

# MY RIVER'S KEEPER

By Sue Jackson

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Artists can change attitudes and catalyse climate change action by stimulating empathy, as Sue Jackson found in her encounter with the Yarra's riverkeepers

The relationship between art and politics has always been intriguing and complex. In June 2009 at the Melbourne Festival of Ideas it once again took centre stage as a range of speakers grappled with the theme "Artists, Writers and Climate Change". The stand-out address was by the writer Kate Grenville.

While Grenville acknowledged the impact artists and writers can have via direct action, she focused primarily on their unique capacity to change attitudes. Officially entitled "The Writer in a time of change", and renamed by Grenville "Writers in a time of change-that-isn't-happening", her talk highlighted the difficulties of shifting entrenched attitudes.

Whether it's investing in water tanks or cycling rather than driving, we know what steps we should be taking to protect the environment, but somehow we often fail to take them. Grenville made a strong case that this is where artists come in; art can change attitudes — and the brain itself — in ways that logical argument can't.

She suggested that humans typically learn by experience; we "suck it and see". But with climate change, we don't have the luxury of the time it takes to learn in this way. Fortunately, Mother Nature has provided us with an alternative way forward.

Grenville used her experience of what finally made her give up smoking to illustrate this assertion.

Although she knew the research findings on the detrimental effects of smoking, she kept puffing. Then one day she lit up in front of a man she fancied. "I watched him recalibrating his idea of me. I watched his disgust and felt it as my own." Empathy was the key — it gave her a new perspective and succeeded where scientific evidence had failed. She changed her attitude instantly and hasn't smoked since.

Grenville argued that empathy operates by creating new pathways in the brain, citing extensive neuroscientific evidence to support this proposition. In her view, artists' unique contribution to the struggle with climate change lies in their capacity to stimulate empathy which can precipitate radical, instant change in attitudes. And the more "difficult" the art, the more effective it can be. Like the spinach we were forced to eat as children, difficult art "gets into your vitals and turns you inside out".

Grenville went on to quote Kafka's assertion that "a book is an axe for the frozen sea within us" and concluded that the artist's job is to break the ice to allow new information and ideas in.

With a new poll showing climate change is losing ground as a primary concern for Australians and a major political party is enshrining climate change denial in its manifesto, we desperately need people who can wield that axe with finesse, over and over again.

A few months ago, Anne Carson, a poet friend of mine, wrote "Heron

Contemplates Eels", a poem about wildlife on the Yarra River. She was inspired by a briefing tour she took with one of the Yarra riverkeepers, Ian Penrose, who pointed out the unique features of "his" river from the seat of his tinnie.

Riverkeeper is a remarkable group. Launched on New York's Hudson River in 1983, the movement now boasts 180 waterkeeper programs around the world. From Bolivia to India, from Russia to Nepal, these volunteers see their role as two-fold — they are the chief advocates, the "voices" for their local waterways; and they are community educators, who encourage others to become involved.

Like all riverkeepers, Ian Penrose is passionate about his river, which has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. Melbourne was originally sited where it is because of its proximity to the splendid Yarra, whose name John Helder Wedge, an early surveyor, learned from the local Wurundjeri people means waterfall. But with a current flow at around 11 per cent of its natural capacity, "waterfall" is the last word that springs to mind these days when you look at the Yarra.

The riverkeepers do a great job. They are involved in cleaning up debris that stormwater drains discharge into the river. They conduct regular water testing and report sources of pollution and other transgressions to the Environment Protection Authority. They lead walking tours, where participants learn about the history, the wildlife and the threats to the river. And they advocate for the Yarra wherever possible. But the riverkeepers' skills lie in logical argument, in education and the provision of information; they don't necessarily share the artists' capacity to stimulate empathy and change entrenched attitudes.

Anne came away from her day with Ian determined to lend the riverkeepers a hand. She decided to organise a fundraiser for the Yarra Riverkeeper Association to support their work in dealing with the environmental impact of climate change. With so many of her friends being poets, a poetry soiree seemed the obvious choice of event and a tiny island in the Yarra — Herring Island — the perfect venue. She recruited a small group to assist her, including a non poet: me.

There was no shortage of sponsors for the event, with, for example, Parks Victoria providing the island and punt service free. The soiree was rapidly over-subscribed and many eminent local poets were keen to donate their time to read their own and other peoples' poems in support of rivers. We organisers were blown away by the level of interest and delighted with the money raised.

Yet something unexpected happened to me that day. I had approached the soiree with, I have to admit, a somewhat pallid appreciation of rivers. I originally volunteered to help more because of my friend's enthusiasm for a "worthy" cause and my strong commitment to environmental politics than because I have strong feelings about our waterways. But the soiree changed all that.

Some of the poets had had an intimate long-term connection with the Yarra itself — one of them even regularly paddling its length with Melbourne's Dragons Abreast boat crew — and their poetry captured this. Others read poems of waterways that might be far away but were nevertheless close to their hearts, like Kristin Henry's "The River of Nevermind".

As I sat in the audience letting the poetry wash over me, I became very emotional. I felt deeply affected by the poets and the rivers they described. Memories of my own local waterway, the Merri Creek, assailed me. I could hardly wait to get home to see how it was faring. And that desire has persisted ever since.

As a poet, Anne has finely tuned emotional receptors and a great deal of that empathy extolled by Kate Grenville. Anne was moved by Ian Penrose's passion to take action on behalf of the Yarra. The river soiree was both a successful example of artists taking direct action on climate change and, at least in my case, a demonstration of the capacity of the artistic axe to transform ice into tears.