

A strong voice, now silent

Aborigine activist Joan Wingfield dies the end of July in Canberra

We mourn. Our fighting sister Joan from Australia – who was part of the Australian delegation at the World Uranium Hearing in 1992 and who represented Yvonne Margarula at the first Nuclear-Free Future Award ceremony in 1998 – passed into the spirit world the end of July.

Our friend Dave Sweeney, nuclear-free campaigner of the Australian Conservation Foundation send us this:

Dear friends,

last week Joan Wingfield - a powerful voice for Australian Aboriginal rights and a nuclear free future - passed away in Canberra. She died of pneumonia following persistent bronchitis – she was in her mid fifties and tragically too young.

Below are some words I wrote for a recent gathering to honour and acknowledge Joan's efforts and life:

I am sorry that I am unable to be with you in person today to reflect on and acknowledge Joan's life and efforts and to share stories and the fire.

The one good thing about the nuclear industry is that in resisting it you get to meet some very fine people. Joan was certainly one of these.

I met Joan in the early 1980's against the backdrop of Western Mining Corporation pushing for the development of the Olympic Dam mine at Roxby Downs.

WMC was headed by Hugh Morgan who was in the vanguard of the mining industry's push to over turn promised national land rights laws.

It was a time of backroom deals, corporate self interest, broken promises, demo's and heavy handed coppers – just like today.

Joan was lit from within and quickly won a reputation among anti-nuke activists as a passionate and articulate advocate for her community and country.

She was someone to be respected and someone who could also apply the blow torch to her fellow travellers if they annoyed or failed her.

For those of us who passed the first test Joan was a staunch ally and a valued friend.

Our friendship was cemented through travelling to take the story of the human, cultural and environmental impacts of uranium mining to audiences in Europe.

We shared platforms at the World Uranium Hearing in Salzburg in 1992 and buses and meetings across Germany and beyond in the times that followed.

I have great memories of Joan from these times: relaxed on walks through the Black Forest, waving the Aboriginal flag from the Bundestag and always connecting and communicating.

She was skilled, tenacious and generous.

She carried the sadness and the legacy of separation and dislocation and as times got tough this got harder and we increasingly lost touch.

But I – and very many people in the anti nuclear movement across Australia and around the world - never lost a special place for Joan.

In a crooked world Joan spoke straight. To a shadowy industry Joan burned bright.

Her efforts were greatly valued and she was admired and loved.

May her spirit soar and then rest easy.

Here is Joan's statement at the World Uranium Hearing in Salzburg, Austria, September 1992:

I'd like to start back in the 1950's, when the Kokotha people were forcibly removed from their lands because of the atomic bomb testing and because of the testing of the rockets at Woomera. At that time, the Kokotha and other Aboriginal Australians weren't citizens of the country, so we didn't have any rights. Because we weren't citizens that meant that we couldn't own land, it meant that we couldn't go to school, it meant that we couldn't get a job. So in 1966/67, there was a referendum where the Australian people voted to give us Aboriginal people citizenship rights. So, up until that stage we've been really powerless to do anything about our struggle. After that time we're still pretty powerless because we've had 150-odd years, 160-odd years to catch up on, learning on non-Aboriginal ways.

In 1991, the Kokotha became concerned about mining activities at Roxby Downs. And this is basically when the Kokotha started to get back together, because we were spread all over South Australia for thousands of miles. So the difficulty came to protect the sites at Roxby Downs because we weren't all in one group. We were separated all over South Australia. We went to the mining companies and to the South Australian Government and we told them that we had traditional interests in that area and that we'd like the sacred sites and the lands there protected. The government and the mining companies blamed us, the victims, for not being in that land. They said, you haven't lived in that area for so many years,

you haven't maintained your cultural links with that land for so many years, so you haven't got a right to talk about Roxby Downs.

First of all, I'd like to say that 200-odd years does not give them the right to tell us that we have no right to talk about that land. It doesn't give them the right to deny us our cultural heritage, and I'm here to protect what's left, what hasn't been destroyed at Roxby Downs. I'm here to tell people that we have an interest at Maralinga even though it's been contaminated by the atomic bomb testing. According to South Australian law we had to help do the environmental impact statement, we had to do an anthropological complement. For a long time the government would not give us money to do this. When we eventually got it done, we had to have what we said in that report verified by a white anthropologist. In other words, we had to have a white anthropologist saying that what the Aboriginal people are saying about our sites and our lands is true. Which is a big insult! We know what we're talking about, we have always known that, we've passed it down from generation to generation, so why should we have a non-Aboriginal verifying that our culture and what we say about it is true? Well, they finally accepted it and the anthropologist said "yes", not surprising to us, but, yes, what we said was true.

Still today, our lands are being destroyed, our sites like the stone arrangements at Roxby Downs have been deliberately knocked over. Some of the stones went in the way of the mining operations, so it's quite obvious when you see heavy vehicle tracks leading up to the stones that the sole purpose of being in the area was to knock them over. In 1988 I went to British Petroleum. British Petroleum have 49 percent interest in Roxby Downs mining, and Western Mining Corporation have the other 51 percent. In 1988, I went to the British Petroleum annual general meeting and I asked the chairman if British Petroleum would knock down Stonehenge like they knocked down our stone arrangements for the sake of their mining operations. And the chairman of British Petroleum said to me that, of course, all nations have sacred sites, sites of importance, and that some would have to be sacrificed in the name of civilization. He then equated our cultural stories that go for thousands and thousands of years -- he equated them with a fairy story. He said that, well, for instance, they would be going to knock down Poo Corner, which is a fairytale -- fictional and it's only just recently been made up. Our stories go on for thousands and thousands of years, and to me, it was just indicative of the treatment of the Kokotha people and their fights at Roxby Downs.

