

Remembering the Rainforest Information Centre, Australia

Part 1

by *Divish Petrof*

After 27 years of physically decoupling in 1996 with the Lismore Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) and the heart-warming work its members were engaged in I with fondness look back to those times. I became introduced to this grassroots organisation of environmental activists in 1987 when I received an invitation from RIC's founder John Seed. That was a few months after returning from Sarawak on the Malaysian island of Borneo where I visited the rainforest dwelling Penan people in the Ulu Limbang and Ulu Tutoh region ("ulu" in Malaysian means "the upper reaches of a river", the two rivers being the Limbang and the Tutoh). I was on a fact-finding holiday from my botany lab work at the University, inspired by a report from Roger Graff of Switzerland. Roger was at that time supporting the work of his fellow countryman Bruno Manser who was, without the permission of Malaysian authorities, living with the nomadic Penan and sponsoring their objections to the ongoing and intense logging in their customary homeland. To provide the necessary background I will only state that the area had for some time been subject to intense logging by a number of lumber companies, financed by Japanese capital and politically sponsored by morally corrupt Malaysian politicians who were the power brokers responsible for issuing licences to logging contractors. The entire scenario thus comprised two inseparable issues. The environmental side was the destruction of old-growth tropical rainforest. The social side was the dispossession of a native people who were being denied rights to any type of control over their customary economy base.

When I returned from my eye-opening trip to Sarawak I wrote a brief information report about the field situation there and sent it out to a number of Australian environment protection groups, such as Friends of the Earth and The Wilderness Society, as well as the RIC. One day a man called me over the phone, introduced himself as John Seed, and explained that he worked for a community-based organisation that works for the protection of world rainforests. He suggested we meet and see what can be done to stop the demolition of the Penan rainforest environment, something that had been already going on for a number of years and was showing no signs of abatement. At that time I lived in Brisbane, so very soon after receiving the invitation I got on a McCafferty's bus to Lismore, a three hour trip of some 200 km.

It was not difficult to find the RIC in the tucked-away Wotherspoon Street in this small city of 20,000. It consisted of two houses, one residential and the other one office and workshop space. In between these two Queenslander-style timber houses on stilts was a smaller cottage inhabited by ethically like-minded associates.

On first meeting, John Seed struck me as someone thoroughly home-grown. Unassuming, yet intense communicator, and an eager listener. His manner was professional, friendly, and always to the point. He impressed me as a man thoroughly focussed on the calling of his heart. His simple and colourful rainbow-themed attire suggested to me a person not bound by conventions. His overall strategy seemed to be based on the idea of disseminating vital information the mainstream media would never of its own provide. His suggestion at our meeting was simple: to run an ad in a popular newspaper, such the Daily Telegraph, informing the public of the field facts and its consequences. An ad that would inspire to action - for the Sarawak rainforest and its traditional inhabitants. He said

the ad would cost considerable amount of money that was not readily available but could be done providing there were sufficient donations towards the cause. I personally had no experience with that side of environmental activism and don't know how or if this project actually got off the ground. Nonetheless, this initial visit to the RIC was to be the beginning of my association with the RIC for the following 9 years.

The next year, 1988, while protesting the limestone cave destruction at Mt. Etna, near Rockhampton in Queensland, I met people who said they were "from RIC". In particular, I remember the energetic Penny, who coordinated the initial cave occupation activity. The following year, under unforeseen circumstances, I relocated to the Nimbin area, and once or twice a fortnight started commuting on the school bus the odd 36 km to Lismore for essential business. On one of those trips on impulse I called in at RIC. John Seed was not there, apparently campaigning on the road, but I was welcomed by a young man who introduced himself as Rosco, and by his friend Belinda. I felt encouraged by Rosco's and Belinda's friendliness and so every time I was in town I would call in to see them. Through them I then met other RIC activists and associates: Cedar, Glyn, Jeffrey Vision, Phill, Mara, Jazz, and in time over the years directly or indirectly dozens or even hundreds of kindred souls.

One evening I returned to the RIC residential house to find a group of half a dozen of people discussing the current conservation issue: the logging of old growth forests in south-east Australia. It was decided a group of activists was to leave that night.

"Are you coming along with us?" asked Rosco as if already knowing the answer.

All out of nowhere I was invited to join in forest action. This was an unexpected development for me but since I had no other commitments I decided to come. We travelled in Cedar's older van, who also was the driver. Beside myself there were three other passengers: Belinda, Rosco and Jazz. There was not much talk about what we would be doing once we got to the protest site apart from the general understanding the protest would be a home-grown civil disobedience action. After briefly parting our ways in Sydney, where I wanted to visit my brother who at that time worked at the Demeter Bakery in Glebe, our little group met up again at the Down-to-Earth Festival in Victoria. From there I hitched across the Great Divide to Bairnsdale and then on to the protesters' camp in South East Forests. Rosco, Belinda, Cedar and Glynn the Viking from the RIC were already there, as well as a close associate by the name Bullfrog. The place was well set up on a Melbourne supporter's land, surrounded by forests and with virtually no immediate neighbours. Many people from both Victoria and NSW arrived for a shorter or longer stay and we all met regularly at the large marquee the early arrivals had set up. On the common side was attached a camp kitchen. All this was self-funded and required volunteer work for ongoing functioning. The information tent displayed maps and latest news. There was no electricity on site and no phone connection, so all news had to come from people visiting the closest town, Orbost.

During the day some people would go scouting the area and the close-by logging site. Although it was the 1989/1990 Christmas/New Year's break we were surprised there was forest workers presence. We decided on a course of action that consisted of a group of some twenty or thirty of us entering the logging area and blocking the logging activities. We first assembled on the access road, unrolled our banners, got our bongo drums and guitars ready and marched in. While a support group stayed on the ground, a few of us climbed into trees. There was singing and chanting in a generally fired-up mood but no coarse language. The loggers were present and soon the police also

arrived. The police informed us that we were trespassing and were instructed to leave or be arrested. A few of us who were in the trees or occupying the machinery refused to do so and were subsequently taken to custody. Machines were used to lower people down from higher elevations in trees. Our arrested group of about half a dozen people were driven the odd 100 km in a police van to Orbost and immediately taken to court. Those who agreed not to return to the protest site had their charges against them dropped and were let go but the four or five of us who refused were put back in the police van and that same evening driven to Melbourne's Pentridge Gaol.