

Pam Robinson OAM: Pioneer Women in the Environment and Conservation

I am proud to be considered a "Pioneer Women in the Environment and Conservation" with other women who came before me, those who are around me now and the others who will find themselves stepping up in the future.

We tend to think of 'Pioneer' in the historical sense of the word - relating to a person in a bygone time or someone having set foot and lived in a region, years ago. Whilst not untrue, I want to have our thinking encompass the fact that a Pioneer is to be one of the first people to do something: to be the first person or organisation to start work in a new area, introduce a new idea etc. I make this point especially in terms of its importance to the environment and conservation, its importance in terms of young people coming along. It is important indeed, that recognition and respect be given to past Pioneers, that strides made 'back then' by them have brought us to where we are now - but so also is it important for younger people to see that they themselves can absolutely become a Pioneer in "their time" – that they will be able to leave their legacy of endeavour. A Pioneer is a person who sees potential, is an innovator, who is willing to try new things. Pioneers push boundaries to advance a cause or idea. There are times of success and failure and sometimes it takes overcoming great challenges. What it will always be about is having a vision, dedication and persistence, creativity, passion and a good measure of constructive boldness and courage. Exciting really and who doesn't want not to be part of all that. I want to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I also wish to convey my awareness of and respect of Elders past, present and emerging - on the lands wherever I walk in times of contribution to conservation; to the wonderful environment we all share. Many Pioneer Women in Environment and Conservation are of aboriginal heritage; others come from several generations of families who came to Australia in the last 200 years; while many more are more recent arrivals – people like me who came originally from Northern Ireland in 1963, or those who have arrived since then – many having come from a much greater diversity of nationalities and cultural backgrounds than in the 1960s. Some of them will have come from rural areas and some perhaps have not to date become connected again with land or been invited to participate with environmental and conservation activities in their new country - such activities as Landcare which connects people and nature. No matter what or where our starting point is or was, the Earth is what we have in common and the future depends on what we do in the present, what we do in 'our time' for our planet.

My passion for nature and volunteering has been with me all my life. It comes from my grandparents and parents, it comes from early childhood activities with family, friends and within organisations – it comes from being a farmer, it comes from living and working within a rural community where one is farming and managing the land, while also being on school councils, being a CFA Brigade volunteer, being a Councillor on the Shire Council, and when with others in my community we formed a local environmental group in the late 1970's to address emerging issues such as dryland salinity, tree planting for stock shelter belts in paddocks, removal of rabbits and weeds. Essentially, my conservation, environmental and volunteering life was borne out of a case of inherently knowing that I must stand up to take part – to take a turn – and if not me, then why should I think others should. What the Dalai Lama put as, *'it is Our collective and individual responsibility to preserve and tend to the world in which we all live'*.

In the spirit of the Focus on Pioneer Women in the Environment and Conservation, I want to step back in time to recognise two Past Pioneers in Environment and Conservation. Two Women often referred to as the 'Mothers of Landcare in Victoria'. They came from different life backgrounds, had different political points of view, but they absolutely got it right. They understood in the 1980s that if a new community based NRM program was to be established, it could only be achieved by a bipartisan approach. Joan Kirner AC and Heather Mitchell OBE AM – one a Government Minister in a Labor Government and the other President of the mainly conservative membership of the Victorian Farmers Federation and both with very different life backgrounds – THEY understood working with a bipartisan collaborative approach would provide the difference required to make their new program first class.

At one stage it was suggested the name be three words - Total Land Care – but Joan with her sense of humour, not to mention her keen alertness to acronyms, said she was not going to be known as the Minister for TLC. Thus Landcare was born. Landcare would tackle shared environmental problems at community level. How could they have known the movement would grow from this to the adoption of a broader focus on sustainable management of all of Victoria's natural resource assets? I think because they trusted people, trusted communities and their ability to 'get things done' by providing leadership and support from the top. Landcare now encompasses individuals and groups across the whole landscape from coastal to urban and remote areas of Victoria. The first Landcare Group was announced in 1986 and earlier groups such as Farm Tree Groups joined in. Land Protection and other activities that people were already in groups undertaking continued but the Landcare theme became the atmosphere they were also relating to.

