

From the Kitchen

23 March 2011



Walking along a bush path, it is almost impossible to tell the weeds from the ‘real’ Australian plants. Actually, ‘weeds’ is the wrong term – there are indigenous plants and exotic ones, the exotics having been brought here by non-indigenous people. The exotics seem to have settled in well and are thriving.

Looking over the bush with a wider view, I can see plants growing in almost discreet communities, with some overlap between them. Certain grasses seem to like to mix it with particular herbaceous plants and not with others. Around some species of trees I can see particular plants which appear less frequently elsewhere.

People talk about once-exotic plants having become naturalised; that is, they have been here a long time and have become part of the ecosystems they grow in. They seem to get on well with their neighbours. Many native birds, animals and insects have adapted to feeding on these naturalised plants and on some that are still considered to be exotic weeds. Do *they* know the difference?

There are many plants which seem out of place in the Australian bush: escapees from suburban gardens, such as agapanthus, roses, yew, hawthorn, lilies and the like. Perhaps in a hundred years from now they will be considered to be naturalised, along with boneseed, oaks, ivy, blackberry and passion vine.

These exotics come from Europe, Africa, the Americas, the Middle East and Asia. We even have blow-ins from New Zealand and they have many of ours.

Cultural diversity, whether of the plant, animal or human kind, is considered by some people to be a good thing and by others to be irrelevant or even bad. But when I look out over thousands of hectares of (exotic) pine trees I feel sad. There is beauty in diversity, rarely in monoculture. Walking through such a pine plantation, one rarely sees birds or insects and very little can grow in the acidic soil beneath the regimented rows of uniform trees.

If a weed is defined as a plant growing in the wrong place, do we have the equivalent of weeds growing in human society? Perhaps they are the people who struggle to fit in or the sociopaths, which may be the same people in some instances. There are those in powerful positions in our society, who would be happiest if we had monocultures – rows of ethnically / culturally homogenous people. There are media commentators who wish for the same thing and work hard to get others to agree with them. When I drive through some, mainly new, suburbs, the regimented rows of similar houses remind me of the pine plantations.

With the large number of ethnicities, religious beliefs and affiliations and cultural identities and origins we have represented in this country, the social ecology can be very complex. As in the natural forest, there are groupings and overlappings and disparate individuals living amidst those not of their kind. Those who arrived generations ago have been naturalised, officially or *de facto*. Our governments do their best to prevent ‘noxious weeds’ establishing themselves but often use draconian measures to achieve this.

In all of this, it is often forgotten that the vast majority of people living here now, no matter what their origins, overran those who had been here for millennia – people who were as much part of their environment as the plants and animals around them. In this case, the exotics introduced poisons into the environment that caused and still cause problems for the indigenes, as well as bringing with them other exotics which are still wreaking havoc with that environment.

It is perhaps understandable that those once-exotic now-established individuals would want to protect their territory from anything that might threaten their comfort. What they tend to forget is that they have adapted to wave after wave of newcomers for two hundred years and that the presence of newcomers has enriched their environment.

It is probably also true that the introduction of the new, though at first challenging, may re-invigorate the culture of those already here.

And there will always be individuals, home-grown or introduced, who pose a threat to the rest. If we treat them as individuals, rather than labelling them as part of a group to which they may or may not belong, we are more likely to be able to protect ourselves from their excesses.