

# **“Nature in the Dark”**

## **Opening Address**

**Freya Mathews**

I'd like to talk about the great task that awaits our society, indeed all contemporary societies, if we as humans are to adapt to life on earth. It may sound odd to imply that our species has not adapted to life on earth when we have been so spectacularly successful. And yes, we *have* been successful, but as with many evolutionary misfits before us, it's the scale of our success that is causing the destruction of our habitat. Unlike the evolutionary misfits who preceded us however, our habitat encompasses most of the surface of the planet, marine as well as terrestrial, so that in trashing our habitat we are also dramatically degrading the entire biosphere.

### **How did this happen?**

It is because we are reflexive beings, capable of reason and freedom of choice, that we have been able to change the course of evolution on earth: it is on account of this reflexivity that our desires have been released from their ecological matrix and are now constructing a world that is unreferenced to the needs of the biosphere. A new manufactured order, totally untethered to ecology, is being overlaid on the natural order, with disastrous results for legions of other species. We are calling this new chapter in the history of life the Anthropocene. We are calling it the Sixth Great Extinction Event. Perhaps we should also be calling it the greatest crime in the history of our species.

### **But is it a crime? Is the Sixth Great Extinction Event an ethical issue?**

Most people, in warning about the consequences of environmental crisis, argue that in damaging the biosphere we are destroying our own life support system, and that it is for this reason - to avoid the collapse of our own civilizations - that we should change our ways. In other words, they argue that we should protect other species because it is in our own human interest to do so rather than because we have a moral responsibility to other species. But this argument is looking increasingly dubious. It seems increasingly plausible that we might

indeed find technological ways of maintaining civilization after the demise of a large percentage of the earth's species. So if we are going to argue that *biocide* is wrong, it will have to be on ethical grounds: biocide is wrong not only because it will rebound on us but because it represents an ethical transgression of the largest possible order.

**But if people don't already acknowledge this, how to get them to do so, let alone change the set of their desires to serve the interests of the rest of life?**

Well, the first step is surely for us to begin to *care*. We can't overcome our cultural autism with respect to other species until we care about them. But to care, we have to *know*. We can't care about something if we don't know what it is. We can't care about it if we don't know that it exists. And this is our situation in relation to our own biosphere. As revered biologist, E. O. Wilson, says, forget about Mars and Venus, Earth is the unexplored planet! The number of species that have already been identified on earth is somewhere between 1.5 and 1.8 million, but the number of species thought actually to exist is estimated to be anywhere between 3.6 million and 112 million! Admittedly the majority of these unidentified species are microorganisms and fungi, but ecologically speaking, that's where the action is, down there amongst the little things – they constitute the invisible glue of the biosphere.

So before we can care, we need to know.

That applies not only to scientists but also to the rest of us. Where ecology is concerned, most of us have only the haziest grasp even of the science that does exist. Most of us couldn't identify the species in our nearest bit of bushland, let alone give any account of the complex relations amongst them that enable that patch of bushland to flourish. So if people don't know what's there, or how it all fits together – if they don't have the foggiest idea about the way the life-world works – then it's hardly surprising that they think nothing of obliterating it when their own convenience seems to require this.

This lack of even the most basic knowledge of botany, zoology and ecology is normal in our society. This is a weird kind of normal, for what sort of knowledge could be more fundamental than knowledge of the way the life-world around us fits together? But normal it is. And as long as we are ignorant of these basic facts of life, we will not care about our "environment". But at the same time the lack of care

perpetuates the ignorance. We don't pay attention to the specific flora and fauna in our local patch because, basically, there are so many other things we care more about.

So as a society we are in a bind. We are blind to the life-world around us because we don't really care about it; and we don't care about it because we are so ignorant of it: it is just background to the main business of our lives.

Science in itself cannot get us out of this bind. Even if the ecological sciences were well resourced, and able to explore the deeper mysteries of the biosphere, the kind of knowledge they deliver is ultimately functional, and would not necessarily induce us to care. Science focuses on outward behaviour and seeks to explain that behaviour in functional terms. In order to care about other species however, we need to *relate* to them, and we cannot relate to them as long as they are represented in a merely functional fashion. Only when the biosphere is represented as a vast terrain of subjectivity, sentience and agency as well as a system of interlocking mechanisms will we relate to it. Only when other beings present to us as having an inner life - when their nature is shown to have a thinking, feeling, fearing, hurting, hoping, striving aspect, like ours - will their lives engage us as those of our fellow humans do.

### **But is it the case that earth beings generally have such an inner life?**

That they do have such an inner life – and that animals in particular do - has surely been evident to anyone who has spent time observing and interacting with them in an open-minded way, without prejudice or ulterior instrumental motives. And the fact of such other-than-human subjectivity was of course self-evident to aeons of hunter-gatherer cultures that lived in community with wild species before the advent of civilizations.

