

Remembering the Rainforest Information Centre, part 4

by *Divish Petrof*

Returning to Lismore, New South Wales, after being away for over four months, feels like a balm. An activist I only just met took me on his motorbike from Melbourne to Albury, and then it was hitch and hike, and eventually catching a coach to town. Lismore welcomes me with glorious autumn weather, soothing and refreshingly warmth, and the familiarity of the RIC compound. There are new residential people there, as well as the familiar faces of Rossco and Belinda, with both Glenn Fenton aka Viking and Cedar aka Harry being around at times. The new faces are Joanne Walsh, with her one-year-old son, John Kanowski, Mara (spelling?), and Gabrielle with her little son.

Frazer Island, Qld.

At RIC I am provided with a room to stay in between my trips to my bush place a few kilometres out of Nimbin, where I live in a forest hut on Jenny Love's property. I am just beginning to settle into my hybrid bush existence when I am surprised by an unexpected visit. As I look up the driveway track, I see three people making their way down to the house. With alarm and curiosity I wonder who on earth they might be, and what their mission is. My surprise soon turns into a grin of recognition. All three newcomers are hailing from Melbourne RAG. They have just arrived, left their vehicle up top of the hill, and came to kidnap me to take me with them to Frazer Island. I protest:

"I can't. The neighbour is threatening to have my unregistered van towed away. He claims it is a traffic hazard because it's obstructing the view from his driveway. So forget Frazer for now. I have to do something about this first."

"What's the problem?" says Paul.

"The car doesn't start. I have to clutch start it. And the brakes are shot. The cylinders leak brake fluid."

To my anxious mind this looks like both a serious situation, and a major fix-up job. But not to two of my visitors. They look at me with a mix of puzzled amusement. The slender guy is a trained mechanic. He assures me all that's needed is a car jack, emery paper, spanners, and elbow grease. I luckily have them all. We got to work, with Paul the mechanic guiding the process. It is a rather messy job but we are eventually able to relocate the vehicle to a new and hopefully less offending position than where it was before. Feeling rather relieved with the outcome, and with no other excuse, I gladly pick up my swag and off we go to Frazer Island.

Paul is a young chap I first met at Friends of the Earth in Melbourne. The more solidly built Danny is one of the residents at Cameron's place where I stayed for a few months after being let out of Pentridge Gaol. The third companion is a young Canadian woman activist whose name I can't recall.

We drive all night. In the morning we park the car securely and board a ferry across to the island. [Frazer Island](#) is a huge sand island mostly covered by magnificent native forests of a number of different types, including rainforest, and old growth eucalyptus and Kauri pine forests. In 1992, two years after the anti-logging protests I was about to take part in, it won protection and was placed on the UNESCO's World Heritage Site list.

When we land on the island, the ferry drops us off literally on the edge of wilderness. All there is a small timber jetty and a 4W drive track leading into the interior. There are no buildings, no signposts, no phone booth, no ferry-service timetable. Nothing. It feels like stepping onto the threshold of another world, infinitely rich in its own primal ways, and free from the constraints of ubiquitous compulsive labelling.

My companions are under the impression someone is coming or already waiting to collect us and take us to the camp, which is on the other, eastern side of the island. But there is no one. We walk a short distance along the track into the bush and, partially concealed, wait there for an hour or two, in case our guides are late. We are considering our options but do not feel comfortable risking walking any further as we understand logging trucks are at large and in the past their drivers apparently behaved unfriendly towards suspected protesters. As midday turns into afternoon we figure out if we are to get to the camp today we should set out regardless of the risks of unfriendly encounters. So after a snack of dried fruit we do. We have estimated that, in order to traverse the island to its eastern shore where the camp is presumably located, a straight-line distance of about 20 km, we should get there before nightfall.

After about an hour's hike, with ears pricked to detect any motor sounds and ready to quickly take cover in the bushes, we become alarmed at the distant sound of human voices. After cautiously investigating their source and the tone of the voices, we realize that we have unwittingly come upon a forward activists' bush scouting party. There is a mixture of laughter and joy at this unexpected godsent encounter, especially when we recognise familiar faces. I am delighted to see in the party my friend Simon Rosengarten from Melbourne RAG. In this meeting place we are surrounded by a magnificent tall forest of kauri pine. Its lofty canopy creates an ambience reminiscent of the interior space of a medieval cathedral. The forward scouts take the lead and bring us to the camp, which is another hour's walk in the easterly direction. The camp is set up right next to the beach. On our track across the island I am surprised that we do not encounter any logging personnel or hear the sound of machinery. Once in the camp, we experience another delightful reunion with fellow activists, this time people from Lismore's RIC, and elsewhere. The familiar welcoming faces of Roscco, Belinda, and Viking are present. With our arrival counted, there would now be all-up between one and two dozen forest protectors.

