

Remembering the Rainforest Information Centre, Australia

Part 2

by *Divish Petrof*

Melbourne (1990)

Our arrested group of protesters was the first batch of arrests made by law enforcement agents in South-East Forests, Gippsland, Victoria. Ours was a pre-planned action. As individuals, we volunteered to be taken to custody without offering resistance to the authorities. Such non-violent behaviour is the epitome of civil disobedience, a political course of action most famously pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi during the India independence campaign. It's a type of resistance to the established order of things. Before we decided to be arrested we were aware that a support legal team was on the stand-by and that we would not be abandoned to the machinations of the law state.

Our group of arrestees comprised two females and four males. One of the men was an unassuming bard type of a character, with a bushy beard and longish hair. He kept a journal where he recorded and evaluated his experiences and perceptions in a poetic, mystical, and matter-of-factly style of expression. He was the oldest of us, I guess around fifty. The other two men were closer to me in age, being in their mid to late twenties. Cameron was a taxi driver and a serious guy who lived in Melbourne and Simon was a one-time student of medicine who also lived in Melbourne, knew Chinese, and was into athletics and art.

Our little coterie of males was separated and housed in different cells but we saw each other every day in the exercise yard. Throughout my stay in jail I wore a green sloppy joe home-stencilled with the words "No Boss". The only response from my fellow prisoners to this silent graphic message I remember receiving was a blank stare. I had no complaints about the jail administration treatment of us and food, but the infection in the top of my feet was starting to worry me. While walking barefoot in the bush around the protesters' camp some seemingly innocuous skin surface scratches became infected and with no attention given them subsequently developed into ulcers. Ironically, this potentially dangerous inconvenience provided me the welcome respite of being every day taken to the jail clinic for a change of dressing, which was performed by most friendly medical staff.

A Glance Further Back

At this stage of my recollections I want to provide some background context I believe is relevant to my recollections of journeying with the nature protection movement. Three previous events in particular stand out in my mind.

Meeting a Japanese reporter and the makers of "*Blowpipes and Bulldozers*" (1987)

In January 1987, while staying in the small tropical town of Marudi built on the eastern bank of the sprawling River Baram in Sarawak, I utterly by chance met two Australian rainforest activists and, independently, a female Japanese reporter. One day in the foyer of my hotel I incidentally passed an unusually looking guest – a slender, bespectacled woman. We struck up a conversation during which I learned she was the South-East Asia environmental correspondent with the Japanese newspaper

Asahi Shimbun. She introduced herself as Yayori Matsui and said she was there to research and report on how logging of the jungle is effecting the native peoples' lives upriver, and in particular the Penan. Most of the Penan rainforest dwelling communities, unlike other native peoples' such as the Kenya and the Kayan, were still to a very large extent dependent for the provision of their staples on timeless nomadic economy practices. Their subsistence economy included the hunting of the wild boar and monkeys, the preparation of starch meal from the pith of the sago palm, and the weaving of baskets and mats from specially processed stems of the rattan vine for both own use and trade.

One other day in Marudi I was having a mid-day meal in a small home-run Malaysian restaurant, when to my unbelieving eyes two white men walked in. Without much ceremony they came up to me and introduced themselves:

"I am Paul Tait"

and

"I am Andy Frame".

It turned out the two adventurers were activists associated with the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) in Lismore and have just recently arrived in Sarawak in order to make a movie about the logging and the many facets of its shocking impact on the rainforest dwelling people, the watercourses and the forest ecology. Their documentary was entirely self-funded and was soon afterwards released as "*Blowpipes and Bulldozers*". Their short but intense adventurous journey included meeting up with the rainforest-dwelling Swiss environmentalist Bruno Manser, and smuggling their video cassettes through Malaysian customs.

Mount Etna limestone mining protest, Queensland (1988)

Several kilometres north of the city of Rockhampton in Queensland is a unique geological formation of Mount Etna. It is a big and majestic looking limestone hill covered in native bushland and dotted with innumerable caves. Some of these caves are only shallow cavities in the face of the hill but others go down into the mount's interior for tens and sometimes hundreds of metres. The local speleological society identified at least one location in the hill that deserved immediate protection from mining.

The conflict of interest was in the fact that a large Rockhampton cement-making company had an operating mine for the extraction of limestone at the foothills of Mount Etna, and was carving out rock from a good one third area of the mount's face. So it happened that, after fruitless negotiations, a local speleologist and businessman by the name of Craig Hardy, with the support of the local speleological society members and Rockhampton Environment Centre, initiated a direct action protest. At immediate stake was a new cave accidentally uncovered by blasting and because of its spectacular formations dubbed Crystal Cave. This was discovered through surreptitious night scouting by the local speleologists conducted in an effort to more closely monitor the effects of mining. The mining company, however, was bent on going on with their work and they eventually destroyed this geological gemstone.

Back in Brisbane, my friend Bernadette one day told me about the forthcoming direct action at Mount Etna, and was enthusiastic to take part. The Brisbane Wilderness Society was organising a minibus for protesters to take them to the protest base camp and I, alongside with half a dozen of other Brisbane activists, decided to go. The base-camp was set up in the paddock of a concerned

local family just out of Rockhampton, and not far from the Mount. When we arrived, there were already a few tents, a central fire pit, and a dozen of activists at the camp site. A swimming hole, and the family farmhouse for matters of emergency, were nearby. At that time, in 1988, there were no mobile phones.

