Kimberley Calling

Freya Mathews

The Kimberley is an area over 424,000 square kilometres. Let's get that into perspective. It is larger than many European countries, such as Italy or Germany, and almost twice the size of the United Kingdom. In Australian terms, it is bigger than Victoria and Tasmania combined. Yet it has a permanent population of 35,000. Nor is this vast Kimberley merely a desert region, an arid shrubland of little biological significance. Rather, it is one of Australia's fifteen National Diversity Hotspots, characterized by a wide variety of unique vegetation communities and home to many rare and vulnerable animal species, such as snubfin dolphin, bilby, golden bandicoot, masked owl, golden-backed tree rat, painted snipe, Gouldian finch, Monjon rock-wallaby, scaly-tailed possum and monsoon vine thicket. It is a centre of world significance for migratory birds. The Kimberley coastline is also a humpback whale migration route; the largest humpback nursery on earth lies between Broome and Camden Sound. The pristine coral reefs that line the coast are as significant, biologically speaking, as the Great Barrier Reef. Although the known biodiversity values of the Kimberley region are high, the true extent of Kimberley biodiversity is still in fact unknown, as this huge and rugged area has as yet been relatively little surveyed. As to its landscape values, the Kimberley is a place of staggering beauty and brooding ancient presence; many who live there or have visited testify to an experience it offers that is all but lost to humanity on the remainder of the planet – a sense of the unquestionably spiritual quality of Creation in its original condition, of an inner luminosity and presence that animates the world when its seamless, living integrity is still intact. In the Kimberley they have a word for this quality, or the state of becoming attuned to it, *le-an*, seeing through feeling, feeling the patterns of meaning and life force in country, experiencing the inner currents of its call. (Sinatra and Murphy 1999, 21)

As an environmental cause then, the Kimberley is in a class of its own. We are talking here about protecting, not an exhausted remnant of forest or

swamp, but an entire realm, an ancient and primal world, infiltrated by ferals and weeds, yes, but not yet significantly compromised. As environmentalists we scarcely have either the words or the imagination for such a cause, preoccupied as we are with remnants and last things - endangered species, last stands of this or that vegetation type, reserved areas in the midst of human occupation. It is natural and necessary that we should fight for such tail-ends but it is also a tragic irony that as we do so a handful of industrialists and politicians are preparing to help themselves to a veritable *empire* of nature that has, until recently, been out of sight and hence out of environmental mind.

But battles over the proposed gas hub at James Price Point on the Dampier Peninsula have now brought the question of what is at stake in the Kimberley into clearer focus. Although the region does support a number of industries, such as pastoralism, tourism, agriculture, pearling and fishing, it nevertheless remains a vast terrain in which ecological and evolutionary processes are still unfolding relatively free of human disturbance. As such, it defies the contemporary categories of conservation as defined in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The stated goal of this pre-eminent environmental Convention is the preservation of viable populations of species in their natural surroundings. But *viable* here implies a *minimum*. Populations of a given species are only protected to the extent that the species in question is in danger of disappearing. At its baldest, this implies that beyond the point of endangerment, there is no protection for species. In the CBD, the reason for this limitation is clear: the convention is as much a licence to exploit nature as to protect it. It conjoins the requirement of biodiversity conservation with a requirement of compatible economic development, but in the body of the document the emphasis tends to fall heavily on the latter. The same back-handedness is evident in the Australian Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC), derived from the CBD: its commitment to conserving species and ecosystems is in practice only triggered by the prospect of extinction.

This hidden bias in contemporary scientific and legal notions of conservation makes a vast and relatively ecologically intact terrain such as the Kimberley difficult to defend. For while many at-risk species and

ecological communities may indeed be found in the region, endangerment is not in this case the main issue. The Kimberley is unique precisely in being a terrain of ecological exuberance and abundance, of unfrequented wildlands, home to vast flocks of birds and awe-inspiring mobs of animals numbered in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. On the banks of the Fitzroy River I myself have seen camps of little red flying foxes, for instance, which, when taking flight at dusk, blot out the sunset. The implication of current biodiversity-inflected notions of conservation is that such abundance is surplus to environmental requirements: viability would be assured with dramatically reduced populations. (Official Minimum Viable Population figures vary, but are generally in the order of only hundreds or a few thousand. One recent meta-study of different estimates in the literature puts the figure at 4169 individuals. (Traill et al, 2007))

The implicit message of definitive charters such as the CBD then is that "undeveloped" lands such as the Kimberley are open for "sustainable" business. Sustainable business, in the intended sense, is business that arrogates to itself the natural resources of a given environment, leaving only residual ecological populations. These populations must be large enough to assure viability of species but small enough to minimize competition with human enterprises for resources. Such residual populations might prove capable of lingering in the back pockets of an industrial landscape – wedged between immense mining installations, for instance, or relegated to the peripheries of irrigated croplands or tourism hubs. This might well be the legislative vision of sustainable development in the Kimberley. But it is not at all the moral vision at the core of conservation. The difficulty, for conservationists, is to find arguments for ecological abundance and exuberance within the terms of an environmental discourse so emphatically skewed towards the ecological minimalism implicit in the vocabulary of biodiversity.

