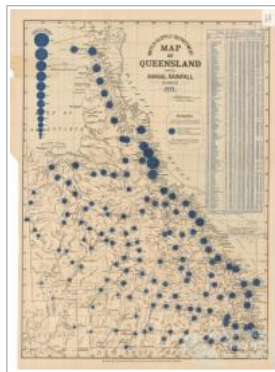


Survival: how the landscape impacts on people



Annual rainfall, 1902

By: Celmara Pocock

Queensland's historical landscape encapsulates the tension between threat and survival. Climate and geography – humid jungles, desert plains, and a hazardous coastline; extreme weather – storms, cyclones, floods, and droughts; and conflicted politics – Aboriginal massacres, intolerance and insularity, have shaped the people of Queensland.

The story of Queensland is filled with incidents of astonishing survival. We treasure these stories for what they tell us of human endurance and resilience. We wonder: how did they survive? how did they go on? We marvel at the resilience of human body, mind and spirit, and at the ferocious, unforgiving and indiscriminatory force of nature. Could we sustain the same ordeals or would we succumb? None of us knows until confronted by disaster, disease or accident.

Surviving nature

Queensland has more than its fair share of natural disasters. Flood is an almost certain eventuality in every Queenslander's lifetime. Of the houses that survived the 1974 Brisbane flood, some boast silt in their ceilings. The Queensland coast has stolen a multitude of ships and lives. Despite a bristle of high tech navigational aids on deck, the Great Barrier Reef can still surprise and trap modern day mariners. The severity of droughts in the first decade of the twenty-first century saw city dwellers check dam levels as frequently as their agrarian counterparts. The threats were no longer to remote and distant crops and rural livelihoods but to urban industries and taken-for-granted ways of life. And while the destructive forces of Tracy are legendary for the devastation they inflicted on Darwin in 1974, a series of severe cyclones has battered Queensland in successive decades, taking lives, homes, property and harvests. The excess of tropical storms can wash away more than dreams. Homes and people vanish or perish before cyclonic fronts; years of work is undone in minutes. To survive is also to start all over again.

The cost of survival can be measured in losses; of life, opportunity, self, ability, knowledge, family property and belonging. An accumulation of sorrows surrounds survivors. They may survive overt horrors of war, disease, accident or disaster, only to abandon their families or end their own lives. The sole survivor carries a particularly heavy burden. Death is the shadow of every survival story.

In 1881 Mary Watson, her infant son and servant Ah Sam survived an attack by Aborigines at a bêche-de-mer station on Lizard Island. They escaped in a metal tank and endured eight days at sea before they finally succumbed to dehydration. Their initial escape and remarkable fortitude was insufficient for their survival. Tropical islands are the archetypal stage of romanticised survival where nature provides survivors with all the necessities of life. But some of the most harrowing real life stories of survival come from islands where water and food is scarce, and isolation and abandonment make escape all but impossible. While EJ Banfield's writings from and about Dunk Island emphasise the pleasures and spoils of a self-imposed exile on Dunk Island, the reality was often more difficult. He and his wife Bertha suffered many illnesses and deprivations. They survived ferocious cyclones but saw neighbours and friends killed and property destroyed. The isolation of their circumstances bore witness to a number of preventable deaths including that of a child. And Bertha eventually watched helplessly as her beloved husband died of untreated



Snake bite kit, pre 1970s



Rabbit trap



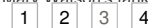
Blood Bank advertisement, Bundaberg



Grindstone



Mary Watson's tank, 1881



appendicitis. But those who do survive can be the least expected. In 2004 a boat capsized in Torres Strait drowning a mother and father and their infant son. But the couple's three older children – 10, 12, and 15 years old – survived. They swam to a nearby island, but finding no food and water were forced to swim a further three kilometres to another island. Here they survived on coconuts, oysters and Wongi plums. Despite their young age, they possessed the knowledge and skill to survive six days before being rescued.

