

Wild Politics: A vision for the next 40,000 years

by Susan Hawthorne

I have in mind a “wild politics,” a vision which I hope could be sustained for at least the next 40,000 years. This idea comes from a talk originally given in Australia by Lilla Watson in 1984 on “Aboriginal Women and Feminism.” Watson commented that to Aboriginal people in Australia, the future extends as far forward as the past. In that case, she said, we have a 40,000-year plan.

In a similar vein, the Kari-Oca Declaration and the Indigenous Peoples’ Earth Charter begins with the following statement in its preamble: “We, the Indigenous Peoples, walk to the future in the footprints of our ancestors” (in Posey and Dutfield 1996: 189).¹ Wild politics is the view that diversity is central to the existence of life, to the sustenance of the planet, and to the health of human society.

I attempt to outline some principles which will assist humanity to continue to live with biodiversity. Some cultures around the world already live by these principles; some individuals are fighting to make people more aware of the possibilities; and some groups are beginning to move in the direction of wild politics (Bennholdt-Thomsen, et.al. 2001). Where we are now is at the other end of the continuum, dominated by techno-global corporatisation.

Central to this book is the concept and practice of biodiversity. Marimba Ani (2000) in her discussion of western culture says its inspiration comes from domination. I extend her analysis to name profit as the inspiration for globalisation. My proposal is to signal a culture whose inspiration is biodiversity.

I choose biodiversity over diversity because “diversity” can easily be



Kari-Oca Declaration and the Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter

The Kari-Oca Declaration and the Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter were signed only by indigenous people themselves in 1992. It broadly asserts indigenous peoples' rights to their land and traditions, and their commitment to protect the resources under their control for future generations.

Source: http://multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1992a/07/mm0792_12.html

appropriated. It has already been appropriated by global companies as part of advertising programmes appealing addressed to young people. Biodiversity as inspiration, however, is not easily appropriated.² It “just is.”

When I say that biodiversity “just is,” what I mean is that an appreciation of biodiversity is integral in its philosophy; it does not exist (unlike shopping malls) for anyone’s profit. Biodiversity is art of the existence of life on Earth. It is people as much as anything else. We live in the midst of biodiversity, and if it goes, so will we. Certainly, under the current transnational profit regime, biodiversity is being appropriated through corporate biopiracy.

of “wild” as in National Park wilderness separated out from the real world because it might prove useful at a later time, or because it is nice to have a place to go to relax for those with the time and the means to get there. The wild type cannot be genetically modified, because when this happens it is no longer a wild type. Resistance to appropriation is important in developing a wild politics.

Below, I sketch ways in which the central themes of this book might be transformed were we live in a culture driven not by profit, universalisation, homogenisation, disconnection and utilitarianism, but by the wild politics, biodiversity, locatedness and knowledge of local conditions. This will necessarily entail epistemological multiversity, connection, and relationship.

Power, in a system where biodiversity is central, would be dispersed rather than concentrated. In order to promote biodiversity, one must recognise the importance of each player, no matter how small.

An appeal to biodiversity implies activity and participation as opposed to disconnected domination. I am thinking here of something like the difference between the “wild” in the sense of wild type on the one hand, and on the other

Power, in a system where biodiversity is central, would be dispersed rather than concentrated. In order to promote biodiversity, one must recognise the importance of each player, no matter how small. The micro-organisms in the soil have an enduring effect on the way in which plants grow. In a cultural setting, the consequences of decisions and actions on the powerless are the test of whether they are worth pursuing.

A dynamic stability in power relations can be reached, given time, and given the willingness to genuinely see the world through the eyes of others. Violence breeds violence, but understanding opens the world to creativity, to new ideas, and to practices that work. Participation and responsible decision making are important in gaining stability, without losing the dynamism of a living system. To make an analogy with ecosystems, the existing system rewards only the peak predators.