The first activists meeting was facilitated by Penny, a young woman associated with the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) in Lismore, northern New South Wales. At that meeting it was decided that a few volunteers would be driven out and then, on their own, they would track out that night in an unfamiliar environment up the hill, find a cave, and occupy it. A seemingly crazy idea: find a cave in an unknown terrain, in the dark, and this without flashing a torch so as to avoid being spotted by mine security. But we actually did it. A media release then followed next day, advising the mining company of human presence in the vicinity of their operations and thus effectively stopping them from doing any blasting.

In the few weeks I spent at Mount Etna I met many protesters from various parts of Queensland and New South Wales, many of whom were in some way connected with the RIC. A RIC delegation led by John Seed showed up on the night of a meeting between the Mount Etna protection action group representatives, the media (including an ABC News crew), and Mount Etna activists. The meeting was held in a spacious cave illuminated by fire-lit torches and consisted of us presenting arguments and reasons why limestone mining on the mount should cease. For example, the livelihood of at least one local farming family was severely affected because the continued mining excavations have resulted in a drastic lowering of the water table. The mining critically impacted the quality and the very viability of agricultural activity in the mine's vicinity. I had an opportunity to listen to the farmer one day in the paddock. The paddock ground level was now drastically above the level of the adjacent mine's ground water collection pond.

On my forays on Mount Etna I could not help but notice the unusual native vegetation covering the hill. Growing on what was essentially a humus-poor limestone substrate, glossy-leaved tree species established themselves to form, together with shrubbery understory, a unique forest environment. To my knowledge, there was no comparable ecosystem remaining in Mount Etna's vicinity, not even in the adjoining, already established, Mount Etna Caves National Park. This piece of a natural and geological gemstone, the Mount, was literally and unbelievably dotted by scores of known and other, concealed and still to be discovered, caves. The limestone formations were quite unique in the whole of Australia but were not widely known or acknowledged as such by the ruling environmental narrative.

The Mount Etna protection campaign confronted disrespect and disregard towards things of nature, this being a defining pathological feature of our society. Unless a thing of nature is embellished in political dogma to justify their protection or just ongoing existence, the callousness of the pseudo-rational human mind takes the lead. The rationality I can see in this particular scenario equates plain corporate greed and worse still, refusal by the masses in general to emphatically acknowledge nature values without compromise, unconditionally. This unfortunately did not happen after the field protests finished and the environmental bureaucracy betrayed the Mount.

There were scores of people I met or made acquaintance of in the course of the couple of months I participated in the campaign. A few faces, some with names attached, are still in my mind. In particular, I remember a local speleologist whose name I believe was Andrew. One day he took a

group of us outsider activists on a tour of some caves in the neighbouring Mount Etna National Park. The tour included some very useful basic training in abseiling skills. I regarded with awe the stamina and determination this unassuming man possessed despite the serious congenital limitations of the use of his upper limbs effected by thalidomide damage. Another memorable person was Rosemary from the Rockhampton Environmental Centre. She facilitated communication among participating parties and lead the ABC News crew to our secret rendezvous. There were also three young male anarchists from Melbourne who occupied a particularly deep cave for a couple of weeks, living on lentils. Another interesting, engaging and inspiring individual was Peter. I met him before at an eco-politics conference in Hobart and to the Mount Etna protest he brought along his mother. His project, as I understood it, was to go around the country with his van and making educational public presentations on sustainable living. The last person I want to mention was a young Swiss woman by the name Nadia. Earlier that year she illegally entered into Sarawak and spent some time with the Penan and her compatriot humanitarian and environmental activist Bruno Manser. And here she was, safe and sound, supporting yet another heart-call action.

I have no photos from the protest campaign and am below attaching a couple of pictures dating from pre-protest times, with thanks to Warwick Willmott. The article *Mount Etna: Queensland's longest environmental conflict* by Carol Gistitin (2010) details further context.



Above: Google Maps satellite perspective showing Mount Etna in upper centre, with the limestone quarry on its NE face

The Rainforest Benefit in Brisbane (1989)

Early in 1989 I learned that Bruno Manser has successfully evaded being detained by Malaysian authorities and left Sarawak. He returned to his home country Switzerland and continued to organise resistance to the destruction of the Penan People's inalienable rainforest homelands. He also travelled and campaigned outside of Switzerland, with one of his call-to-action protest stunts being descending with a glider onto the lawns of the Malaysian prime minister Mahathir.

My acquaintances Len and Anna-Lise, who constituted the core of the Brisbane Rainforest Action Group (BRAG), were keen to take on the idea proposed by the Lismore RIC and organise a fundraising benefit for the rainforest campaign. We home designed, at the University of Queensland Student Union facilities screen-printed, and then distributed advertising posters for the event. Bernadette's friend Tony Kneipp and his band *Trash of All Nations* agreed to donate their time and art and perform onstage.

The Rainforest Benefit was held at the Migrant Resource Centre in West End, with around a hundred people present in the small venue. The RIC contingent arrived in a van, with John Seed and Penny bringing Bruno Manser. Bruno, after surviving a poisonous snake bite while in the jungle, radiated contained vigour. Apart from the benefits of raising the public's awareness of the struggle to halt the destruction of rainforests not just in Sarawak but in so many other countries in the world, our fundraiser achieved another important outcome. It brought together two distinct niches of political concerns – rainforest activists and urban anarchists. The third element present at the benefit function were concerned members of the community, and even one or two university academics. We listened to talks by John Seed and Bruno Manser, and appreciated the heart-felt entertainment provided by John Seed's band *The Wallies* and Tony's *Trash of All Nations*.