Landscape as survival

The Queensland landscape is the very essence of human survival. Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders have prospered in landscapes colonials regarded as hostile. More than an eked existence, landscapes are the heartland of spirituality, creativity, belonging and sociality for Aboriginal peoples. Until recent times very few colonisers valued or appreciated Queensland landscapes in this way. Rather non-Indigenous settlers have pitted themselves against the Queensland landscape. In doing so they created new circumstances and narratives of survival.

The biggest challenge to early colonial survival was ignorance. European explorers were speared and attacked for transgressions of Aboriginal law; they starved while surrounded by unfamiliar foods, and died of dehydration because they could not follow ancient water courses.

Transformation was seen as necessary for survival. Colonisers imported housing, transport, crops and livestock that irrevocably changed the landscape. But the landscape also persisted and exerted its presence on the newcomers. Unknown seasonal patterns and unprecedented climates thwarted many efforts to establish agricultural enterprises in the colony. Crops continued to fail in the face of ravaging storms, insect plagues, drawn out droughts; and fluctuations in fortune that turn parched soils to boggy mud.

Despite initial setbacks early colonial ventures were optimistic. Government propaganda to encourage migration emphasised the space, warm climate and the natural benefits of the Queensland landscape. And settlers began to learn how to adapt and create new ways of being. Hybrid cultures and local innovations allowed settlers to survive and eventually prosper. Wooden houses built on stilts to avoid flooding and capture breezes in torpid summers have endured as characteristic elements of the Queensland landscape, so characteristic that they are widely known as 'Queenslanders'. And a remarkable number survive, in both city and country.

The large land mass of Queensland extends from subtropical and tropical coastal fringes and dense rainforest, to rugged mountain terrain, dry inland plains and deserts. Stories of survival from inland regions cross state borders and share much with archetypal Australian bush stories. Drought and fire, starving sheep and long cattle droves to find water and feed characterise western Queensland. Severe drought has driven many pastoralists and farmers to despair. Loss of livestock, property and hope have ended in suicide or driven people to the coast.

The tropical locality with its twinning of sunshine and rain was particular promising for a bountiful harvest. Henry Lamond a station manager from western Queensland, made this dream a reality when he escaped the prolonged drought of the 1920s by moving to the Whitsunday Islands. Here he successfully supported his family through the Depression by supplementing a marginal pastoral property with his popular writing.

Surviving abundance

While the tropical conditions of Queensland offered great promise, colonisers had to learn how to survive over-abundance. In the warm moist climate, vegetation is lush; crops can flourish and animals thrive. But such excesses challenge human survival. Abundance can manifest as impenetrable growth; rampant weeds and diseases; and proliferations of predatory or venomous animals, biting or stinging insects and plants. The same conditions that help plants and animals flourish, can make diseases

virulent – spreading quickly among people and animals. Queensland is home to some rare but deadly conditions like Hendra virus. The fertile conditions support the survival and population explosion of exotic animals and plants. Prickly pear, rabbits, pigs, deer and goats, and that most famous of Queensland exotics – the cane toad, have prospered. Their presence and the changes they have wrought in the landscape threaten native food sources, introduced crops, wildlife and people.

Queensland has harmful species of its own. Stinging trees, lawyer vine, burning and blinding tree saps, toxic plants – irritants at best and life-threatening at worst. Aboriginal people have developed complex processes to render these safe. In the right hands they can provide essential elements of survival – food, shelter, medicine, baskets, clothing. Snakes and crocodiles can be more immediately life threatening. In 2004 a 60 year woman tackled a 300 kilogram crocodile that had dragged her companion from his tent in far north Queensland. In an act of astonishing heroism Alicia Sorohan saved the man and herself. In contrast Steve Irwin, Queensland's most famous wrestler of crocodiles, survived many years of handling venomous snakes and venturing too close to saurian beasts, only to be killed by that most unlikely of marine creatures, the stingray.

Cultural survival

Survival may be a matter of single heroic act, or a long struggle over a lifetime. Poverty and ill health can be as severe as unsympathetic seasons, rainfall, soil and terrain. A society blind to history, need or circumstance pushes people to the very edge of existence.