Indeed, conservation premised exclusively on the norm of biodiversity is, even in ecological terms, self-defeating. (Mathews 2013) If the ethical trigger for environmental intervention is species endangerment then, at the limit, *nothing* will be protected until it becomes endangered. This would result in only remnants and "last things" eventually remaining, and viable ecologies cannot be constituted out of such remnants: *attrition* will inevitably occur. Ecology is premised on abundance: tens of thousands of seeds are produced to replace a single organism; huge populations are required as buffers against environmental set-backs and contingencies. At the individual level, organisms may indeed compete for scarce resources,

but at the population level, plenitude is the rule: nature operates with large numbers. An ecology of the minimal seems oxymoronic.

In any case, a conservation ethic triggered only by endangerment is patently inadequate in light of the fact that scientists have so far identified so few of the species that inhabit the earth. A recent study estimates the present number of species to be eight million seven hundred thousand (give or take 1.3 million). Of those, only 1.2 million have already been catalogued, leaving 86% of terrestrial species and 91% of marine species still to be identified. (Mora et al 2011) If we are so little apprised of the species that do exist, how can we rely on their endangerment as a trigger for intervention?

Even if population thresholds were lifted to provide adequate buffers against contingency, there is a further moral question that needs to be asked: how much "development" is enough? How many humans are enough? By what right are humans systematically displacing all other species (or at any rate, species which are not instrumentally important to us) to the point of mere "viability", their last members lingering in ghettoes, fenced out of their erstwhile homelands or assailed in those homelands by impossible hazards. There is a familiar – colonial - logic to this process of systematic dispossession: the invaders arrive, repulse the indigenes with superior arms and arrogate to themselves all the natural resources of the region. After the event, when the spoils have been thoroughly appropriated, there is concern for the plight of surviving members of the colonized populations. Reserves are established, tribes and languages are catalogued by science, last-ditch accommodation is arranged. As a sideline to the main business of appropriation, efforts to preserve cultural diversity are made. Everyone is morally pleased when threatened indigenous cultures and communities are dragged, for the moment, back from the brink.

This marked symmetry between the logic of biodiversity conservation and the logic of colonization should alert us to the serious moral deficiency of conservation based exclusively on biodiversity. By what right has humanity dispossessed the vast legions of living things that have been pushed aside and obliterated by our overwhelmingly invasive presence? Of course we have no more right to displace other-than-human inhabitants of Earth than any other invading army has to displace rightful inhabitants. More robust arguments than the argument from biodiversity are required if we wish to see justice for earth communities.

One such argument for environmental protection of areas on the scale of the Kimberley is simply that *we owe the earth*. To some small extent, we ameliorate the wrong we have done in annexing the rest of the planet and ruthlessly disposing of its rightful earth-inhabitants by ceding to Earth a little of the territory that is rightfully its. The Kimberley is, from this perspective, a *sovereign Earth terrain*, one of the last such terrains whose sovereignty has not yet been violated and extinguished by an invading industrial army. Sovereign too are the wild inhabitants of Earth. They do not owe their existence to us. Their ends, like the patterns and rhythms of their lives, are completely independent of ours. We have no claim on indigenous animals in the wild: they belong not to us but to themselves. We did not invent them, design them, breed or create them. Their destiny is not ours to co-opt.

To acknowledge the moral sovereignty of wildlife is implicitly to concede that wild animals are entitled to their own *ecological estates*. It is to concede that the biosphere was shaped for wildlife and by wildlife as much as it was shaped for us and by us. In this sense Earth belongs to wildlife as much as it belongs to us: we have no right to expropriate wild animals or despoil their habitat. The fact that industrial civilization has already done this on an ecocidal scale makes our obligation to leave remaining wildlife estates to their rightful owners a matter of moral urgency.

To acknowledge this is not altogether to deny that human communities are entitled to a share in such estates. In particular, of course, Aboriginal communities, as exemplars par excellence of moral co-existence with other sovereign forms of life, are so entitled. The unique claim of the Kimberley to protection lies not only in its status as a sovereign Earth terrain but also in its status as one of the last great Indigenous homelands on the planet. Indigenous responses to recent industrial threats in the region have been tortured, tangled and vexed. The Woodside proposal to build an industrial port at James Price Point may now have been well and truly scuppered, but legions of other extractive industries are hammering at the Kimberley door. Political calls for the development of the north are also increasing in insistence. The Kimberley will undoubtedly be under siege for decades to come, and moral and spiritual dilemmas will continue to torment its peoples. Ethical arguments for the environmental protection of the Kimberley will necessarily include just provision and compensation for Aboriginal communities. But if our deepest moral obligation, as a species, is to be acknowledged, then such provision must also be consistent with

the hitherto flouted claims of the wider Earth-community to its rightful and proportionate share of the biosphere.

References

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