

The Canberra Times

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LESSONS OF A
LIVE PLANET

Arius bilineatus, until last week, was a virtually unheard-of creature. Now it has been projected to minor fame. Arius bilineatus is a catfish that lives in the Persian Gulf. It has venomous spines and scavenges the muddy bottom of the Gulf's waters. That is not so remarkable. What is remarkable is the fish's self-healing mechanism. When injured, it secretes a slime from glands near the surface of the skin. The slime very quickly closes wounds, stops bleeding and improves healing. This is very helpful for the survival of the catfish because bleeding in the sea has the unfortunate habit of attracting predators. Presumably, those catfish with the most developed slime glands survive longer than others, thereby ensuring the improvement of the glands and the slime over generations of catfish.

This wonder of nature was noticed by the Arab fishers of the Gulf who use the slime to rub on their own wounds with dramatic effects. Wounds virtually healed over before their eyes. And now Professor Richard Criddle, of the University of California at Davis, who has spent five years scraping the slime from the catfish and studying its effect on wounds, hopes to synthesise it to make a medicine for use on human cuts. Apparently, many species of fish have glands that secrete substances that heal cuts, but they secrete it under the skin; only Arius bilineatus secretes it externally.

Arius bilineatus provides us with a great lesson. If the fish, which grows to up to a metre, had been more edible, or contained precious ivory or exotic skin for coats and shoes, humans would probably have hunted it to the verge of extinction. Humans can be short-sightedly rapacious. We seem naively happy to over-exploit things on Earth. We take the short-term view, no longer than a lifetime and usually only a few years. Economists and accountants rarely look beyond six years. Put all the catfish in cans. Covert all the forest to paper and planks. Plant as many wheat seeds as will possibly grow on one patch. Run as many sheep in one paddock as will fit. In the short term these policies are beneficial to the few people who implement them or who immediately depend on them. In the long term they will at best curtail the standard of living of humans and at worst spell disaster for the planet.

Fish and forests

Like the catfish in the Gulf, Australian and Brazilian rainforests could throw up plants which will help humanity medicinally and nutritionally, unless we stupidly destroy them. The banana, pineapple, rubber and coffee plants, for example, were once restricted in habitat. However, immediate gain for humans is not the only criterion for concern over extinction of species. If it was, any species which could not show itself to be of immediate economic value could be exploited to oblivion.

In March the American Geophysical Union will meet in San Diego to confer on the prospects of testing the Gaia principle. This principle is that the Earth does not merely contain life, but is itself living. The argument, put by James Lovelock 18 years ago, runs that the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond its constituent parts.

The theory says that microbes over millions of years have built up rocks and sediments that absorb carbon dioxide, stabilising the biosphere to maintain exactly the right amounts of oxygen and hydrogen and other reactive gases to maintain life. The way life maintains the conditions to maintain life is difficult to explain in any other way than that the whole thing is itself a living entity, so the theory goes. The theory is unproved and may sound utterly loony. But the gathering at San Diego will highlight the need for humans to be careful about what they do with the planet. Humans are, unfortunately, in the position of being able to make the planet as sterile as Mars or Venus. However, if we learn the lessons from things as marvellous as Arius bilineatus we may be able to remain part of the living planet instead of its enemy.

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Letters to the Editor

Teaching about
Aborigines

Received January 12

Sir, Teachers who want bi-centennial activities in school to have an Aboriginal perspective can easily take more positive action to that end than the boycott proposed by the Australian Teachers' Federation.

The resources for teaching children about the historical experience of Aborigines are now rich, and growing. John Mulvaney's *The Prehistory of Australia* and Geoffrey Blainey's *Triumph of the Nomads* explore pre-European Australia, and Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance 1788-1980*, surveys the next two centuries. There are many books, and two collective enterprises worth teachers' attention.

Times past

From The Canberra Times of 25 and 30 years ago:

January 17, 1963: The Soviet Prime Minister, Mr Khrushchev, announced that the USSR possessed a 100-megaton nuclear bomb "too destructive" to be used in Europe.

January 17, 1938: Three Chinese generals were executed by firing squads after failures against the Japanese.

The congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions in Brussels called for an international boycott of Japan.

The first is *Australians: A Historical Library*, now complete in 10 volumes (Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, PO Box 134, Willoughby, 2068). As one of the historians who initiated the project with the bicentenary in view, I hope the delegates who resolved on that boycott will join the growing number of their colleagues who are quarrying the set for their pupils. We have tried to blend text and images into accounts for general readers. You could create a whole course of Aboriginal studies out of the section "Aboriginal landscapes" in *Australians: A Historical Atlas*. *Australians: 1788* makes recent scholarship on pre-European Australia accessible.