Knowledge is an ever-changing and developing system which encapsulates the experiences of generation after generation of people living in communities. Relationship is essential to the development of knowledge. Knowledge also arises in response to the environment. Indigenous peoples' knowledge is a distillation of a history of local conditions, careful observation

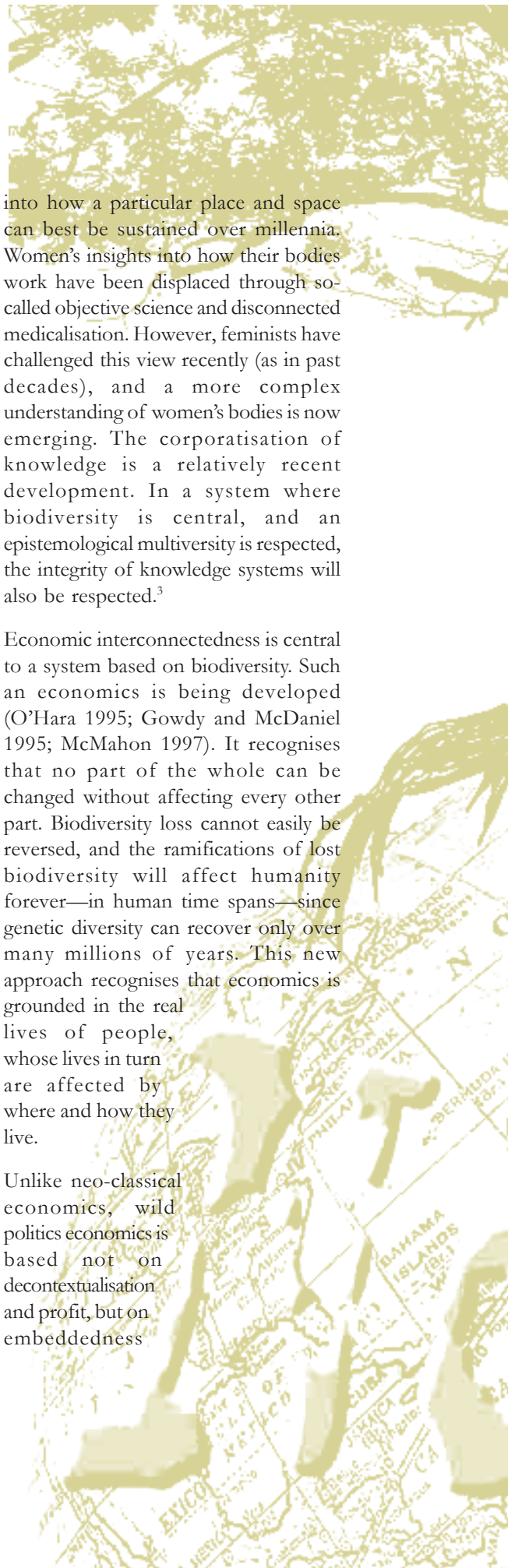
Unlike neo-classical economics, wild politics economics is based not on decontextualisation and profit, but on embeddedness and the sustaining of life. Under such a regime, export-driven economies with uncounted externalities would not exist.


framed, as with all knowledge, within a particular cultural tradition. As the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples makes clear, "Indigenous flora and fauna are inextricably bound to the territories of indigenous communities and any property right claims must recognise their traditional guardianship" (in Posey and Dutfield 1996: 207, Paragraph 2.6). Overriding such knowledge with an imposed, disconnected, and displaced system means losing valuable insights

into how a particular place and space can best be sustained over millennia. Women's insights into how their bodies work have been displaced through so-called objective science and disconnected medicalisation. However, feminists have challenged this view recently (as in past decades), and a more complex understanding of women's bodies is now emerging. The corporatisation of knowledge is a relatively recent development. In a system where biodiversity is central, and an epistemological multiversity is respected, the integrity of knowledge systems will also be respected.³

Economic interconnectedness is central to a system based on biodiversity. Such an economics is being developed (O'Hara 1995; Gowdy and McDaniel 1995; McMahan 1997). It recognises that no part of the whole can be changed without affecting every other part. Biodiversity loss cannot easily be reversed, and the ramifications of lost biodiversity will affect humanity forever—in human time spans—since genetic diversity can recover only over many millions of years. This new approach recognises that economics is grounded in the real lives of people, whose lives in turn are affected by where and how they live.

