

Los Cedros Biological Reserve Dec. 1, 2021

Back in 1981 our 2-year [direct action for the Terania Creek rainforest](#) ended with the declaration of the Nightcap National Park. This was part of the [Wran Government's historic decision](#) protecting the best of NSW's sub-tropical rainforests in a string of National Parks stretching from the Border Ranges 600 kms south to Barrington Tops. You can best get a feeling for the mood of those bygone days by listening to some of the songs written around our campfires - songs like [Tonka Toys](#), [For a Handful of Timber](#), [The Killing of The Trees](#) and [The Water Song](#).

Unbeknownst to the bedraggled hippy victors, among their ranks were three infiltrators who had been sent north by a group then known as The Tasmanian Wilderness Society led by a dole bludging doctor named Bob Brown. Their mission was to ascertain whether TWS should consider mounting such a blockade to save the temperate rainforests of SW Tasmania from flooding by a dam that Hydro Tasmania were starting to build on the Franklin and Lower Gordon Rivers. The three chained themselves to bulldozers alongside we Nimbin folks, were thrown in jail and returned to HQ excitedly commending such action to their comrades.

Thus, our Nightcap Action Group (NAG) – the bumper stickers read Nightcap Action Group: NAG! NAG! NAG! – received an invitation from TWS to help create a [blockade to stop the dam](#). A couple of kombi-loads of us rolled down and helped set up the base camp at Strahan, conduct NVA trainings and then go upriver to greet the daily boatloads of warriors from all over the country ferried in in an old cruise boat called the J Lee M – more than 3000 people joined us, more than 1500 were arrested. [Here's](#) Bob Brown's story of that campaign.

We had timed the action to coincide with the run-up to the 1983 Federal Elections and 2 weeks before election day the Franklin story had pushed election promises off the front page of the newspapers and, seeing the writing on the wall, Leader of the Opposition Bob Hawke announced that, if elected, the ALP would stop the dam.

This was what we'd been waiting for. The following day some 1100 people left Tasmania and fanned out to a dozen marginal electorates around the country where less than 2 percentage points separated the opposition from the government in the polls. We went from door to door in those electorates (I was in south Brisbane) telling people about the importance of rivers and rainforests and asking them to vote for the ALP.

All eleven electorates swung to the ALP and Hawke's first words when the results were announced were "The dam will not be built!"

One spinoff of these heady events was a long honeymoon between the green movement and the Hawke government, one of the manifestations of which was NGOEI – the Australian Development Assistance Bureau's NGO Environment Initiative Program.

At this point in the story I need to take us to the headwaters of another stream. Back in Lismore we had started the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) in 1981 a group of volunteers sounding the alarm for rainforests worldwide. The rainforests are the womb of life, home to over half of the world's species of plants and animals and satellite photos were showing that, at current rates of destruction, they would be utterly annihilated in less than a single human lifetime. My partner at RIC and editor of our World Rainforest Report, Ian Peter in 1989 started Pegasus Networks, the first public Internet service provider in Australia. Before this we had been communicating via Econet, an ISP based in San Francisco and were amongst the first users of email in Australia. Through this we had been contacted by a Washington DC environment group and asked to join an international coalition calling for the reform of the World Bank's environmental policies. We did so and were appalled at the environmental destruction in the name of so-called development assistance. The RIC volunteer leading the charge, Carol Sherman, wrote a book in 1990 called "[A look inside the World Bank](#)" and we were often down in Canberra [demonstrating outside World Bank events](#). During our research we discovered that only 15% of Australia's aid budget was funnelled through the World Bank and other Multilateral Development Banks, the remaining 85% was bilateral dispensed by the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB, now called AusAID). We also discovered that AIDAB's environmental standards were no better than the World Bank's, unsurprising given the revolving door where bureaucrats careers would regularly bounce around between multilateral and bilateral institutions.

So ... we started a campaign to persuade the Senate to launch an inquiry into the environmental impacts of the Australian aid program and created a letterhead which eventually included both the major environment groups like ACF, TWS and Greenpeace as well as the development assistance NGO's like Freedom From Hunger and Community Aid Abroad.

