Well-Rooted Individuals

This past August I was fortunate enough to attend the Society for Ecological Restoration International conference in Perth, Australia. I had some trouble getting there, owing to a convergence of thunderstorms, the Chicago airport, and everyone-and-their-uncle flying somewhere in mid-August. In order to catch up with the preconference field trip I had to take five consecutive flights from Madison, Wisconsin, to the town of Geraldton, Western Australia. These places are very, very, very far apart—17,348 km to be more exact. My first stop in Australia (where over 90% of the population resides in cities) was in a town with a population of 31,000, located some 420 km north of Perth, and apparently known for both surfing and sharks. When I walked outside the terminal, there was not a soul to be seen, just cars shimmering in the car park, and yellow canola fields in bloom stretching off in several directions. I had flown for almost thirty hours and was presented with a very quiet and really rather familiar rural scene.

This familiarity was completely erased over the next two days, part of which we spent in Kalbarri and Mt. Lesueur National Parks. I joined a group of over 50 people to explore the impressive plant diversity of the kwongan floristic region. The region has a flora in the vicinity of 8,000 species with endemism approaching 85%. While other continents experienced tectonic mountain building and “recent” glacial bulldozing and freezing, Western Australia appears to have remained very quiet for a very long time (no glaciation for 250 My). The relationship between one of the oldest and most stable land masses on earth and plant diversity is not well understood, but the stability may have facilitated long-term diversification of numerous plant lineages. In addition, the areas we visited had very complex soil mosaics, which likely supported the prolific speciation. As a result, plant life was free to develop over eons into an incredible diversity, exploiting perhaps tiny differences in soil and microclimate. The

area is dry and experiences temperatures over 30°C in the summer, so plants tended to be low shrubs, often with small leaves. However, their blooms were elaborate and beautifully colored, and they included a wide array of orchids, as well as banksias, eucalypts and many plants new to me, such as the black kangaroo paw (*Macropidia fuliginosa*). Trip leader Kingsley Dixon, who also directs Perth’s Kings Park and Botanic Garden, was a masterful guide, a fountain of information about some of the world’s most mysterious flora.

Along with these unusual blooms, I enjoyed meeting a number of unusual people. I began to think about a kind of parallel between these complicated, multifaceted flowers, so beautifully adapted to a specific place, and a certain type of person that I met on the field trip (and also later at the conference). These were many-layered people with multiple interests and a number of pursuits; they were involved not only in hands-on restoration, but also in working with different groups of people in order to motivate, develop, fund, and finalize restoration projects. You may recognize the type: well-rounded, or may I say well-rooted individuals, with many dimensions. These are people who aren’t afraid to speak Latin and enjoy collecting and analyzing data, but who also stop watching restoration in order to make it happen, are familiar with the local dialect or vernacular, and spend a good portion of their time building relationships with different groups of people in order to get restoration done.

I promise you more coverage of the SERI conference in the next issue (see also Jim Harris’s editorial in this issue). For now, I can report it was a success, with many interesting themes and even more interesting people, who, I am glad to say, are using their multiple talents to support ecological restoration in many parts of the world.

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