The writers of *Australians 1838* do not let readers forget that most people on the continent in that year were black. Henry Reynolds inspects Aboriginal lives in *Australians 1888*. Aborigines tell their own stories in *Australians 1938*. *Australians* from 1939 includes the last thing published by Kath Walker before she became Oodgeroo Noonuccal. "Aborigines are never out of the picture," writes Edmund Campion in a review of the books. He believes every school library should have them.

The other collective enterprise is the output of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (GPO Box 553, Canberra), which has been energetic in recovering Aboriginal history in written, visual and oral forms, and in sponsoring work by Aboriginal authors. Getting more AIAS books and tapes into school libraries would be another valuable bi-centennial activity.

K. S. INGLIS
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(History Department, Research School of Social Sciences)

Anglicans condemn sin of nicotine inhalation

THE PRAGMATIC Anglican Church moved to take advantage of the current popular agitation against smokers.

The Dean of Sydney, the Very Reverend Lance Shilton, gave a sermon in which he condemned smoking, the sin of the month, in the same breath in which he condemned drink-driving and sexual promiscuity. Perhaps the next edition of the Good News Bible will depict Judas as a 40-a-day man.

In another sermon, the Very Pious Michael Yabsley, NSW Opposition spokesman on dungeons, said that it was a terrible thing that prisoners in Berrima prison should be watching videos that gave them enjoyment since they were supposedly being punished for crimes against society. This followed reports that Berrima prisoners were allowed to watch videos as an alternative to watching television and that they were allowed to hire from the same range of videos available to free citizens.

Berrima's endowment are reported to have watched such uplifting epics as *Schoolgirl Screaming*, *Blue Climax* and *Tracy Takes Tokyo*.

BUT PERHAPS it is better to punish them with television than to expose them to the videos of the films of that wonderful role model,

Sylvester Stallone. Stallone's Rambo was boobyed by cinema-goers in the United States when two-minute trailers of the forthcoming *Rambo III* were shown.

Rambo III shows Stallone, having won the Vietnam War, (Stallone himself spent the Vietnam War fulfilling the dream of all healthy heterosexual men by working as a gym instructor at a girl's finishing school in Switzerland) going to Afghanistan to fight for Truth, Justice, Democracy, etc, by killing lots of the occupying Soviet soldiers of the Evil Empire.

Analyses of the booring ranged from a feeling that the triteness of the Rambo movies was beginning to make thinking people feel ill, to a feeling that the recent fondness shown by the US Administration to the USSR had eclipsed the Evil Empire scenario pushed by the film, to (most plausibly) a feeling that those doing the booring were what one of the film's publicists called "Yuppie swine".

In the same week the USSR repeated its interest in withdrawing from Afghanistan when the US finishes its alleged aid to the Afghan rebels, but another *Rambo III* publicist said that if this disaster came to pass "we'll just dub in another country".

MR YABSLEY will be pleased to know that there is at least one

SUNDAY

REFLECTIONS
The week in review

punishing video in the ofting. The producer of *Man From Snowy River II*, announcing that his film would be inflicted on the nation from late March, alleged that the box office takings of the \$11 million epic would be spoiled by the publicity which had surrounded the axe murder of one of the members of the cast.

Mr Geoff Burrows said that the RSPCA's apology for alleging that one of the horses on the set had been cruelly dispatched by being beaten around the head with an axe was all very well, but that some misguided horse lovers would remember the sensational allegations rather than the RSPCA's

apology and would boycott the film. The RSPCA has since agreed that the horse was doomed anyway and that the axe was wielded to put it out of its misery. As someone who wanted to be put out of his misery while spending a miserable six or seven hours (or so it seemed) watching the new film's anaesthetising and implausible predecessor, I will be quick to proffer my outraged affection for horses as my principled objection to seeing its sequel.

SENATOR John Stone encouraged speculation that he was keen to move from the Twilight Home of the Senate to the fast lane of the House of Representatives. Oh, he does like to be beside the seaside, and he opened an office on the esplanade at Mooloolaba in the Queensland electorate of Fairfax. Fairfax is held for the National Party by a backbencher, a household name (whose name escapes me for the moment).