The Senate eventually held the inquiry and their report broadly accepted all of our criticisms and its Inquiry's findings required far-reaching changes of AIDAB: For the first time AIDAB had to prepare environmental impact statements for projects before funding them and to obey Aussie environmental laws even when working in countries with no such laws of their own. Furthermore, the Senate called upon AIDAB to create a new funding window – The Non Governmental Organisations Environmental Initiative or NGOEI which would provide \$1 million/year for NGO's to create aid projects which establish new standards of environmental excellence in the delivery of Aussie development assistance. Having been for years the chief thorn in AIDAB's side, the Rainforest Information Centre felt that it was unlikely that we would see any of this money but, to our amazement, every project that we proposed to AIDAB over the next several years was funded. These included the [reforestation of the sacred mountain Arunachala in S India](#); the [protection of more than a million Ha. of tropical rainforest in Morobe Province PNG](#) by creating an economic alternative to industrial logging – we provided landowners with small portable sawmills and training in ecological forestry in exchange for them putting 99% of their forests off limits to all industrial developments - and the creation of a [biological reserve in Ecuador](#). RIC was stunned to be on the receiving end of this largesse and figured that AIDAB probably hoped that fear of losing this funding would prevent RIC from continuing to harass them. So , in September 1992, RIC helped fund the creation of AID/WATCH by Carol Sherman (who had been spearheading our campaign against the Multilateral Development Banks and had authored the 1990 book “A Look at the World Bank” ) and Lee Rhianon (who had been working at The Ideas Centre and later went on to become a Greens member of the NSW Parliament (1999-2010) and since then a Federal Senator). This way we supposed that AID/WATCH could continue monitoring (and where necessary criticising) AIDAB while RIC (with no conflict of interest) could receive funds from the NGOEI which remained in place until John Howard became Prime Minister. It was axed (alongside funding for “Women in Development”) in the Coalition's first budget in 1996.

Anyone interested in more of this story might go to [Some AID/WATCH History](#)

As mentioned above, one of the RIC projects funded by the NGOEI was the creation of a biological reserve in Ecuador and this is where our story now travels.

RIC volunteers had been saving vast swathes of [rainforest in Ecuador since 1986](#) and in 1989, funded by the Australian Government via NGOEI, we helped establish a 15,800 acre reserve as a legal and physical entity. The Los Cedros Reserve provides habitat for monkeys, bears, armadillos, pumas and jaguars, now studied by scientists from around the world. The project site was strategically chosen to halt the colonization, poaching and illegal logging that have been undermining the adjacent Cotacachi-Cayapas in spite of its status as an Ecuadorian national park and a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve. The approximately half million acre Cotacachi-Cayapas National Park contains the most diverse forest on Earth and represents the crown of the biota of western Ecuador.

For the last 30 years we have been helping our Ecuadorean colleagues protect Los Cedros from a variety of threats including illegal logging, colonisation and, most recently mining. You can read about that campaign [here](#) or watch [this video](#) if you're interested but suffice to say that a corrupt government had illegally handed mining concessions to 2 million Ha of Bosques Protectores (protected forests) to BHP, Gina Reinhardt and a host of multinational miners and this included our own beloved Los Cedros.

In 2019, we had initiated a Court Case against Cornerstone, the Canadian miner wreaking the most havoc at Los Cedros. We won the case and Cornerstone, foolishly it turns out, appealed to the Constitutional Court. In July 2020, in a precedent-setting move, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador, the highest court in the land, decided to take on the case of Los Cedros as a test case for the “Rights of Nature”. Ecuador was the first country in the world to include the Rights of Nature in its constitution and this was the first time that it is being tested to see whether it's just window dressing or perhaps might have some teeth. The Ecologist called it “[The Case of the Century](#)” Now, Ecuador's Constitutional Court, 7 to 2, has ruled for Los Cedros!

If there's any justice this is the precedent which will eject BHP, Gina Reinhardt and all the rest out of 2.4 million HA of Bosques Protectores. I believe that no appeal is possible though time will tell. There are certainly billions of dollars at stake and they won't take this lying down.

Ric have been helping fund an important film about this issue, [Marrow of the Mountain](#) , and this decision will certainly make it a much more important film that might otherwise have been the case.