

“Three hundred year old Marri at Beckley?”

*Are we to think your time has come great tree
the very thought stabs a knife into my heart
you are but one of many as we all are
your memory will be special when we part*

*I lie here looking up through spreading branches
to the lit half of the slowly fading moon
my body's filled with melancholy sadness
that tomorrow when it comes may spell your doom*

*Sun's first rays strike through perfect cantilever
overarching balance's withstood the tests of time
your rich bounty has touched the lives of many
ancient branches forming cascades to the ground*

*Will you scream silently as dozer blade wreaks havoc
or as chainsaw slices through your mighty girth
you who have been home to oh so many
your spirit shall return unto the earth*

*A black ant drops onto my page from your branches
symbol of life contained in all of the above
will we look afresh at every little detail
will we learn our lessons from the bush we love?*

Written by: Rob Greenwood

The author – Rob Greenwood – very generously gave the AOP permission to include
“Three hundred year old Marri at Beckley?” © in its Education Website.

(In special recognition of “2011 – The Year of the Forests”.)

“Three hundred year old Marri at Beckley?”

Teachers’ Notes

Background Information:

In 2005, the Western Australian Government deemed that it was necessary to destroy most of the Beckley bushland in order to construct a bus station and carpark. Many people demonstrated against the proposed destruction of this extremely rich and previously intact eco system. Some of the demonstrators had alternative proposals which would have reduced the amount of destruction. However, government representatives refused to meet with representatives of the demonstrators or to consider any of their ideas. Consequently, the destruction of 80% (32,000 square metres) of the beautiful Beckley bushland went ahead. Fortunately, there was a minor concession as the protesters were promised that the iconic 300 year old Marri tree and one other would remain. (With “trimmed” branches.)

The real tragedy is that in 2005 in WA, the equivalent of another 750 “Beckleys” were cleared on the Swan Coastal Plain alone.

Questions for Reflection, Discussion, Debate and Further Research

Verse 1

The author – Rob Greenwood- experienced great anguish, knowing that the Beckley bushland and the Marri tree in particular were to be destroyed.

- Have you ever been distressed by the prospect of a tree being destroyed? (If so, please relate your experience.)

The memory of the tree will be special to Rob Greenwood as well.

- Does a tree (or trees), feature in any of your memories? (If so, please explain.)

Whilst addressing the Marri tree, the author also says: “you are but one of many as we all are”.

We know that humans are usually social beings who like to live in communities. On page 6 of the book entitled “Tree-A Life Story”, David Suzuki and Wayne Grady also state that: “No tree is an island; it is a communal citizen and derives the same benefits from cooperation, sharing and mutual effort that any living creature receives from participating in a fully functioning ecosystem.”

On page 47, another associated issue is raised when it is stated: “A tree is part of a community, but a tree itself is also a community of disparate parts – roots, stems, branches, needles, cones, inner core, outer bark. It’s self sufficiency comes from having worked out over time, a network connecting all of its members more or less constantly.”

- If you have previously been unaware of these characteristics of trees, you may wish to learn more.

Verse 2

This beautifully written verse is filled with foreboding, as the author gazes at the “slowly fading moon”.

- Have you experienced “melancholy sadness” when something was deliberately destroyed? (If so, could you have done anything to prevent this?)
- The use of the word “doom”, is highly emotive. What does “doom” actually mean and do you think that the word is appropriate in this context?
- Are you aware of links between trees and the moon? On page 31 of “The Life Cycle of a Tree”, Bobbie Kalman states: “Scientists have discovered that trees swell and shrink with the moon’s rhythm in a way that is similar to the way the moon causes tides in oceans.” Test this out by measuring the trunk of a tree at different times of the month.

Verse 3

The tree’s characteristics of beauty, strength and its rich bounty are highlighted in this verse.

- Have you ever viewed a sunrise or sunset through the branches of a tree? If not, perhaps you should try to experience this new perspective.
- What is a “perfect cantilever” in reference to the Marri tree?

“Ancient branches”, are mentioned too. As this Marri tree is at least 300 years old, it was more than 100 years old when Perth was colonised by the British. Try to imagine what this tree would have experienced in this time. Perhaps you could create a time line of significant events which occurred during these 300 years. If you live in another state or country, you could select an old tree in your area and create a realistic time line for the events which it could have experienced.

“Rich bounty”, is a succinct summation which should be qualified.

- Compile a list of the bounty which this Marri tree would have supplied during its 300 years.
- This task could be completed for a wide variety of trees.
- Compile a list for a tree which has died as well. (According to David Suzuki, “the decaying tree continues to feed and support a succession of life forms for centuries.”) Obviously, the benefits only occur if the decomposing tree remains on the forest floor.

Verse 4

Rob Greenwood ponders: “Will you scream silently”.

- As trees do not communicate in the same language as humans, we cannot answer this question. We can speculate though. What do you think?

Many paid workers were directly responsible for the destruction of this ecosystem. (eg. Those driving the bulldozers and operating the chainsaws.)

- Do you think they were aware of the consequences of their actions?
- Do you think they cared?
- How do you think they felt? (Especially when facing the demonstrators.)
- Why do you think they carried out these acts of destruction?

How do you interpret: “your spirit shall return to the earth”?

- How do you define a spirit?
- Do you think a tree has a spirit?

(It is interesting to note that in 1633, Guy de La Brosse was appointed as the first director of the new botanical gardens in Paris. “One of the most forward-looking scientists of his day, La Brosse was astounded by the degree to which plants functioned like animals. Both, he reasoned, have generation, growth, and movement and require nutrition, sleep (hibernation), and even sex; he was the first to suggest that plants reproduced, like animals, by the sexual mating of males and females. He even went so far as to wonder whether plants had souls. Life was life, he held, whether it was manifested in vegetable or animal form, and both life and death were regulated not by some seed planted in it at the time of its creation but by other factors contributed by the environment.” – Reference- page 106 of “Tree- A life Story”.)

Verse 5

A black ant is the symbol of all of the life which inhabits the Marri tree. Rob Greenwood realizes that a tree is not a single entity. It is actually a microcosm of life.

- Select a particular tree in the bush or forest and try to discover how many different life forms are dependant on it.
- You may also like to learn more about ants. The ecosystems of our world are dependent on these fascinating creatures.

The poem ends with the question: “will we learn our lessons from the bush we love?”

- What do you think are the lessons which we need to learn?