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A large, detailed illustration of a tree with a thick trunk and many branches, its roots spreading out over a map of the Americas. The map shows geographical features like the Amazon river and various countries. The tree is rendered in a dark, textured style, with its roots appearing to grow from the map's surface.

and the sustaining of life. Under such a regime, export-driven economies with uncounted externalities would not exist. This does not mean that trade would cease, but the profit of shareholders and companies in far-away countries would not be trade's main purpose. Trade may well cross international boundaries, ply the seas, and be airborne, but its purpose would be the sustenance of life, developing creativity and innovative systems for the survival of communities, cities and geographic regions. In addition, the cost of externalities such as habitat loss and pollution caused by transport would be factored into the cost of goods.

A system based on biodiversity is not simply a return to a rural paradise. Rather, it involves thinking creatively about the most productive (in a genuine sense) ways of giving everyone a chance at a fulfilling, not wastefully excessive, life. Creativity and happiness may be dependent on a full stomach—of nourishing food—but they are not dependent on profit.

Reconceptualising relationship with land is going to take a lot of deep thinking and reorganising. Land reform has been a slogan in many revolutionary movements for change, and land dispossession has accompanied colonisation and industrialisation in nearly all parts of the world. Land, as well as the water sources,⁴ the seas and the air, are the basis of our existence.

They are not commodities to be owned. Access to land, to

the produce and resources of land, is a common wealth of all of humanity, and of other living beings on the planet. The integrity of a rock's existence should also be taken into account. Biodiversity suggests that the rock is integral to the existence of the lichen, or the ant, or the lizard, or the woman sunning herself in the morning's warmth. Ownership of the enduring common heritage such as land and water is an act of decontextualised imagination and hubris. Our relationship to urban land is just as important as the ways in which we live in cities (Hynes 1996; Bennholdt-Thomsen 2001).

Work is an activity carried out initially to increase our chances of survival. The worm could be seen to be working as it aerates the soil. Human work could have the same result, which is to leave the world a richer place, a world with the possibility of sustaining itself for tens of thousands of years. Indeed, if we can make it through the next 40,000 years, the earth will be well placed to survive much longer. Cosmic accidents might occur, of course, but a profit-driven world would not fare any better.

Some theorists of work (Gorz 1999; Hyman 1993, 1999, 2001; Else 1996) have suggested that work could not only sustain itself over thousands of years, but could also leave the world a richer place if every person received an income. This income would not be dependent on any activity, but would be more than sufficient to maintain good health, and enable the person to participate in the society as equitably as

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anyone else. The world's gain would be immense if the billion or so people who currently devote all their efforts to physical survival were able to devote their time to creativity and inventiveness.⁵ Such systems of trust, because they generate goodwill, tend toward reciprocated trust and are less likely to be abused than systems that impose onerous conditions.⁶

Production is an outcome of work. If work were fulfilling and socially responsible, production too would follow in its wake. Making "biodiversity the logic of production" (Shiva 1993: 146) changes the nature of production. Export processing zones would be unthinkable. Inhuman wages and working conditions would be counterproductive. A multiversity of approaches to production would draw out all the creativity and inventiveness

of people. It would allow for growing food, trees, flowers and medicinal plants in ways that best suit their growth rather than in ways that best suit the markets or distribution systems. The latter dominate the existing system and does not consider consequences of actions on people's well-being. Biotechnology would not fill the spaces of previous technological failures; instead, self-sustaining systems could be developed. These are systems which contribute to the community rather than leading to poverty and starvation.

Consumption would be reduced. Not because consumption in and of itself is bad, but because its current level in the rich countries is not sustainable. Consumption could cease to be a need, cease to fill the gap displaced through a lack of meaning in a society driven by profit. Consumption would be transformed into a reciprocal process that allows individuals to grow physically or intellectually; it could assist in sustaining relationships. Goods produced purely for profit would not survive in this environment, although goods which enhance beauty, well-being and health might.