How nice it is to see the Girl Guides here today. As a former Brownie, Guide, Cadet and one-time Brown Owl, I give you all 'a left-hand handshake' - being that the left hand is the one nearest the heart. I expect many of you through Guides and school have a strong passion for the environment and conservation and I like to think that you have taken part in some activities such as with a Landcare project. Landcare has no age barrier – it is for everyone. We can all do our part to care for and maintain our unique and biodiverse landscapes and there are many opportunities to participate – whether it be through a one-off event or greater connection to the nearly 600 Landcare groups and 500 Friends of Groups in Victoria, their websites will show you where you can register to receive the lively and colourful Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management Magazine – the Summer edition showing the 2019 Landcare Award Winners – showing people like you and me taking part in a diverse range of activities around Victoria. Newham Primary School near Woodend with just 140 students and eight staff won the Woolworths Junior Landcare Team Award achieving great results with their environmental and sustainability programs.

The Indigenous Land Management Award was won by the Woka Walla Land Management Crew who have been operating for seven years across Yorta Yorta Country and northern Victoria where they have done a great deal of cultural heritage identification and protection, cultural burning, pest plant and animal control. The five crew members have an unbroken link to the land through their families and have responsibility for Caring for Country which connects them to their ancestors and provides a career path for the future and their leadership is bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous land managers.

I am today focussing on Victorian Landcare, but also Landcare is across the nation managed by Landcare Australia Limited - as in 1989, following the success of Landcare in Victoria, the Australian Government introduced a National Landcare Program with a politically bipartisan approach. There is Australian Landcare International, a non-profit organisation initiated by several Victorian Landcare pioneers in more recent years and it is supporting overseas communities to sustain their own country's land, water and biodiversity.

With the recent heartbreaking events with the fires, many Landcare Groups and land carers have lost a great deal of their hard work, their achievements and the fires have been devastating for the environment, for individuals, communities, wildlife and yet already many in Landcare have rallied to help each other in so many supportive ways. In rural areas, many people who are in Landcare, are also in their CFA, Red Cross, Service Clubs and Local Government Councils amongst other commitments, as people 'wear many hats' locally. So many are reeling with what has happened, yet already through the strength of the Landcare Movement – people and the environment conservation movement are there for each other with a listening ear and taking part in the first round of what is needed – whether clearing up fences, finding a corner to plant seeds, caring for injured wildlife or out looking for other injured ones.

Other groups are talking about when the rains come and germination begins they will collectively work closely together to monitor the weeds, as happens after fires – while other weeds may come from the kindly delivered hay as not all come from weed free properties. It is a big task and a big ask and Landcare people are 'can do – will do' people and are already looking to the future. That is not to say that everyone is just bright and cheerful and getting on with it – in fact many are very tired and annoyed with the scant attention that was given by Governments to evident climate change science and vegetation fuel loads expected this season, which with less moisture in the soil, means many fires will be hotter and travel more quickly. Over the past 10 years there has been some outstanding climate change work undertaken by Australian scientists – work that was/is internationally recognised and has been peer reviewed by other scientific bodies and highly qualified professional scientists. Australian Scientists are highly regarded internationally, but at times their advice has been diminished nationally. Then there have been great inputs from citizen scientists who have been collecting and collating information from 'on ground' observations and surveys – some undertaken over many years. People are aghast at the scant action taken on information provided by scientists, the Bureau of Meteorology forecasts and their "years old" mapping and indications of land and sea warming. Groups such as Farmers for Climate Change and the community at large have been ahead of Governments, just as have Insurance, Business, Health and the ADF – all of whom over recent years put climate change front and centre of their planning and future policies. These people and others have been at the table on various National Committees and Forums, reported to Governments, as some institution, organisation, committee or research facility were set up with government funding. I certainly know this from a seat at some of those tables and words now being used such as 'mitigation and adaptation' to manage the new normal were part of those reports, which is really what the transition to worse future impacts from climate change will be if a bigger response isn't undertaken; isn't given to understanding the changed landscape of just native vegetation; isn't given to understanding what is now, a shorter season available in a twelve-month period to undertake fuel reduction; and if what is going to be needed at a local level, is underestimated.

