—a love of the littoral! Leading the way is Robert Drewe, who confesses that he feels...

most Australian when I see a patch of ocean framed in the branches of a gum-tree...or catch my first glimpse of Little Parakeet Bay on Rottnest Island off the Western Australian coast, on an early morning bike ride. To me, the *real Australia* will always be that mysterious, sensuous zone where the bush meets the sea. The *real Australia* has no other season but summer. The *real Australia*, of course, is myth as much as it is reality.^{viii}

Why is the Sea so Popular?

These informal conversations correspond with research conducted in 1998 by Peter Bentley and Philip Hughes, who surveyed Australians about the places they frequently experience a sense of peace and well-being.^{ix} They discovered that 71% of the respondents replied, “by the sea”. Other answers included “in the bush” (66%), “with family” (64%), “with friends” (59%), “in a garden” (56%), “praying” (29%) and “at church services” (28%). Upon closer examination, for some persons the bush, sea

and gardens took the place of churches. But for many others, the spiritual resources of the natural environment existed *alongside* traditional religious resources. In fact, the people who attend church regularly were just as strong in affirming the sea or bush as those who did not attend church. Bentley and Hughes wonder why the sea is so popular:

Is there something in the nature of the sea itself which attracts Australians, with the extent of its horizons, or the regularity of the tides, or the sound of the waves? Is it the 'beach culture' which has developed Australia, which commentators have sometimes described as the place where social barriers are not apparent? Does it reflect the happiness that most children experience when they play in the sand on the beach, the one place they play for hours without expensive toys? Or is there something more, the almost mystical experiences that some surfers report, as they ride the ultimate wave?^x

Bentley and Hughes leave the questions unanswered. But these questions have sparked my imagination to re-draw Tacey's map in a different way—what if we think of the coast more as a "sacred edge" than a profane and shallow place?^{xi} What would it mean to honour the sea and coast as well as the land in the movement for reconciliation of non-Indigenous people with Indigenous people? What stories need to be told and listened to so that the diversity and richness of spiritual and cultural identities can be illuminated? The themes encourage Western Australians to honour the possibilities of envisioning, articulating, and

celebrating spiritual values that call all of us to new ways of just and sustainable living on our coast. For as George Seddon writes, "The earth is home. If we are at war with it, it is a war we cannot win; better to think of it as our partner, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death us do part."^{xii}

The Touch of the Sea

Bentley's and Hughes' statistical data encouraged me to take up a formal project of interviewing non-Indigenous people about their coastal sense of place.^{xiii} While the project is in the early stages, let me share some of the ways the participants regard the cultural and spiritual significance of the sea and coast in their lives:

If I'm in a kind of emotional turmoil, I just go to the beach and I'll walk or sit and look at the waves. The sea is always different; it has different colours, different movements, different moods. It's so alive, not static or fixed; it's always changing.

I love the smell of the beach—the salty smell—and I like touching the sand. Even just sitting on the beach I get into a meditation and feel the energy coming up through the sand. I always feel a lot clearer about things after I've been to the beach.

I suppose it's a real solace place, a place of real peace.

I can't remember a time when there wasn't the beach. The beach was integral to my childhood days.

I feel I'm nearer to God in this place. The ocean is a mystery, like the finger pointing to the moon. What leads me to God is the ocean.

At Rottnest, we would lie down at night and we would still hear the sound from the sea, and there would be sand in the sheets and it gave us great joy—it was freedom.

You've got to respect the ocean.

The choice of where my life would end would be in the sea.

It's about care of the earth, care of the beach, care of the world.

There is a symbolism there of rebirth and cleansing. In winter, the ocean takes all the sand away, makes it nice and clean and around spring brings it all back. There's this huge cleansing thing.

The ocean is my key healing place, it's renewing and refreshing. I do a lot of meditating there. There are less distractions and the rhythm of the waves have a calming effect and the eternal nature of the horizons—I feel very calm looking at the horizon.

The ocean speaks to my spirit; it is a special place of freedom. It has to do with the endless, restless movement, like the dance of creation that's ever forming and re-forming, making connections beyond oneself.

You can't help thinking that all this is just incredible, that God created it all and it is so beautiful, the washing of the cliffs, the sculpture that the waves make of the rock.

I used to delight as a child playing with the sand. It's the walking along, the smells, the whole sensual experience by the sea.

The sea touches me at a deep, unconscious level. God speaks to me there through this awareness, deeply embedded in myself, like we are creatures of the sea.