And although it has been the resolute empiricism of science that has largely blinded us in the modern era to this inner realm of subjectivity on the other side, so to speak, of the appearances, scientists themselves are now increasingly unable to refuse the inference to such a realm of subjectivity. You may have heard about the recent Cambridge Declaration of Animal Consciousness, in which leading neuro-scientists from around the world announced that

animals – mammals and birds and many other creatures, including insects - not only possess consciousness but an emotional and intentional life that is essentially no different from ours.

This Declaration has finally put the weight of science behind the view, widely regarded as anthropomorphic until very recently, that animals experience life in essentially the same way we do. This is of epochal significance as it implies that an attitude of empathy, and hence of care, is as appropriate towards animals as it is towards our fellow humans.

**But will the bare acknowledgment that earth beings have an inner life like ours be enough to ally us to them, to bring our desires into line with theirs?**

No. If we are to become allied to earth beings we need to enter the hidden terrain of their subjectivity and actually imagine their lives as they themselves experience them, as charged with drama, pathos, suspense, joy, danger, and above all meaning. The time-honoured vehicle for such a leap into the hidden inner life of others is of course *story*: it is through story that human cultures have always socialized people into the subjectivity of others and thereby awakened the fellow-feeling and empathy that is eventually translated into ethical consciousness. It is largely through story then that we can hope to socialize people today into the life of the larger earth community. It is through storying the lives of the myriad beings who inhabit the planet with us that people will become engaged with them. And story is, of course, the province of literature and the arts. Literature and the arts then will be crucial in developing the kind of *rapport* with our fellow species that will lead us to care for them, pay close attention to them and in due course freely align our desires to their needs.

Famous theologian, Thomas Berry, spoke of the Great Work of the twenty-first century: to re-reference human flourishing to the flourishing of the earth community. Such a transformation, almost unthinkable from our present *biophobic* standpoint, will, if it is to prove even remotely feasible, require first and foremost, and right now, the genius of our artists, writers, poets, musicians and amateurs. Only by telling the great Earth Story, species by species, being by being, region by region, in ways that evoke the true beauty, strangeness, depth, vulnerability and meaningfulness of earth existence, can we hope to engage the cultural imagination of

contemporary societies to the degree required for the Great Work to proceed.

### **How does “Nature in the Dark” contribute to the Great Work?**

“Nature in the Dark”, the show we are here to open tonight, contributes to this Great Work inasmuch as it will bring, right into the heart of our city, glimpses of the normally invisible private life of wild beings. The title, “Nature in the Dark”, is multiply allusive. At a literal level it signals that much of the photographic material on view in the show is nocturnal imagery derived from photo-monitoring equipment installed in national parks. But nature is also in the dark on many metaphoric levels: it is backgrounded in our normal urban consciousness, out of sight and out of mind; we are oblivious of it even while our urban footprint relentlessly tramples it. Wildlife lives in the dark shadow of a host of dangers and threats, and many species are sliding into the eternal night of extinction. At the same time, by giving us a glimpse into the private life of particular wild animals, the show enables us to enter, in a small way, that hidden or “dark” terrain of subjectivity, that has been largely ignored or denied by modern civilization.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present moment is undoubtedly a tragic one. Scientists are wringing their hands. They have delivered the message, plainly and in no uncertain terms, over and over, that life on earth is in catastrophic decline. Philosophers have added that this is a moral issue of a new order of magnitude in the history of ethics. But little in the way of a commensurate political response has been forthcoming.

This is as true in Australia as elsewhere. We enter the Anthropocene with already the worst record of mammalian extinctions of any continent. Yet – and here I cite just a couple of the multitude of sins against Australian fauna that could be cited - we currently oversee the largest land-based slaughter of wildlife on earth: 3 to 4 million kangaroos and wallabies per year, legally culled in the name of resource management. And elsewhere the destruction of listed species is permitted, as in the case of grey-headed flying foxes: in Queensland the shooting of grey-headed flying foxes was reintroduced on 7 September this year – Endangered Species Day!. And of course in the west we have gargantuan extractive industries

poised to decimate one of the last great empires of nature left on planet, the Western Kimberley. Here at home in Victoria we have just witnessed the shedding of hundreds of biodiversity jobs in DSE. And now a fire management plan that rides roughshod over the needs of wildlife and ecosystems has been launched under the banner of community protection, as if our earth kin are not also part of our community and in need of protection.

But cultures *can* change. Overseas, the idea of “compassionate conservation” is beginning to gain currency, where this countenances only non-lethal methods of wildlife management. In some countries, Bolivia and Ecuador for instance, rights for nature have been written into the national constitution to restrain destructive development. Between humans and our wild kin, an *ethic of conviviality*, as ethnographer, Deborah Rose, puts it, *is possible*. The moral and imaginative horizons of civilization *can* expand. The missing piece in the puzzle at present is the empathic link. Only artists, writers, poets, amateurs and other adepts of the imagination can supply this link. “Nature in the Dark” is an instance of this vital work of the imagination and as such contributes to the great task that lies before us, the telling of the Earth Story.