Unbeknown to us, we have actually arrived a day or two before an important PR exercise is to take place. Soon a few more activists arrived with John Seed. We congregate on the beach for the occasion. Overall, it is a rather impromptu and quickly set up media exposure event. There are no long speeches, only a few interviews with some present. John Seed plays his guitar and sings, and the rest of us join in the best we can in providing acoustic and emotional backing. Some of us then walk a couple of miles further up the beach to - I believe - the only store and post office on the island. The idea is not as much to do shopping or preach to the community but rather to present ourselves as a good-will mob.

I stay perhaps a week in the camp before returning to northern NSW with a couple of other fellow activists, hitching a ride with **Ian Cohen**. Ian is a veteran Green Peace nuclear ships protester and later became the first Greens member of the NSW parliament.

Back to my Bioregional Home

Once back I set out to continue with my hybrid bush and Lismore RIC existence. I divide my time every week between a few days at RIC and a few days at Jenny Love's, where I am building a simple hut structure on stilts. It has a dome-shaped roof, a Penan-style fireplace in one corner, a ground-level access in one corner,

as well as a central ladder access. It is built from bush, reclaimed and recycled materials. Jenny comments it looks like a yurt, with smoke rising from the roof centre opening.

While at RIC I am provided with a private place to sleep, which is either in a caravan, one of the sun rooms, or the newly being developed downstairs dormitory-type space. RIC management makes it possible for visiting or itinerant activists to stay in the compound on a house-sharing basis so long as they contribute to work in the office, maintenance of the communal garden, the merchandise workshop activities, fundraising efforts, building renovations, or tree planting. It is also okay for individuals to work on specific projects of their own or shared conception. The operational situation I venture to describe as *mutual aid, shared responsibility, co-operative self-management, and sovereign citizenship*.

Upon returning from Frazer Island, and over the following four or five years, I remember, in the course of my involvement with RIC, making acquaintance of quite a few fellow activists, and some names and faces of people who worked at, resided at, or visited Lismore RIC.

The Lismore RIC People I Particularly Remember (1990-1996)

Over my years with RIC, **John Revington** is a constant yet almost unnoticeable presence. His role in the rainforest protection movement is unique, working tirelessly as the inveterate editor, coordinator and writer for [The World Rainforest Report](#) *, the periodic publication of Lismore's RIC. He commutes to Lismore from The Channon area, a distance of over 35 km, and over the years I see him working away at the desktop on a more or less daily basis.

The office is located on the second, split-level, floor of the RIC building proper, and consists of two desktop computers at the far end of a skinny sunroom space, a couple of large filing cabinets, and a solid low workbench under the windows along one wall. From there, two steps up, we enter the kitchen space. A home-crafted table with two matching bench seats dominate this space. Behind it, filling one corner of the room from floor to the ceiling, is a home-crafted shelving structure for storage. The room set is completed on the right by a kitchen bench running along the room's longest wall. Standing at the kitchen bench, one can savour the natural views of a section of the RIC compound's courtyard. The kitchen has a bar fridge, hot water cattle, coffee and tea, a stove, and a telephone with a calls' log book.

The 'kitchen room' has four doorways, two of which with doors. The house's back entrance door is right at one end of the kitchen bench – the other end butts into the other closed corner of the room. The second door leads to a comfortable bathroom with a toilet, shower, and bathtub. The open doorway opposite the back exit opens to the central space of this floor. It's where meetings take place. It features the RIC library, with book shelving covering one-half of one of the longer walls. There are cushions and beanbags to welcome you.

Another open doorway, opposite to the one we've just entered through, takes us to the south-facing sunroom, thus completing this floor's plan. This sunroom is narrow, and about the same size as the one with computers. It runs along the full length of the lane-side wall, and features a row of classic Australian louvre windows. The windows offer an immediate view of this far end of Wotherspoon Street, and of Pritchard Park on the other side of it. The park is of a medium size, but despite the couple of swings close to the street side, there are very few visitors. There are a couple of huge native fig trees by the street side, with most of the remaining area open post-colonial grassland. The bank of the Wilsons River, which forms the far east and

south sides of the park area, is lined with a hotch-potch of subtropical forest regrowth, including both native and introduced species.