Senator Stone really must become a member of the House of Representatives if he is to realise his ambition to become leader of the Nationals in Canberra. Fairfax would be ideal for Senator Stone because while it is a National seat it is not one of those nasty, fly-blown, brucellosis-impregnated, cowpat-dotted rural ones which would require the utterly urban

Senator to mix with mole-skin-clad peasants and to pretend to show an interest in their boring crops and their herds of brutes.

WHILE on the subject of brutishness, Victoria's censorious Liquor Control Commission banned the sale of full-strength alcohol from those bars at the Melbourne Cricket Ground which serve the brutish, thong-wearing classes. This was done at the request of the famous Victorian gentleman who, during the previous week's limited-over cricket match between 11 gentlemen of Australia and 11 gentlemen of New Zealand, had had to arrest 122 dangerous drunks and had had their sensibilities affronted by several hours of the massed hoots' plausible imitations of the debaucheries depicted by Hogarth.

THERE WAS only one arrest, and that of a black protester, at a cricket match at Manly which pitted a star-studded Prime Minister's XI against an Aboriginal XI selected from the side about to make a bicentenary tour of Mother England.

The star-studded team was studied by the Prime Minister himself, but otherwise by some real cricketers, including Rodney Marsh, Dennis Lillee, Gary Cosier, Max Walker, Ian Chappell and Len Pas-

coe. The distinguished palefaces lost by seven wickets, with the Prime Minister attempting to atone for 200 years of white wickedness by yielding his wicket for a duck. The arrested Aboriginal, the picturesque Burnham Burnham, had sat on the pitch until removed. "We gave them the land. They gave us cricket," Mr Burnham snapped, showing none of the gratitude appropriate in black people brought the civilising boon of cricket by the white man.

IN ANTICIPATION of an auction, a catalogue of the possessions of the late, AIDS-assailed Liberace was published, revealing that he had owned 13 pianos and a ceramic zebra 1.4m tall.

IN SENSITIVE Arizona, the Governor of that state, Evan Mecham, casting about for another group to outrage after having managed to offend his state's blacks, women, Jews and homosexuals with things he had said, told a golf club luncheon that "Japanese golfers suddenly get round eyes when I tell them how many golf courses there are in Arizona".

Offended celestial quaked to add their signatures to a petition which already has 400,000 signatures, calling for something to be done about the Governor.

— JAN WARDEN

Biggest hazard: 700kg snowdrift-like polar bears

Soviets, Canadians ski
towards glasnost

From PETER BENESH,
in Toronto

IT'S glasnost on a heroic — or maybe lunatic — scale. In early March, a team of Soviet and Canadian adventurers will set out to "link east and west through north" as their fearless Russian leader puts it, by skiing from Cape Arktichesky in the Severnaya Zemlya Islands in the Soviet Union to Cape Columbia on Canada's Ellesmere Island.

The forbiddingly unpronounceable Severnaya Zemlya and the comfortably familiar Cape Columbia are a mere 3500km apart — across the most daunting ice and seascape on the planet.

The seven Soviets and four Canadians will pass over the North Pole in their epic journey to prove that in the world's coldest climate there's no place for a cold war. The exercise is understatedly billed by its organisers as a test of "social integration and interaction of highly trained Soviet and Canadian personnel and their capacity to work together in overcoming extreme elements of ice, wind and temperature".

How extreme? Temperatures as cold as minus-70 degrees Fahrenheit will challenge their long underwear. Seven-metre-high pressure ridges formed by ice flows crashing together will tax their stamina. Open water, widening unpredictably, will test their paddling skills (in rubber boats). And 50kg back-packs will give their chiropractors waiting at home plenty of future patients.

There's another hazard, one that the adventurers won't be able to anticipate until, perhaps, it's too late: the menace from polar bears that weigh up to 700kg, look like snowdrifts, and don't welcome company.

The expedition will take 3½ months, unless the team has to be rescued. And a rescue would present major problems. On the Soviet side of the North Pole, the Soviets would undertake rescue operations. The Canadians would be in charge on their side of the Pole.

If disaster strikes in an area of pressure ridges, fixed-wing aircraft would be unable to land. Helicopter rescue would take longer because helicopters fly slower than airplanes. Politics would make another kind of rescue — by submarine — difficult.

The Soviets have ruled out submarine rescue. They claim they have no submarines under the



Arctic ice, so it wouldn't do to have one popping up where it theoretically doesn't exist. They have also proposed that the Arctic be turned into a "zone of peace", presumably without nuclear submarines.

