When people think of ‘ecosystem values or services’ they most often think in terms of tourism, or perhaps water and habitat protection. However, wild environments have many other benefits including stimulating aesthetic appreciation and imagination. These inspiring experiences show us what we value, and these valued experiences, while as old as humanity, are increasingly recognised in literature as an integral part of ecosystem services (TEEB, 2014). The entire spectrum of profound cultural dimensions of natural environments has also been recognised by UNESCO with the listing on the World Heritage list of cultural landscapes (Mitchell et al., 2009).

For many people the immersion in natural and cultural landscapes generate exhilarating feelings of awe, beauty, wonderment and connection, which contribute profoundly to a sense of happiness and the building of rich, pleasurable and meaningful lives. These deeply felt experiences are significant to artists in their attempts to frame philosophical and aesthetic questions about who we are and what it means to be alive today. Physical engagement with wild environments is a complex aesthetic experience, which strengthens our understanding, knowledge and value of those places. Valuing something bigger than ourselves sharpens our ethical perspective and shapes the way we ethically behave in regards to other living beings (Crompton, 2010).

The cultural life of a society, for example poetry, visual and performing arts, music, as well as popular culture, form a framework that shape peoples’ perception and experience of the world, including natural landscapes. The unique platforms of the arts engage audiences in unthreatening ways about ideas of profound implication and importance. The arts also help us become more historically aware and more perceptive of the present, drawing us into thinking about the reality we are building and whether it needs changing.

I am interested to think how contemporary culture may play a role in developing our sense of coherence and connection between what we believe to be valuable and what we see and understand to be happening in the world around us. How might the arts continue to heighten our awareness and create connections to a world of beings outside ourselves?

Australian Photographer Peter Dombrovskis (1945-1996), answered some of these questions through his extraordinary photographs of the Tasmanian wilderness.

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Figure 1. Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Tasmania (1979), © Peter Dombrovskis, courtesy of Mrs Liz Dombrovskis

The photograph titled Morning mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Tasmania (1979) portrays a section of the Franklin River that at the time was threatened by the proposed Franklin Dam and which led to Australia’s largest and most important conservation battle (Figure 1). It was the most iconic and significant image in the protest to protect the Franklin River which is now gratefully a part of the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park, the heart of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It should be noted that photography, in particular, has had an immense role in virtually all nature conservation campaigns in Australia as in other parts of the world as a clear way of communicating what is at stake, what will be lost and therefore it constitutes an implied call to action to save the beauty conveyed.
Thought graph - (Blue Lake Moreton Island) 2008, Marian Drew

Square on water (Lake McKenzie Fraser Island) 2008, Marian Drew
It is important to consider why Peter Dombrovskis’ famous image of the Franklin River so engages audiences and how this affect may support political movement. Timing and context are crucial, but reading of the image may reveal further the feelings and ideas that emerge from that exchange.

Studying the image, I immediately get a sense of strong forces at play and a deep sense of time. Human time frames are not evident here. Water has eroded a lot of rock and the island in the centre of the river will eventually be washed completely away. There is at once great fragility and great power. The cool morning colour and the rising fog create a deep and mysterious space where things are clouded. The water, relatively calm, shows powerful movement under the surface. The lines of water draw the eye behind the central rock, deep into a single viewpoint pictorial space. The image triggers memories of paintings, where mist, rock, trees and water represent a kind of natural but dangerous harmonic. The fog envelopes rock like a veil. We have to imagine what is hidden. We need to be careful. We are not relaxed viewing this image. Standing where we are just outside the frame, we could be washed away. We know this place exists because it is a photograph but it shows more than a place in time, it whispers in our ear a story of our own transience, our fragility and our place of the natural world. It is an incredibly beautiful image of an extraordinary place and I feel grateful knowing it still exists. We learn a lot about ourselves looking at it and know more about what we value.

These feelings, sensual experiences and psychological states that natural landscapes evoke in us are crucial to our maintaining healthy relationships with those environments and crucial to the health of our culture. Cultural diversity reflects and promotes ecological diversity and visa versa. Cultural diversity is an amplification of the creative response that maintains a diversity of knowledge not only necessary for rich and rewarding lives, but to our possible survival (Davis, 2009).

Culture mediates experience and acts to shape our appreciation and perception of natural environments. The business of art is culture and it follows that the arts play a significant role in shaping our appreciation and connection through culture to those environments. The arts need to develop the knowledge necessary to respond culturally to our continued adaptation and mitigation of change. Through partnerships with science, the arts are better informed of these critical issues. The arts may then more actively highlight those values, develop motivation and emotionally engage individuals and communities. This could be very important in communicating, for example, the inseparability of ecosystem health with human health and happiness, and the inevitability of connection no matter what the distance on the map.

Cultural change requires a broad base of recurrent dialogue. Cultural change doesn’t come from one person; it is a field of work by many citizens that include creative artists, designers, musicians, architects and artisans. It is a grass roots movement that comes in waves rather than lines. It is a momentum that includes all the failures and successes of amateurs and professionals. Cultural momentum needs to be understood as everybody trying; opening up dialogue through aesthetic means about things that are of value. By enhancing what we value we are able to act more ethically (Brady, 2006). A focused experience of art may help audiences highlight their own values and develop personal standpoints on cultural, social and environmental issues of importance.

By founding my art practice on a physical engagement with natural environments, I developed a specific series of photographic works about the “road kill” of native fauna in my local area of Brisbane, which grew over time to include some other regions in Australia. I was interested to explore our relationship with wild animals within an art historical framework to draw out the inherited contexts that have shaped our attitudes and behaviours. Between 2003 and 2011, I worked on a series of exhibitions with various titles, Australiana (2003), Still Life (2005), Every Living Thing (2007) and Birds (2009). These exhibitions explored ideas conveyed through still life paintings that animals and the natural world were a kind of resource that existed for human consumption in the broadest sense.

Figure 2. Pelican with Turnips 2005, Marian Drew

To test how these ideas felt in the present, I carefully arranged and photographed these dead animals in intimate domestic situations, tables of the dining, kitchen and sewing rooms (Figure 2). The familiarity of the still life as a seductive historic art form and the documentary nature of photography assisted in confronting my audiences with these recognisable but contradictory ideas.

Through this work I aimed to bring real deaths to our attention, acknowledge those animals and establish their close link to the sustainment of our lives. Native animals are killed on our roads, by power lines, by our pets and through a loss of habitat. Our progress is their profound loss. Through these art works, I hope to revive a sense of respect, responsibility, connection, and gratitude for the life and death of animals that cohabit our environments. I am trying to make the point that our life and death is strongly connected to theirs.
Rainbow Lorikeet on Queensland Needlepoint (Figure 3) shows one of the many Rainbow Lorikeets I have found on roads in Brisbane. My mother embroidered this 1970’s tablecloth of Australia which map the values of the time.

In summary, I argue that natural environments have a special importance to play in our cultural lives. Experience of wild places and animals stimulates aesthetic appreciation and imagination. These aesthetic appreciations help clarify the things that we value and in turn enhance our ethical behaviour towards other humans and other living things (Compton, 2010). The arts special contribution lies in working across language and across disciplines in the marriage of cognition and emotion, which takes place in aesthetic experience. With the right support, the creative arts may continue to discover relevant cultural ways of connecting to place, local and global, and through those cultural activities highlight the values of families, friends and communities building the cultural paradigms necessary for our planet to thrive.

References


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