Skeletons
Greg French

Lake Leake, on the east coast of Tasmania, is just three or four kilometres long, yet when it was formed in 1886 it was the largest artificial impoundment in Australia, a powerful symbol progress and security, proof of wealth for toil. Today, well over a century since the flooding, drowned trees still stand, though one by one, year after year, like war veterans from other powerful nationalistic campaigns, they topple, crumble and decay. Soon, all will have fallen. Will that mean that the lake is more, or less, alive? More or less dead?
Australia's most controversial impoundment must be the one which flooded Tasmania's Lake Pedder-who has not been moved by the photographic images of those rose-pink beaches, cradled as they were by dramatic expanses of verdant wilderness? And what about the dreamtime outflow, the incredible Serpentine which, like one of Homer's worms, must have seemed indestructible? For countless millennia, flood after flood, whenever the river was decapitated with guillotines of silt and rubble, it would defiantly sprout another head. Each time Nature cut its torso, the severed pieces, the oxbows, adopted lives of their own. Until there was a labyrinth of unfathomable water courses, deep, mysterious, frighteningly dark and silent.
The Serpentine was a world apart, isolated from the rest of watery creation by an impenetrable waterfall. A Galapagos of life unlike anything anywhere, each species subtly and perfectly adapted to its delicate microcosm.
Yet how common is the story of the Serpentine's demise, the flooding of unique habitats by diverted streams, all teeming with powerful generic invaders-everything from common galaxiid fishes to universally-competitive insects and crustaceans. Surely the damming of Great Lake, an event which predated Pedder by more than half a century, was equally tragic-its seals, grayling, great beds of aquatic weeds and who knows how many invertebrates, all sentenced to extinction even before the modern meaning of the word 'conservation' had entered our lexicon.
Recently I drove to Arthurs Lake to compare aerial photos of the Morass to the bland expanse of water which has long suffocated the complexity of the natural marsh. The sun beat down, hot and relentless, and the sense of loss seemed overbearing. I found myself weeping, and sought respite in the shade of drowned forests. I discovered that many other animals were doing likewise. Mayfly duns, which dislike harsh light, were hatching in the shade and nowhere else. Spinners found the sheltered water perfect for egg-laying. Aquatic mudeyes used the protruding trunks and twigs first as ladders, then platforms on which they could hatch into dragonflies. And the fish, either attracted to the food, or the trees themselves, seemed altogether more abundant and sprightly. I found, as always, that the skeletons were not so dead as they seemed.
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The losses in drowned lakes are hardly confined to intangible spiritual things. Consider the volume of sawlog and woodchip enveloped by the deathly-dark waters of Lake Gordon. Denied access to this resource, we find ourselves relentlessly chainsawing away at ancient living forests, tearing apart greenness, solitude and timelessness, hacking at our social fabric, spitting out venom like rednecks and greenies.
Human endeavour is largely about feeding one another and protecting ourselves from the elements-about keeping ourselves alive. Who amongst us would not chop down firewood to warm our families, or feed the last of a species to our starving children? And it doesn't stop there. Surely we must be allowed to lead vibrant lives.

Surely recreation, creativity and development are critical to the human condition. Can the manipulation of our environment be an atrocity in its own right?
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Every year the Tasmanian summer gets drier and more harsh. Way back in the high country wilderness, miles from development, grand old trees weakened by successive droughts, find themselves too weary, and they fall easy prey to insects. Longicorn grubs and pinhole borers eat into the living wood, gum beetles instantly devour green shoots, and dieback runs amok. Today the wilderness comprises thousands of acres of tree skeletons, just as dead as if they had been flooded by hydro-electric development.
Beneath the dead and dying trees you will find leaves that have suffered a holocaust of woolly sawfly grubs, small animals which devour everything green and tender but leave behind a delicate embroidery of tough veins. And each leaf so skeletonised looks exactly like an aerial view of the vast and intricate creek system which once fed Lake Pedder.
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Hydro electricity produces minimal greenhouse gasses and I wonder if, despite the drowned trees, it is a better bet for our forests than recycling fossil trees. I wonder, but I don't know.
What many of us do know, desperately, is that we don't want any more of our wild living places to disappear. So there is a campaign to restore Pedder, to tear down the dams and rehabilitate the eroded landscape. Such an outcome would be powerfully symbolic. It would not only tell humanity that it is noble to atone past wrongs, but demonstrate that the future is not beholden to the mistakes of the past. Yet nothing will bring back the unique ecology and extinct species. The littoral scars will not heal. Do we run the risk of suggesting that no matter how disrespectfully we treat our environment, we can always repair it?
There is another campaign, similar to the Pedder one, in which desperate people are trying to clone a thylacine from DNA collected from joeys long ago preserved in jars of alcohol. Here, too, the environment in which the lost thing clung is irretrievable.
Something else interests me: many current users of the Serpentine impoundment-anglers, campers, canoeists-did not know the natural Lake Pedder and have developed a spiritual attachment to the artificial lake. They fear and despise the campaign to restore Lake Pedder. Is their spiritual attachment less worthy than my own? I can't help but wonder how they feel about thylacines
Could it be that in a world where the pace of change seems to accelerate daily, the thing that we really fear is change itself. How much does the beauty of an old tree, green and vibrant, lie in the fact that it has stood sentinel for so long. Perhaps we need to see and feel ancient survivors in order to dare hope that we ourselves are not so ephemeral. That we will not be eaten, that we will not skeletonise ourselves.
David's photographs emphasise the brooding beauty of dead trees. He makes us recognise that dead forests, if not as exhilarating as living ones, are survivors of sorts, and remain more comforting than barren clay. More importantly, he forces us to question the nature of such comfort.