Canada has no submarines capable of under-ice work. The US has sent submarines into the Canadian Arctic, but Canada considers that a violation of its sovereignty, so the Canadian Government would probably not want to have to explain a US rescue.

In the current glassy-eyed gladness over glasnost, one of the surprising things about this adventure story is that — except for a possible rescue — there's no official government involvement on either side.

At least, that's what the Soviets say. While both governments had to approve the project, it started out as a private venture — and it started, not in Canada, but in the Soviet Union, where expedition czar Dr Dmitry Shparo first proposed the venture in 1981.

Peter Baird, organiser for the Canadians, says: "The politics were not nearly as positive then as they are now. The Canadian Gov-

ernment could not see its way clear to give permission for Soviet nationals to land on Canadian soil. There was Afghanistan, there was the Olympic boycott ... all kinds of things."

But, in 1987, the Canadian Government relented. Shortly afterwards, perhaps by coincidence or perhaps because the Canadian Government announced it would buy its own fleet of nuclear submarines to patrol under the Arctic ice, Moscow put forward its proposal for the Arctic zone of peace.

After the Canadian Government stopped saying, "nyet", the Soviet planners ran advertisements in newspapers across Canada to find Canadians to join the expedition.

The Soviets are relying for funds on their version of the private sector — donations from readers of the mass-circulation youth newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. The Canadians are relying on their own culture's well-established method of fund-raising for worthy causes: corporate contributions from, among others, McDonald's hamburger chain.

Before McDonald's stepped in, the Canadians had had more trou-

ble finding money for the \$2 million project than the Russians. But the golden arches will not be erected in gratitude at the North Pole. And food — not including Big Macs — will be dropped to the trekkers from aircraft every 15 days.

The Canadian and Soviet adventurers have already spent several weeks working out their cross-cultural and interpersonal idiosyncrasies in two lengthy training sessions, the first in the Soviet Union last August, and the second late last year on Canada's Baffin Island. Their common language is now a fractured mixture of Russian, English and French.

During their Baffin Island training, Canadians laughed that while they had the latest in high-tech winter wear, the Soviets were attired in rough, woollen "long johns". The last laugh may come at about minus-70 degrees.

But why cross the Arctic on skis? After all the lofty rhetoric about peaceful neighbourliness, scientific value, social relationships and liking East and West, it boils down to a cliché: as a glasnost-celebrating official at the Soviet Embassy put it: "Because it's there."

Pompey was an expression used in the early days to describe someone who was dodging work, stealing grass or working on a sheep station, the last two activities being no doubt considered as being much better than doing forced labour as a convict.

So, the word "Pompey" passed into Australian slang, and in my humble opinion, it was shortened in the very early days, and used to describe those who came from the "Old Country" via the port of "Pompey". If any readers know whether Portsmouth was used as the port of embarkation for Australia for many years after the departure of the First Fleet, or of examples of "Po." being used prior to the early 1900s, I would be glad to hear from them.

— ARTHUR JONES

When humiliating
Pud became the
mother of invention

By TONY WRIGHT

PUD McCracken and I have been robbed.

You may know, if you read the motoring press (or the splendid motoring columns of this very journal) that a car called the Honda Prelude has received the *Wheels* magazine's Car-of-the-Year Award. One of the main reasons for the award was the vehicle's allegedly revolutionary four-wheel steering system.

Revolutionary? Hah! Pud McCracken and I invented the four-wheel steering system 25 years ago.

We were billycart daredevils. Billycarts have gone out of fashion in the past decade or two, usurped by skateboards, trail bikes, snazzy BMXs and other such glitzy speed machines.

Billycarts cost nothing more than a trip to the garbage dump for a set of cast-off pramwheels and axles, plus a little labour in the back shed, hammering bits of wood together. The machines could be personalised with paint work. My cart rejoiced in the name *Hotrod Lincoln*, a suitably rakish title cleaned from a rock 'n' roll song much appreciated by an idolised older cousin who wore a great deal of Brylcreem in his hair. Pud wanted to call his machine the *Hotrod Lincoln*, too, but after a dispute that began with accusations of plagiarism and finished with a bloodied nose, he settled for *Peggy Sue*. We knew our American music.

Each Saturday morning, Pud (a round young man with a liking for strawberry jam sandwiches, lamingtons and aniseed-balls) and I would hook our billycarts behind our pushbikes and set out for the heady delights of the creatively named Big Hill.