In my time, in the early 90s in Lismore, Pritchard Park became another site of significance for RIC activists. A tall young fellow of Aboriginal - I believe Bunjalung - descent, **Phil Murray** from Dunoon, **Glenn Fenton aka Viking**, as well as others from RIC, initiated and maintained a rainforest regeneration project in the park. The park had a sizeable open grass area – I am guessing at around 1 acre – which was being progressively replanted over a period of a few years with suitable indigenous tree species, including food-producing trees. Dozens, if not hundreds, trees and shrubs were planted. Most if not all of them originated from the small nursery Phil and Viking started and maintained on the western side of the residential house by the rainwater tank. The seedlings were raised in recycled containers, such as 1L tetrapacks. These were kept on the ground and shaded by existing overhanging shrubs. Once planted out in Pritchard Park, they were being looked after, mulched and watered, while getting established.

Back to the RIC office building. From the backyard, ascending a few steps, we enter its first floor, which is the level below the office space above. It is still elevated, about 1 ½ metres (5 feet) above the actual ground. The space we enter is one large room which houses RIC's merchandize workshop. It is run by **Brenda**, who coordinates both the production and marketing side of RIC's fundraising activities. Here, in the kinship tradition of the GreenPeace Rainbow Warrior, rainbow-themed scarves, hats, T-shirts etc. are dyed and stored. The year is early 1990s, so the rainbow motif has a meaning fundamentally different from the mainstream political symbology of 2020s. Brenda organises regular market stalls, including the unforgettable iconic ones at The Channon. She has enthusiastic co-workers in **Joanne Walsh** and **Mara**. Apart from this job, Joanne, a young mother, does RIC's accounting.

The RIC office building block has a caravan at the back of its backyard, beyond which is located the now luxuriating rainforest plantings block. In this visionary project of John Seed, a variety of rainforest trees have been - over the course of some years - planted out on this previously vacant house block of regular size. When I first saw the plot in 1990, the biggest plants were around one metre tall. When I was leaving Lismore in 1996, the trees have started to form a canopy well above a person's head. Visiting Lismore in 2022, I am shocked to see no sign of any trees having ever grown there. Flabbergasted, I conclude some seriously damaged individual must have authorized their destruction.

What I here call the RIC compound includes three buildings, one of which houses the office and workshop, another is the residential house, and in between sits an old cottage. All of them are of timber construction, with corrugated iron roofs. The cottage was at one time where **Bullfrog** lived, up until about the start of my involvement with RIC. Then it was the home of **Jeffrey aka Vision** and his lady companion and eventually, during my last year or two in Lismore, **Gabrielle** and her little son Kikoa lived there. The remarkable feature of the cottage was a small frog pond beside it, set in a mini-rainforest cluster of vegetation. It was here I experienced another shock during my 2022 visit, to see this for me iconic cottage collapsed onto one side. Thus, due to the effects of the recent floods, it became inhabitable.

What I remember as the central feature of the RIC compound was The Circle Garden. This project, I am under the impression, was initiated by **Francesca**. I met Francesca only briefly but did not fail to be impressed by her no-nonsense down-to-earth energy. In view of her daring participation in the nude in a legendary Lismore protest march I think of her as an eclectic and forceful revolutionary. This particular protest march happened before my time at RIC.

The Circle Garden was an important focus for RIC personnel. As I see it now in my memory, it has at its centre a clump of banana stems. From there, like spokes in a wheel, radiate paths, which are in turn crossed by one or two rows of concentric paths. The cultivation methods used are manual and organic, incorporating the principles of permaculture and companion planting.

The residential house is located in the westernmost side of the compound. Just like the office building, it too has a caravan parked in its leafy backyard. The house is a hub where we relax, cook and eat meals, meet new people, swap news, and share knowledge, experiences, ideas and plans. Here new developments are debated and plans developed for actions. There is the yarn time by the wood stove, sitting around the lounge on cushions with our backs resting against the walls.

There are new visitors at RIC every week. Many just call in for a brief visit, others stay overnight or a few days, and some stay for weeks or months.

