

## **Landscapes, mindscapes and relationships to place**

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All of us create landscapes --- it is not just artists or geographers that define, describe and depict tracts of land. Indeed, landscapes are more a function of the human mind than we realise, with each of us reacting to particular places or sets of places in ways defined by our individual and cultural experiences. In one sense, there is no such thing as a landscape but rather jumbles of elements ordered and bounded through human thought, choice and experience. The choice of which elements, places and spaces are included in particular landscapes are, in turn, determined by our perceptions and conceptions. In other words, they are affected by our minds. Indeed, for many groups of people, landscapes are not constructed solely on the basis of what is seen --- instead, they use a combination of visual cues mixed with sound, smell, temperature, emotional reactions and other features. Thus there can be an infinite number of landscapes which reflect the varieties of human relationships to place.

Landscapes are also difficult to define in a strict scientific sense. For some people landscapes consist of natural features only --- the topography of an area of land. For others landscapes are cultural creations or are defined as a mix of natural and cultural elements. Landscapes are political, contested, defended and celebrated. They can be places called 'home', exotic locations or barren wastelands that should be avoided. To be known they must be experienced but they can never be fully described. This is because not only are they perceived differently by each observer but also because they constantly and continually change. The passing of seasons, weathering, human intervention and catastrophic forces of nature combine to transform each and every landscape on an ongoing basis. Thus for many of us landscapes exist only as ideals held in the mind --- pictures composed of key reference points woven or mapped together through the nature of experience.

Essentially, landscapes have to do with mapping and constructing models of reality. Today it is valid to say there are no truly 'natural' landscapes left on planet Earth. Humans for hundreds of thousands of years have explored, charted, categorised, settled, harvested, named and defined every corner, nook and cranny of the globe. The process began with the emergence of *Homo erectus* about a million years ago. *Homo erectus* had stone tools, made ornaments from pierced ostrich shell, engraved bone with crude designs, and sailed the first water craft to islands such as Flores, in present-day Indonesia. And *Homo erectus* may have had other human abilities, such as some rudimentary form of language --- perhaps first naming some of the world's landscapes! *Homo erectus* was also the first great primate explorer with a wanderlust that took the species far out of Africa, across Europe and Asia, to islands on Australia's doorstep. Indeed, *Homo erectus* was the first human ancestor to begin the process of registering and experiencing the world's great range of natural landscapes.

There is much debate as to whether *Homo erectus* developed into *Homo sapiens sapiens* in different parts of the world simultaneously, that is that *Homo erectus* really was not that different from ourselves, or that fully modern humans emerged in Africa

a few hundred thousand years ago. For those that believe in the latter, it is argued Homo sapiens left Africa about a hundred thousand years ago in a second great wave of migration and exploration. They colonised the Homo erectus lands, eventually not only making them their own but also inheriting the Earth. Whatever the case, it appears that landscapes were first marked in a wide-spread symbolic way between 40,000-50,000 years ago, with rock paintings and engravings being among some of the more long-lasting evidence. This occurred not only in European landscapes but also in those of Asia, Africa and Australia. People mapped, marked and presumably mythologised every landscape they encountered. Eventually this behaviour spread to the Americas so that today we find the globe covered with rich and culturally meaningful landscapes. These locations are, of course, usually populated with humans, plants and animals but they often are also inhabited with spirits or fantastic creatures --- elves and trolls of Ireland, fairies at the bottom of English gardens, the Yeti 'snowpeople' of the Himalayas and parts of China, the Loch Ness monster, the Mimi spirits of Arnhem Land or races of giants in North America, Africa and Europe.

Landscapes now have lengthy histories associated with them, with rock paintings, oral histories, topographic maps, books, movies and computer programs commemorating some of the more significant events that took place. Some landscapes have become sacred for particular peoples or for humanity as a whole. These often are natural places, such as spectacular mountains, waterfalls or places where incredible change is emphasised or experienced --- the boundary zones between forms of vegetation, rock, water and sky. Others may be cultural places of profound human experience, such as the battlefields of past wars, graveyards, or even entire villages that capture a sacred moment of the past.

As can well be seen, we all have different relationships to particular places. Some of us may have a scientific, clinical, descriptive relationship. Others will have one that is more creative, one that taps into the raw energy of the landscape. Relationships may be deeply personal, spiritual, historic, nostalgic or aesthetic. Indigenous people may have a relationship that connects them directly not only to the landscape, or a particular place within it, but also to Ancestral Beings of the creative era of the 'Dreamtime', to plants, to animals, to other people and to the past.

For many of us there is something we call a distinctive 'Australian landscape'. This is despite the great diversity of place spread across the continent. Often this is most noticeable when we travel overseas for an extended period --- when we greet new and foreign landscapes we both compare and contrast them with our own. Sometimes we also miss or feel homesick for the Australian landscape. In our minds we have a conception of what makes Australia unique and special but often it is difficult to describe with words. For instance, we could describe the natural Australian landscape as consisting of the sounds of cockatoos and kookaburras, the golds and greens of eucalypts, the buzzing sound of cicadas on hot and sweaty days, the earthy reds of the Centre, the brilliant blues of the fringing seas, the feel of sand between toes, the dusty dryness of the parched interior, the sense of openness, spaciousness, vastness and freedom. The Australian landscape also is mysterious, mystical, magical and mythical, with a strong element of timelessness. It is this aspect that Indigenous Australians often emphasise while more recent arrivals seem bent upon isolating the discrete elements that make up Australian landscapes. Science and the Western

tradition of putting things in boxes has thus been superimposed over top of the sheer beauty and majesty of the Australian landscape psyche in much the same way that European, and now a distinct but changing 'Australian', culture has been superimposed over top of the Indigenous.

This layering of the landscape is what Kevin Todd's creations are all about. They are mindscapes in the extreme for no where do they actually exist in three dimensional space. But they also are real, tangible objects that express a history of mapping, marking and manipulating. They illustrate some of the profound changes Australian landscapes have recently undergone while also reminding us of the different ways in which people perceive or conceive of landscapes. Finally, they warn of a future perhaps not to our liking. For if we continue on our present course we may reduce our landscapes to places without birds, plants or even humans. But it is not too late --- if we come to terms with and better care for our landscapes now. Australia and Australian landscapes, both physical and cultural, truly are unique. Let us rejoice and celebrate the richness of our heritage in order that we may bequeath such a gift to the future.