Big Hill is a volcanic upthrust sitting above a rolling green landscape without a single house in sight, and a gravel road winds up to the summit where tip-trucks once ground their weary way to and from a stone-crushing battery and quarry. The quarry and the stone-crushing machinery were abandoned long ago, and so Pud and I had the hill, the steep road and the view to ourselves. It was our realm for dreaming and adventure and dizzying billycart rides from the summit to the plain.

Gravity is a powerful force when you've got a set of old pramwheels, a rickety wooden frame and a one-in-five slope beneath you. We drove faster than Juan Fangio (with vastly less skill) and we had more dramatic smash-ups than Nikki Lauda. We kept for emergency repairs a set of spare wheels and axles, a spanner or two, and a hammer in a hiding place beneath a wattle tree halfway down the slope.

Emergencies happened with alarming frequency.

Pud, being larger and heavier than I, used bigger pramwheels. In the heat of competition, our loyalty as friends would waver. Often we clashed wheels and the *Hotrod Lincoln* would hurtle sideways under the impact from the great Pud and *Peggy Sue*. Gravel would split into the air, and with a tremendous sense of panic, I would know that the *Hotrod Lincoln*'s steering geometry was not up to saving me.

In such moments, there was nothing to do. As the cart tipped on to two wheels and the road rushed up to meet you, you could only stick out your elbow and wait for the impact. There was never much skin on our elbows. Gravel rash was our badge of courage and foolhardiness. Pud would fly on, chortling with delight as I topped through his dust, the *Hotrod Lincoln*'s wheels buckled and the frame splintered.

Later, Pud would offer me an aniseed-ball and assistance in repairing the cart as reparation. It

seemed a reasonable deal, and the pain and the shame would subside as we sat on the hillside, munching on the aniseed-flavoured sugar, surveying our realm.

But I secretly, desperately, wanted to humiliate Pud. I wanted to smash *Peggy Sue* and send the both of them careering upside-down as I hooted on, unscathed and victorious.

In short, I needed to invent something so sneaky that Pud's weight would be of no use to him. I needed a revolutionary cart.

And so, late one night, when I had finished reading the latest *Biggles* episode with the aid of a torch beneath the blankets, I came up with the concept of a four-wheel steering system.

With such a system, I figured, the *Hotrod Lincoln* would become so manoeuvrable that poor old Pud and *Peggy Sue* would be completely lost as they attempted to slunk me off the road. A mere flick of the steering rope would gracefully zip me sideways from their path, and they would find themselves fish-tailing and skidding and, sweet delight, crashing. I would pack a bag of aniseed balls just for the occasion.

The four-wheel steering system seemed splendidly simple. Each of the two axles would be movable. It would require only a couple of pieces of rope from the axle to the back, and the rear wheels would move sideways in unison with the front.

The next Saturday, Pud took a long look at the *Lincoln*. He was too proud to demand what the new ropes were for. I was fairly trembling with excitement. Revenge is mine, saith the lord of Big Hill.

It was a disaster. The *Lincoln* developed a completely unexpected quirk. We set off down the hill, I waited until we had reached almost terminal speed and gave a little experimental tug at the steering. The cart executed a fine, screaming 360-degree turn that threw me in to a swan dive on the gravel.

Pud fairly rocked with mirth as he disappeared around the next bend.

Later, as we sat on the embankment, Pud sucking at a mouthful of lollies, me sulkily dabbing at my new gravel rash, Pud became mighty generous about things.

"It's a great idea, this four-wheel steering system," he said.

"What we need is some way of turning the back wheels only a little bit, otherwise you'll always end up with your bum on the road." He was, of course, conceptualising a variable ratio, although neither of us had heard of such a term.

We never did get to work out how to do it properly. Pud and *Peggy Sue* kept dumping the *Hotrod Lincoln* and me into the embankment, and after awhile, our visits to Big Hill became sporadic, and then stopped altogether. We had found other ways to injure ourselves. We had discovered girls.

Pud kept the wind in his hair by buying a motorbike. I ended up with a Mini Moke.

Somewhere beneath a wattle tree on Big Hill lie a couple of rusted spanners, a hammer and a pile of pramwheels and axles.

And Honda is about to make a squillion dollars on its four-wheel steering system, complete with variable ratio and other refinements.

Perhaps we have no claim to the invention. Perhaps we received our reward long ago, sitting on Big Hill, looking out across the green pastures, with no worse concerns than how to control a set of pramwheels. We had freedom, we had a friendship, we learned something about winning and losing and forgiving, and we had fun, complete with gravel rash.