Trade would not cease, just as economics would continue. Its purpose, however, would be to move goods produced in one area, because of particular environmental, social or cultural conditions, to another, at a price that accurately reflects the inputs and incorporates external costs as part of the price. Trading accounts would continue to be kept, between nations, or communities or regions, but determined and conscious efforts would be made to minimise deficits and surpluses. Also, the system of accounts would include work currently rendered

invisible (subsistence, domestic, unpaid, caring work)

Maintaining the health of the whole is as important at the international level as it is at the local level.

Rules of trade, as they stand, would need to be overhauled and the language of equal access changed to reflect equitable outcomes. Global interdependence would grow, and social and cultural interaction could flourish with increased cross-cultural understanding.

These ideas for a wild politics are not a blueprint.⁷ They form the beginnings of an outline. The drawing will need to be developed and given colour by many people from diverse places and with a wonderful array of approaches.

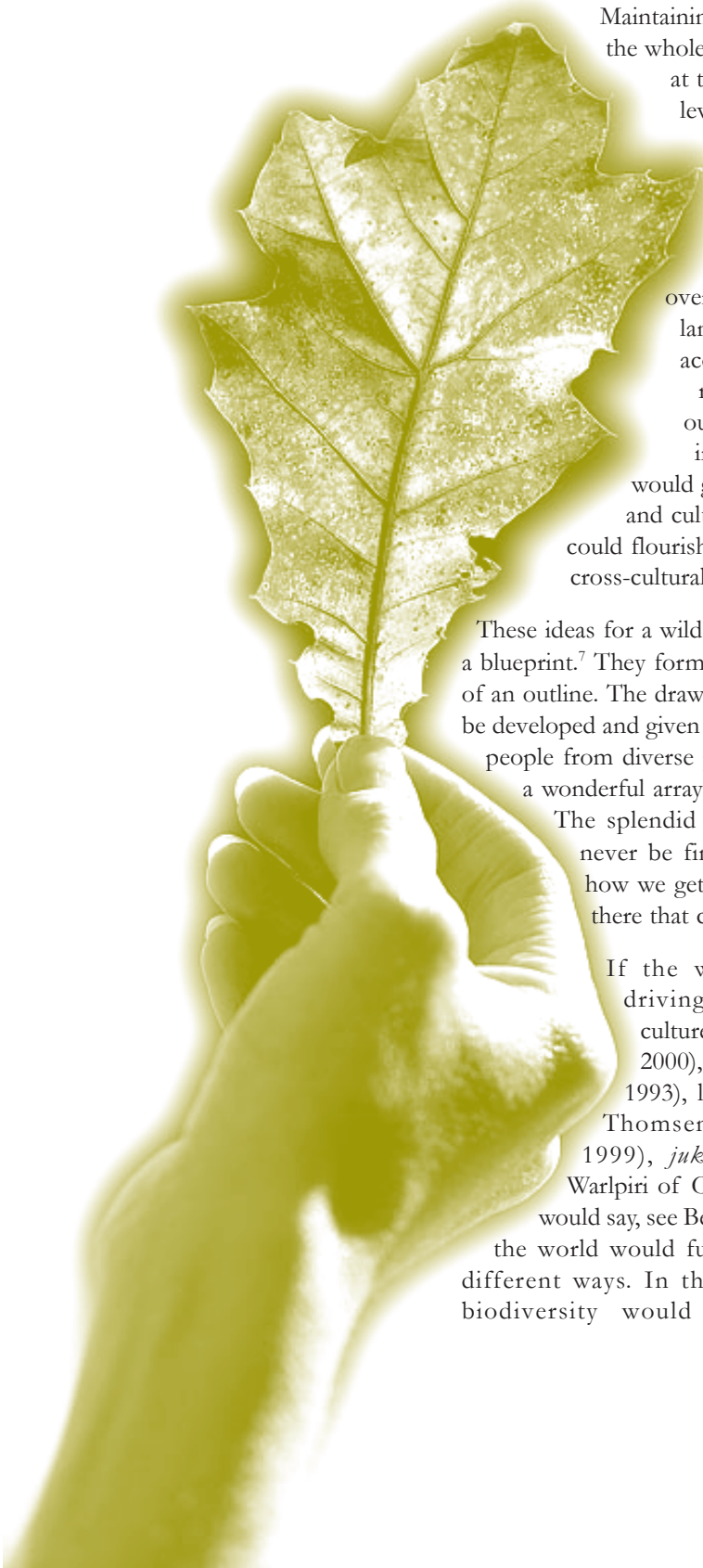
The splendid drawing might never be finished but it is how we get on the road to there that counts.

