



Judith Wright

IT'S NOT THE PLANET THAT'S THE PROBLEM. IT'S US.

Twenty years ago, there was a rising anxiety about the increase in population, the loss of soils and clean waters and clean air, the future of the earth. The Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972 was an attempt to address these problems and get people to recognize them. Then the military-industrial powers moved in, strangling debate, rubbishing the problems, suborning the media and pushing the unwelcome facts underground. Now, we have another rising roar of anxiety; the ozone belt, the greenhouse effect, the loss of soils, the exponential rise in populations, are back on the agenda of politicians and the subject of articles and talks and letters and talk-back shows. But we haven't changed our own priorities, or given our governments and public servants a new and urgent agenda. And we haven't changed our attitudes.

Not until we do this, can we hope for a liveable future. It's us, not the planet's limitations, that's the problem.

Our history isn't reassuring. We have been predators on this count. Few of us ever thought it necessary to learn from our mistakes and care for, maintain and restore raped landscapes; let alone to learn from the Aborigines whose country it has been for untold millennia what its past and present limitations have been. Aborigines survived vast changes in climate, and now we will have to learn to do the same. But we still think we are the masters of the world and can solve all problems with a technological trick or two. We are up against irreducible limits now, but we won't believe it.

It has been a grand splurge, and most of us under sixty remember nothing else but rising prosperity — we hadn't noticed it was based on over-exploitation and couldn't be sustained. If anyone questioned it, they lulled their critical faculties with the consolation "it will last my time, anyway". But it hasn't; and we don't have much time to reverse what's seemed to be a natural order of things. What kind of assumptions underlie our attitudes, and what are the chances of our looking at the world in a different way?

They are not very good. Our expectations are high and we feel we are justified in fulfilling them. We never liked this country much; there is no tradition of care and love. We see it as infertile and hostile, an obstacle to be conquered, rather than a place to be loved and cared for. Our aim has been profit, not adaptation to the land's conditions. All this is now built into the character we think of as Australian and therefore praiseworthy. We seize on any chance of getting more out of the place, (we are among the most profligate users of superphosphate, insecticides, pesticides, in the world, and the state of our soils and waters demonstrates the results.)

Yet Australia has always been deficient in fertile soils, in water, in forests, in grasslands; the arid regions and the monsoonal belt are permanent limitations on population support. (Even if the "greenhouse effect" changes rainfall patterns and arid regions get wetter, this won't alter. But no doubt we will go out with rifles and dispossess Aborigines who have got back some of their lands that now look like becoming more productive.)

Most of us live in the better-watered and forested areas that make up so small a percentage of Australia; the rest, as far as we are concerned, can be given over to mining and marginal pastoralism. These are both destructive uses of land: as destructive as woodchip and clear-felling, though less visible to most people. Yet what is happening in the arid and semi-arid wheatlands and pastoral areas is as important to our future as the survival of the forests. It just doesn't have the same impact.

We have never grasped the fundamental fact that ecosystems are inter-dependent — that there is a unity of relationship between them and us. We see ourselves as separate, the elite of nature, deserving of the best — and we are going to get it, even if it is the last available goods and services the world still has to offer. Like the guns of Singapore, we point in one direction only and while new factors creep up on us, we can't reverse our direction.

Nothing more illustrates our priorities than the dominance of Gross National Product on our economic thinking. It is obviously foolish to believe that a rise in employment in hospitals, prison staffs, medical services, is an economic plus. And dollars mean little if they can't buy goods that have been used up.

All these entrenched assumptions about the basis of our existence and about our right to unlimited consumerism, then, will have to be eradicated if we are going to adapt to new and rapidly changing living

conditions. In their place, by every means of communication, we will have to emphasise their opposite; from the values of entrepreneurism and dominance, we need to switch to qualities of co-operation, humility in the face of facts we can't alter, concern for the world and the creatures we share it with — qualities that have been despised because they are thought of as feminine.

In our favour are: the emergence of ecology as a science, even though it is too relatively new to be acceptable as yet; a change in sexual stereotypes; a rising fear that we are ruining the future of the young and therefore of ourselves; a shift, still most imperceptible, from attitudes of disregard for life, to life-affirming attitudes. They are small buds as yet on the human psyche, and resisted by all our old priorities; but they may grow, if they are encouraged. Humans have changed in the past; they are inventive and adaptable. With luck and with the changing tide, they may change again.