Landcare MUST be part of the regional environmental recovery ahead, be an active and integral partner of the roll out required for resources and financial support to meet the regional recovery. Landcare people are already established in groups and know their communities – they have an excellent track record of natural resource management – they know their community and Landcare with increased financial support can deliver in ‘spades’ what Governments need urgently to happen on the ground. Out of the fires I see and hear a desire for a renewed commitment and link between urban and rural people; there is compassion and understanding.

I want to recognise the many emerging new Pioneers coming along in the environment and conservation fields of endeavour – those who are students, in research, who have joined departments working with natural resources, working on the land and waterways, whether it be in urban or rural settings. Recognise those who have been and are currently speaking up and standing up for the future of our planet – our world. Without them it would be a bleak future, but with them I see a refreshed leadership process of social influence in which one person is, or many like-minded people are, able to enlist the aid and support of others in accomplishing a common task. Working with the environment, working together in a bipartisan way, through all levels of influence, whether it is being part of the group in their area as a volunteer with ‘hands on’, or in conversations for what is required for the institutional arrangements needed ahead, or whether it be taking up the opportunity to have their voice heard – being on the Local Council?

The Australian Local Government Women’s Association, which like NCW has a track record of supporting women to get to levels of influence and has information to share on ‘How to go about standing for Council’- a local level of Government where one can influence what is happening or required in the community. This year is a 100 years celebration of the First Victorian Woman elected to Local Government, Mary Rogers on the Richmond council (now Yarra Council) – another Pioneer.

Pioneer is not just the domain of the past it is a call to the future. In 2014-2017 I served on the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility – End Users Committee – which provided excellent outcomes of information and guidance for mitigation and adaptation community approaches across Australia. In 2014, I was one of 12 Women around Australia who initiated a Monster Climate Change Petition of 72,000 signatures from adults and young people. The petition was headed by Medical Professor Fiona Stanley AC, a past Australian of the Year and Mary Crooks AO from the Victorian Women’s Trust and who is held in high regard for her commitment to public policy, feminism and social justice. The Petition was presented to the Australian Parliament and went to the G20 that year. Internationally, in 2014 a wonderful young woman, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner was one of four speakers chosen to speak at the opening ceremony of the United Nations Climate Summit. A poet, writer, performance artist, journalist and mother from the Marshall Islands, in the North Pacific, then just 6 feet above sea level - was given the chance to deliver her people’s message before the UN Secretary Ban Ki Moon and other world leaders. Knowing many from Pacific Islands would one day have to move given rising sea levels – would become climate refugees - not only did she rise to the occasion, but she powerfully voiced a call for climate action that left UN delegates on their feet with tears in their eyes.

Six years later we are still hearing more calls from senior and younger Australian and international voices; they are asking Governments to intelligently acknowledge, with respect and care for the work undertaken, the information provided from past and current Pioneers of environment, conservation and science but most of all – to get on with greater urgency and response to our changing climate. I am an optimistic person and want others to be too – not to get overwhelmed - but garner strength and join others to continue to care for and enhance our wonderful environment – our land, water and air quality. I will continue to believe enormous benefits await humankind if we and Governments rise to the climate challenge, realise a great many of the benefits are economic and see it is a time for us to collectively say YES– I am going to give more personal ‘hands on time’ with and in my local environment.

While looking for ‘greater leadership from the top’ we can also go from sitting on the sidelines with frustration saying ‘**THEY OUTA**’ be doing this and that – we can decide that - **We** will take up the leadership position for the future of our environment and conservation by saying in a bipartisan and collective voice **‘We Outa’ WE WILL and WE ARE’**.