I have never lived far from the sea. It seems as important to me as mountains are to others. I sleep most soundly when I can hear the sea shushing in time with my own breath. Sometimes, on sleepless nights not by the sea, I imagine I am in a bubble, exploring the breadth and depth of the ocean. The ocean floor

fascinates me even more than outer space. Yet I need it to remain an unexplored mystery, a place where my imagination takes me when I need the comfort of solitude, a place which provides a landscape the explorations of which parallel those of my own inner landscape. These imaginings perhaps hark back to life in the womb and my first encounter with the creator spirit—very primal sort of stuff.

Listening to the stories of others makes me think about my own story.

A Heart of Blue

Barbara Kingsolver confides in her recent novel, *Prodigal Summer*, that by growing up between farms and forests, her particular way of looking at the world has been “colored heavily in greens”. Since moving to Perth five years ago, I can say that my own particular way of looking at the world has become heavily coloured in blues—beautiful blues—deep, dark blues, cerulean blues, aquamarine blues, blues that make my heart cry aloud with womanist poet Alice Walker:

We have a beautiful
mother
Her green lap
immense
Her brown embrace
eternal
Her blue body
everything
we know.^{xiv}

Perhaps this is just the effusive passion of a newcomer who has not yet been exposed to the heartland or initiated into the red mysteries of the desert. Perhaps this feeling reflects the clever calculations of

marketing designers and land developers who advertise the new Australian dream drenched in these blue colours of desire. But I am not inclined to be cynical. I have come to love living near the sea. I've become a coastal person now, with an emerging sense of place that is moored more to seascape than landscape. My sense of belonging flows from the bare feeling of sand beneath my feet and an open horizon where the breeze shifts around mid-day and the sun swims in the evening.

Maritime Mystery

As I listen to Western Australians talk about their own senses of place, I've come to wonder about the connections between Australians, spirituality and the sea. What is it about Australians and the coast? As Meaghan Morris claims, the beach is "one of the deepest-laid 'realities' of life" in Australia.^{xv} Yet the coast, with all our cultural-crossing, and double-crossing, is not without its ambiguity. In response to the dispossession of Gai-mariagal people, Peter Read laments his childhood memories of Forty Baskets Beach, "How can we belong in places of our own intense pleasure but others' intense pain?"^{xvi}

Yet, what is this sense of hope and possibility that comes upon one in just catching a glimpse of that blue horizon, let alone in immersing oneself beneath the waves? What does this salty sense of salvation

mean? Many writers on Australian spirituality speak from the heart-habits of the bush and desert; these are the landscapes for the heart's "re-enchantment", as David Tacey claims.^{xvii} But Western Australian Tim Winton casts his lot with the coast when he suggests:

Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert—a war of mystery on two fronts...Of the two mysteries, the sea is more forth coming; its miracles and wonders are occasionally more palpable, however inexplicable they be. There is more bounty, more possibility for us in a vista that moves, rolls, surges, twists, rears up and changes from minute to minute...The sea is the supreme metaphor for change.^{xviii}

In recent years, I have found myself drawn to the contemplation of blue, the faithful persistence of limpets, and the long swells of waves from deeply fathomed currents. I have found my heart enchanted with maritime mystery.

Sand in our Souls

Immediately, I am taken back to my own childhood, growing up in the northeast of the US. My earliest memories are of sitting with my mother and sisters at the shore, making pools of water and drip castles with our hands. In the mornings, just before sunrise, my father would wake me for our walk along the beach to discover driftwood, starfish and broken whelks. During these times of summer holiday, my family was relaxed—we knew the times were special, even though walking the beach

and bathing were ordinary, daily rhythms. I learned my deepest spiritual intuitions of awe, wonder and humility along the coast, where today I continue giving thanks that I dwell in a world of sacred Presence, where “deep calls to deep”, to draw on the words of the Psalmist (42:7).

Now my own two boys are growing up with what Leone Huntsman calls “sand in our souls”.^{xix} Their imaginations are coloured blue and full of drifting along open seascapes—Nanarup, Yallingup, Turquoise Bay, Little Beach, Coogee and Cottesloe. Huntsman observes that while public spaces in Australia usually ignore children, at the beach children are privileged: here, coastal love begins early, with a child’s initial ‘baptism’ in the sea and later through hours of carefree and sensual play.^{xx} For many people, the coast provides the transition from social order to fluid openness. Winton shares his own childhood memory when the sea was the only remaining place of freedom:

When the bushland around my street began to disappear, a big part of my world began to be closed off. Roads, fences, drainage ditches literally sectioned the landscape up... In the end there was only the sea left unfenced, unowned. In the world of childhood it was a saving refuge and because of the shrinkage of my natural world I looked to it fiercely.^{xxi}