In 1986, I went to Vienna to talk to the lobby of the International Atomic Energy Agency. I might say that we never actually got to meet them; we only had press releases, they did not want to know us, and even today they do not want to know what is happening to indigenous people. One thing about our culture which separates us from non-indigenous cultures, I think, is that with Aboriginal law the religion and the law are one and the same things, we cannot separate them. With non-indigenous cultures you have the religion and the law, and quite [a few] of them, they don't marry up very well. And that's why companies, mining governments have been allowed to do what they do to indigenous people and to indigenous people's land and culture.

I'm a cultural heritage manager and I did this because, when Roxby was going ahead, of course a lot of our stuff wasn't documented. And so the mining companies used to excuse that: Because it wasn't documented we were just making it up at the last minute. They

refused to recognize that our culture has been going on for thousands and thousands of years and they refused to recognize that we lived there before, that our ancestors lived in Australia before they did, and therefore, we have more rights. When I talk to non-Aboriginal Australians, they talk about four, five generations' worth and that they have a right, and I really get upset when they challenge to that right when I say I have thousands and thousands of generations of interest in this land. It almost gets down to a physical confrontation. They do not like it.

Our culture, because it's part of the religion, and the law is the same, is so important, not just for us, but for everybody in Australia and for the world. Unfortunately, the Aboriginal women's thought of the culture has been underrepresented. The sites at Roxby Downs that have been talked about in the past are mainly men's sites -- and I would like to apologize to the Aboriginal men, because in our tradition we don't really sort of talk about men's sites, especially women, and the men don't sort of have -- aren't allowed to talk about the women's sites, so that's totally separate. But the women have had a raw deal at Roxby Downs, that the sites there are very, very important, perhaps more important than the men's sites. The men have had anthropologists and experts going out mapping their sites, but the women haven't had much of that. We've had just a little of survey done, but really, there is a lot more that should and could be done.

I come from the desert, but I wanted to tell you that it's also our concern with the waters. The waters that we use is part of the great Artesian Basin that stretches over three states from New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Northern Territory. And a lot of the pastoral industry relies on that water. That's the water that is being contaminated because of the operations at Roxby Downs. So it's not just what's on top of the surface like the sacred stones and the sand hills and the plants and the animals. It's underneath this world, it's the water that is a vital importance, water is so important for all life that to contaminate that means that you are contaminating the life source of everything and anything on this planet.

So from 1981, when I went to Europe, to Britain, to talk about Sizewall, the nuclear power station on the coast of Britain, to 1986 talking at the International Atomic Energy Agency or lobbying them, from 1988 doing a tour of Germany, Scotland, Wales, England, going to Sweden, the Kokotha still haven't any more rights as what they did back, say, before 1966, before we were considered citizens of Australia.

We still care about our land, it's so important to us, it's part of us. We are part of the land, we come from there and when we die, we will go back to the land. We are responsible for [it], under traditional law we would be punished if we didn't look after it. Under traditional law that is our responsibility. I think it's about time that the non-Aboriginal peoples of the world started to change their ways. Maybe it should be more like our religion and our law where it's one and the same. Where you can't chop and change when it suits you. Sometimes it's all right, sometimes it's not. That's the way I see non-Aboriginal law. It's good when you want it to be, but you don't listen to us when you know that we have our rights.

I was taken away from my people when I was two years old and I lived in Adelaide separated from my brothers and sisters who also lived in Adelaide, and I just wanted to tell

you that to prove to the governments, the atomic mafia and to other people who tried to prevent us from knowing our culture, that our culture, by all the hurdles that you put up, still survives, it's still strong and we want it to keep on going strong. You cannot stop us from learning our culture, you cannot stop what is right. It must be right. We have lived for thousands and thousands of years on that continent Australia, and more damage's been done in the last 200 years to that land than in the whole time we've lived there. We want help, the Kokotha need help, we haven't got any lawyers, anthropologists, money, we didn't even have enough money to pay for a post office box where we could receive our mail from interested people who wanted to know about the Kokotha. So, we've been really powerless.

I'm disappointed that the Kokotha men couldn't come because they have their side of the story to talk about. But really, I'm glad that I'm here, because I can talk from the women's point of view. The women do have an interest there and we are very concerned about it. As women, we teach survival skills to our young children. I'm not sure what survival skills we can teach them now apart from saying: "No, we do not want uranium mining and we want you to clean up your mess!" We are responsible for that land. We will not be part of the war on that land. And we will not be part of the war on other peoples' lands and the plants and animals on this earth. If you don't listen to us there will be a cultural desert. If you don't listen to the indigenous people there will be a survival desert. We are just one little group on the planet, the Kokotha, we are not saying that our rights come before anybody else's, that we are more important than anybody else. What we are saying is, we are part of the planet. We have to do something along with everybody else and we want to know how to do, but we need help from you people.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about the dreaming stories: This Roxby Downs is part of "The Sleepy Lizard Dreaming Story", in our language we say "galda", stumpy-tail lizard. At Roxby, the main shaft, the Weenan shaft, goes right through the stomach of the lizard. At that shaft they mine uranium, the yellow cake, the gold, silver, copper, lead, all those minerals can be found in that area. When you open up the real lizard you find exactly the same colours as what you found deep down inside the earth. We didn't need big machinery, we didn't need the sinking shaft to know that those colours existed underneath the earth. So we have our wisdom as well as the technical wisdom, but because ours has been going on for so much longer we urge you to listen to indigenous peoples, and we want something to be done fast. I'm not sure what can be done, as I think the damage has been done. But I think we have to stop it right now.

That's all I've got to say.