

Women of the Wombat . . . and beyond

Words & Image by Alison Pouliot

Conservation draws men and women from all walks of life for all sorts of reasons. While they might have different motivations and approaches, knowledge and beliefs, they're often united by a shared feeling of moral outrage. Many have a common aim of questioning and fighting for change of inappropriate policy or management, usually tied to a particular place or species. Wombat Forestcare members represent this spectrum of folk, all fighting for the forest.

I was surprised to notice recently that almost all requests I receive to run conservation workshops, were from women. This struck me as interesting. Why such a gender imbalance I wondered? These requests come from Landcare or Bushcare coordinators, ecological consultants or public relations staff with Catchment Management Authorities, universities and the like. I quickly realised that much of the so-called conservation 'extension work', 'community development work' or staff training relating to conservation issues, is organised by women.

Australian women have actively participated in environmental conservation since before Federation through to the current day; as scientists and explorers, artists and activists, poets and polymaths and contributors in many other ways. However, scientific societies, nature studies groups and bushwalking clubs were originally and exclusively the domain of men. From the early 1920s, women managed to elbow their way in, even though their findings were not recorded and contributions seldom acknowledged.

From the 1980s, the environment movement grew rapidly in Australia. The Decade of Landcare followed thanks to the initiative and innovation of Joan Kirner (then Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands) and Heather Mitchell (then president of the Victorian Farmers Federation). Together they recognised and understood the dynamics and empowerment of voluntarism and united unlikely alliances. Various other environmental initiatives got off the ground during this time including the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. Then in 1992, the Australian Government signed Agenda 21 – a voluntarily implemented action plan of the United Nations targetting sustainable development that came about at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, as well as the Conventions on Biological Diversity and Climate Change. Many women

contributed, often as volunteers, but some in paid positions and at one point there was almost equal representation of women in leading State and National positions. Today the imbalance has returned and the environment 'industry' is characterised by a prescriptive management approach, highly resistant to innovation and change.

Gayle Osborne is one innovative woman who has taken a leadership role in conservation. When I suggested the theme of this article to Gayle, she was quick to mention how the collaborative approach of key men and women has made the group successful. Gayle became interested in conservation following intensive logging of the Wombat. She and her partner joined the protest movement. Wombat Forestcare grew out of a number of local groups and, as Gayle notes, was lucky to have people with diverse skills,



Gayle Osborne at home in the Wombat
Photography © Alison Pouliot

all committed to the protection of the forest. She points to the pivotal role played by Murray Ralph in the creation of the group, and how he provided her with the ecological knowledge that enabled her to convene Wombat Forestcare following his retirement. Today, Wombat Forestcare's membership has roughly equal representation of women and men (54% women 46% men) and the committee has four women and three men.

Although Wombat Forestcare is well represented by women, we are still under-represented in the sciences and in conservation. In a recent issue of the Monthly magazine, science writer Margaret Wertheim raised her concern

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about the lack of science on the agenda at a gender equality conference in Melbourne in late 2016. While commending the breadth of topics and engaging speakers, says Wertheim, 'I raise this not as a point of criticism but rather with a note of sadness, and also a hint of alarm'. This concerns me greatly too, but in my experience, the women are there, although usually with limited influence and in a voluntary capacity. Women are often doing the work on the ground and within the community, but are needed across the spectrum and hierarchy.

Effective conservation requires a great range of skills. It requires solid understanding of the environment and environmental issues and policy, but also diplomacy, patience and sensitivity to environmental nuance. It requires innovation, creativity and imagination. It requires moving away from a transactional command-and-control approach to a more collaborative, inspirational and transformational

approach. It requires diverse thinking and women have a significant role to play in realigning this culture of environmental 'management' to something more attuned with current day understanding of ecology, environmental issues and human influence on the planet.

The Wombat Forest, indeed all Australian forests, are threatened by a current political mindset fixated with the tired rhetoric of the Aussie battler fighting against nature, zealously reinforced by our prime minister. It fuels a myopic argument to chop it down, constrain or erase it. We live in a country characterised by unpredictability and extremes, quirks and surprises. They are precisely what drive the evolution of our eccentric, highly adaptable and unique biodiversity. It's not to be 'battled against', but to be 'worked with'. Thank goodness for all those women and men who have the insight and imagination to recognise the difference. ■

White and "Woody" - More Mycenas from the Forest

Words and images John Walter

If you have been out in the forest this autumn you might have noticed that there are a lot of *Mycena* species to be found out there. I have mentioned thirteen species so far in this series of articles and I can easily double that number with "finds" that I have been able to put a name to. I also have at least another twenty-six finds that I cannot name. Some of these are likely to be unnamed species, others will be named but are not species I have learned to recognise and some are also likely to be species that I do know but have not identified because they are an unusual colour or show some other difference from the standard form.

In this article, I want to tackle some of the many white, or near-white *Mycena* species of the Wombat. I find the white species to be some of the most difficult to photograph and virtually all my early attempts are too embarrassing to show. Things have improved with a better camera but you must balance the high level of reflection from a flash and the auto-focus on many cameras functions poorly as it tries to define the shape of such small white objects in the glare.

Mycena albidocapillaris is a small species whose pileus (cap) is generally less than 5mm diameter with a comparatively long stipe (stem). The cap is generally pure white but sometimes you see a light brownish tinge, particularly on older specimens and the stipe can appear translucent. You will find this growing in large numbers on old fern fronds, leaves, twigs and pieces of shed bark in the wettest parts of the forest such as the deep gullies between Trentham and



Above: *Mycena albidocapillaris* growing prolifically on the old stems of a tree fern. *continued next page ...*