Perhaps we love the coast because of our need to return to that place of creativity and freedom, a birthing place, a place where we are not bound by clocks, bitumen or backyard fences. We are restored to our senses by

placing ourselves within reach of “the elemental”.^{xxii} Thus, seascape becomes fraught with memories of not only joy and passion, but loss, tragedy and sorrow. Still we keep returning in a ritual of remembrance, binding ourselves again and again to a spacious, encompassing other, in which we flow and have our being. Perhaps it is as simple and complex as this: “The ocean is my friend”, Reg Cribb wrote for the Western Australian Youth Theatre Company’s recent performance, “This Endless Shore”.^{xxiii}

In reflecting today about a “sense of place”, I believe we can find much inspiration in our community value of coastal living, which honours together both land and sea, landscape and seascape, land rights and sea rights, care of the land and care of the sea. In committing our state to a sustainability strategy, we need to do more than “think like a mountain”, to invoke Aldo Leopold’s famous vision. We also need to “think like the sea”. We need a sea-ethic for sustainable living, and as I would like to explore much further with any of you, a sea-spirituality. Thank you.

ⁱ This submission is based on a plenary presentation concerning “Sense of Place” delivered at the 11th National Students and Sustainability Conference, Murdoch University (8 July 2002).

ⁱⁱ Rose Farrington, “Childhood Memories”, in *Recollections from a Shoreline: Researched and Compiled by Members of the North Beach Historical Society*, co-ordinated by Linda Newell and edited by Helen Weller (Perth, Western Australia: Artlook, 1980), p. 117.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Winton, *Land’s Edge* (Sydney: Picador, 1993), pp. 35, 37.

^{iv} Patricia Hancock, “Rock, Sand and the Sea 1.8 Million Years Ago to the Present Time”, in *Recollections of a Shoreline*, p. 93.

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- ^v Robert Drewe, "Forward: The Lure of the Beach," *Australian Beaches*, by Anne Matthew (Sydney: Landsdown Publishing, 1998), p. 5.
- ^{vi} Robert Drewe, "The Beach or the Bush? (or the Shark vs the Dingo)", presentation at the *1994 Coast 2 Coast Conference*, Hobart, Tasmania (29 June—2 July 1994). I am grateful to Dr. Robert Kay of *Onecoast: Coastal Knowledge Ecosystem* for sharing this paper with me.
- ^{vii} David Tacey, *The Edge of the Sacred* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1995).
- ^{viii} Drewe, "Forward", pp. 4-5.
- ^{ix} Peter Bentley and Philip J. Hughes, *Australian Life and the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures* (Victoria: Christian Research Association, 1998), p. 108. I am grateful to the Revd Dr Nigel Leaves, who first brought this data to my attention.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ^{xi} I have explored the image of the sacred edge in the following resources: "Sea-ing Faith, Fathoming Faith: Reflections on a Coastal Sense of Place," *Eremos: Exploring Spirituality in Australia*, No. 79 (May, 2002), 17-21; "The Sacred Edge: Seascape as Spiritual Resource toward an Australian Eco-eschatology," *Ecotheology*, Vol. 6 (July 2001 & January 2002), 167-185; "The Sea is Our Life! Cross-Cultural Reflections on a Coastal Sense of Place," *In God's Image: Journal of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology* 20/4 (December, 2001), 34-8; "The Sacred Edge: Women, Sea and Spirit," *Seachanges: Journal of Women Scholars of Religion and Theology*, Vol. 1 (2001), www.wsr.com.au, 1-28.
- ^{xii} George Seddon, *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 248.
- ^{xiii} This project, supported by Murdoch University is entitled "Learning the Language of the Sea", to borrow an image from Tim Winton's fable, *Blueback* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1997), p. 130. Quotes are used with participants' permission.
- ^{xiv} Alice Walker, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete* (London: The Women's Press, 1992), p. 459.
- ^{xv} Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon, Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 105.
- ^{xvi} Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 217.
- ^{xvii} David J. Tacey, *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000).
- ^{xviii} Winton, *Land's Edge*, pp. 36-7.
- ^{xix} Leone Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ^{xxi} Tim Winton, "Strange Passion: A Landscape Memoir", in Richard Woldendorp and Tim Winton, *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000), p. xviii.
- ^{xxii} John Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000).
- ^{xxiii} Reg Cribb, "Director's Notes: The Endless Shore", Victoria Hall (September 2002).