Anja Light, joined the RIC after meeting John in 1986 and was part of a team putting together the 'GOOD WOOD guide' especially in response to the fastest rate of tropical forest logging in the world that was happening in Sarawak, Malaysia, at the time. The GWG was conceived as one avenue in the multi-prong strategy to protect old growth forests and world rainforests. It was addressed to both makers and consumers of timber products, including local councils, builders, and timber and timber product traders. The aim was to raise awareness in the community about the origins of the various timbers on the market, and the implications of consumers unwittingly supporting essentially self-destructive economy practices. By offering more environmentally sustainable alternatives, the GWG would hopefully change consumer behaviours and contribute to soft-boycotting rainforest timber trade. RIC had the facilities and culture to enable and support Anja's work, such as liaising with councils and concerned parties, and eventually resulting in the guide production.

John Seed had renovation plans for the residential house and the right man for the job just happened to be there. **John Kanowski**, in addition to being a veteran Penan supporter who visited their Sarawak homeland a few years prior to his arrival at RIC, proved to be a skilful carpenter. He rebuilt the attic, making it into a nice room for Joanne the accountant and her son Jarrah. He then proceeded to construct an extension to the first floor living space by adding a veranda on the eastern and northern aspects of the house. Later on, he built-in the underhouse space, creating a spacious dormitory. Concurrently with his building activities, John K. also began to study environmental science by distance at James Cook University.

Unless they had specific projects to work on, longer time residents and visitors alike would put in their time at the office, mostly by answering letters and enquiries from the public, sending out information, and working on mail-outs of the World Rainforest Report. In this connection I recall four people from MRAG, three of whom I met under different circumstances earlier. **Lisa** participated in the duck rescue action of 1990 in Victoria. **Becky aka Spider** was at the Mt Etna blockade in 1988, and **Tanya** participated in the Brisbane rainforest timbers ship blockade action in 1990 (or 1991?). **Sabine** came to RIC and stayed for a few months. In the early 1990s, a tall guy by the name **Rob Kennedy** came up from Tasmania to take part in RIC's work. Quiet and dedicated, he stayed with us for at least one year, spending much time at the office, and, among other things, sorting out computer glitches and educating people about their use. While she did not stay at the compound, one person I vividly recall visiting the office at times, a friend of John Seed, was **Carol Sherman**. Carol impressed me as a critical actor in a campaign to protect local communities in a rural region in India against the ravages of unbridled capitalist development, namely the construction of a hydroelectric

dam that would inundate huge tracks of agricultural land.

Visitors from Overseas

What was initially shaping up to be a significant development in my bioregion for the Sarawak's rainforests campaign unfortunately turned out rather lacklustre. Sydney RAG (SRAG) brought over from Sarawak a native activist. He belonged to a settled Dayak** group distinct from the Penan. For this occasion RIC organised for him a public appearance at Lismore's Southern Cross University. On the day of the event, there was a medium-sized audience waiting in the auditorium only to be informed there would be a delay due to transportation issues. The **Dayak ambassador** was accompanied by **Alex** (female) from SRAG. When, after one or two hours' wait, they finally arrived, we were told the arrivals were too tired and exhausted from the trip to even show up, much the less make a presentation.

Apart from the Dayak ambassador I remember four other overseas visitors to RIC. **Jake Kreilick** hailed from Canada and stayed at RIC for a few months. A strong-looking and assertive wildlife protection activist, he was also a football enthusiast and took part in training with the local lads in Lismore. It was a shock to see him one day with his leg in plaster. During a training session or game of rugby, he suffered a serious injury to one knee, resulting in a shattered patella, which he had subsequently surgically removed.

Gehrlinda (spelling?) was a German environmental activist of a noble heart who came over from the United States, where she had spent a considerable length of time, and stayed at RIC for a few months. Beside her, I remember **two other visitors from Germany**, but not their names, both young men. They came independently of one another, one from what was only until recently East Germany, the other from West Germany. The latter fellow I remember for a story he once told me about living in a one-room hut in rural Germany during a fierce winter, surrounded by countryside covered in deep snow.

All the events and people I have written about in this section refer to the years of 1990 to 1996. In the next instalment, I want to cover the projects and actions I took part in in that period of time. In 1996, the year I left Lismore, RIC had already relocated to other premises, located in a building across the road from the Lismore Shopping Centre.

Notes:

**61 issues of The World Rainforest Report were published between 1984 and 2004, averaging 3 every year.*

***Dayak is a generic name used to collectively refer to all and any one of the many and diverse indigenous peoples of Borneo.*