The frontier between cultures is a dangerous and frightening place; survivors are transformed. The taking of Aboriginal lands in Queensland created circumstances of war and conflict between Aboriginal peoples and between white and black, and established extreme competition for survival. It is the victorious who have recorded many harrowing tales of survival, while stories from the other side are seldom acknowledged, recorded or celebrated. On both sides there has been fear and violence, and survivors are both oppressors and the oppressed, but overwhelmingly it is Aboriginal people who have lost. Aboriginal histories span the immediate, the lifetime and an intergenerational epic of loss and survival.

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders have survived a rapid and extreme invasion of their lands and seas. They have endured, adapted, invented and continued despite every effort to eradicate, exterminate and alter their country, families, customs, knowledge and religions. Their struggles for recognition of continued presence and cultural integrity remains a cornerstone of the Queensland political landscape. The Mabo legal decision is testament to the enduring connections between Indigenous peoples, their country and cultural knowledge and customs. The influence of the decision extends way beyond Eddie Mabo's Torres Strait homeland, and beyond Queensland borders, to mark the exceptional cultural survival of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

The predominantly hot northerly location of Queensland set the conditions for exploitation of black labour. For many years the exploitation of Pacific labourers has been justified as a necessity for colonial survival. Providing a cheap – and, as argued at the time, climatically suited – source of labour, South Sea Islanders were coercively recruited to the Queensland sugar industry. They survived hard work and deplorable conditions only to face deportation when the White Australia policy was adopted at the beginning of the twentieth century. But many of these people had made Queensland home and refused to go. But it took until 2000 for the Queensland Government to formally acknowledge Australian South Sea Islanders.

Queensland is a State often characterised as conservative due to the longevity of the Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen Government. During his reign opposing voices were silenced. Such draconian times fostered a legacy of political activism; feminist, socialist, Aboriginal, environmental and student groups banded together and fought. Those who survived these years bear scars of fear and uncertainty, many are angry.

Survival and community

Histories of struggle and survival are often between different cultural groups or geographic locations. But survival also depends on knowledge sharing; give and take. Many stories of colonial success have depended on the skill, knowledge and labour of Aboriginal peoples; they have also depended on the work and commitment of non-British migrants – Chinese, Italian, Greek and Pacific labourers.

Together Queenslanders have survived floods, droughts, economic hardship, epidemics and world wars. In crisis the most unlikely people will work together. Cooperation is a hallmark of survival. Helping one another is as natural as breathing in remote and desert regions of Australia. Failure to offer or accept assistance can be deadly. Surviving in these locations relies on personal fortitude, but it also relies on a network of distant but trustworthy neighbours. The Royal Flying Doctor Service brings emergency aid and everyday comfort to remote people throughout the land. Conversation, company, schooling and medical assistance are all possible with the aid of communication technologies.

Historically, survival is perceived as an individual or community achievement, but increasingly there is an expectation that outsiders – volunteers and government departments – should provide assistance. In urban areas informal community support is replaced by the committed volunteers of the State Emergency Service, fire brigades, government programs and council hotlines. Professionally trained, these individuals and agencies ensure a high level of survival and recovery.

But in relying on others to provide assistance, we may forget that living with one another is a critical measure of survival. There is an increasing number of people at our margins – the homeless, unemployed, addicted, evicted, lonely and isolated. Young gay men struggle to survive in rural Australia – seeing no way out of who they are and where they want to live, suicide is endemic. Homeless people in cities fight a constant battle to find a space where they can be safe, and out of sight. The unemployed, low wage and pensioners increasingly struggle to survive in an affluent society.

If the Queensland physical and social landscape is full of threat and danger, then it is equally a landscape of survival stories. New inventions and adaptations have given Queensland distinctive cultures, landscapes and identities.

To survive it may be necessary to hunker down or keep on moving; hide from a passing storm or come out fighting. Queenslanders have adopted many modes of survival. Within every story are the twin elements of life and death; threat and survival. And between these stretch the extraordinary strength, imagination, creativity, endurance and adaptability of survivors.

Date created: 3 December 2010

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