If the wild were the driving force of the culture, the *asili* (Ani, 2000), the seed (Shiva, 1993), life (Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Mies, 1999), *jukurpa* (as the Warlpiri of Central Australia would say, see Bell, 1983/ 2002), the world would function in very different ways. In this new world, biodiversity would become the

inspiration for the culture, the defining spirit, or what Ani calls *utamaro*. This spirit would result in very different behaviours and institutions, at both local and global levels, and the creation of a particular kind of thought, or *utamawazo*. It would result in a very different kind of relationship with the biophysical world, one that would make it difficult to destroy land by mining, bombing, industrial farming or commercial development, all of which are predicated on profit and disrespect. With a relationship of connection between people and the land, there would be great reluctance to do things solely for short-term profit, when the long-term consequences are destructive.

In a world of wild politics, it would be impossible to imagine terminator seeds, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), molecular colonisation, biotechnologies and reproductive technologies which violate women's bodies, since these would be perceived as deeply destructive. The vicious cycle of technological failure followed by business opportunity followed by yet another technological failure would be broken. These and other cycles of violence could be replaced by a system which focuses instead on life-oriented outcomes, on systems which are premised on a germinating matrix, *asili*, seed, wild type.

Within such a system, it would not be possible to separate out the wild as a place far removed from human life, and the eradication of cultural diversity would be unimaginable. Educational, health, commercial and artistic endeavours would flourish in an environment enriched by epistemological multiversity. In a world enlivened by wild politics, members of the diversity matrix are the hope for the



future. Within wild politics are new ways of thinking, and in this quest for new behaviour and institutions are also the seeds of a future which will hold dear wildness as a driving force.

What I hope for is a world filled with richness, texture, depth and meaning. I want diversity with all its surprises and variety. I want an epistemological multiversity which values the context and real-life experiences of people. I want a world in which relationships are important, and reciprocity is central to social interaction. I want a world which

can survive sustainably for at least 40,000 years. I want a wild kind of politics. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 In eleven appendices to their book, Posey and Dutfield (1966) reproduce important charters and declarations from UN and indigenous organisations regarding rights of indigenous peoples.
- 2 I note with sadness, however, that the World Bank is making appropriate moves on biodiversity. In 2001, I visited the World Bank headquarters in Washington. At the time of my visit, there was a huge display entitled “Biodiversity in the World Bank’s Work”. The display told of the many projects the World Bank is associated with in countries around the world. It stated that 226 projects had received \$US1 billion in the past ten years, as well as \$US1.2 billion in co-funding. Another interesting convergence was occurring in the foyer where four women were putting up a display of indigenous artefacts from around the world, entitled “Biodiversity and its Products.” These are just the latest means of drawing traditional and indigenous communities into the homogenising ambit of the World Bank and global capital. Note that women are used as the World Bank’s “messengers.”
- 3 This does assume that a knowledge system which promotes profit and violence would not easily arise, and that if it were to arise at all, its people through discussion and developing understanding would see that such a path would result in their own deprivation. Put differently, its people would change their minds. I realise that this is a rather optimistic view of human society, but for the purpose of this thought experiment, I will run with it.
- 4 For a critique of water ownership, and an optimistic proposal for the future, see Petrella (2001).
- 5 I am grateful to Janet Mackenzie for mentioning this point.
- 6 In Australia, welfare under the conservative Howard government moved toward a philosophy of pseudo-equality called “mutual obligation”. Such a system engenders mistrust.
- 7 There are already many good ideas being proposed by a wide range of people, including the Tobin Tax and the ideas put forward by David Suzuki and Holly Dressel (2002).