

Wattle: A Deep Time reflection for our time

Terry Fewtrell

'Ancient land'. It is a common descriptor of Australia that has become increasingly familiar during the last 50 years. It is now usually tagged with, 'home of the world's oldest surviving human culture', something of a concession as we stumble towards proper recognition of our land's first peoples. Archaeology and history are helping us to understand the true significance of these statements. But there is another aid, something with which we are very familiar – the wattle – especially at wattle time.

Just like our continent, we are moving ever so slowly, to discern and proclaim the nature of authentic Australia. The story of the land's geological formation first prompted the use of the term 'deep time', to describe the enormous forces that shaped and sculpted its form throughout millennia. Like the term 'deep space', it challenges us to go beyond our normal limits of comprehension. It invites us into the astonishing journey of our past. It is the land itself that has shaped our story and us. It has been the stage and backdrop for all things Australian. It is diverse. It is forbidding, and it is beautiful. Its spirit is powerful.

Its symbol is the golden wattle. We proclaim it as our modern-day national floral emblem. Part of the wattle's significance in our lives is that it is a living thing that springs naturally from the earth, that sustains and enriches us. And it has been in our land for more than 30 million years. We know this from the scientific analysis of the pollen in ancient soil samples. Wattle is the golden thread that links us back through all those eons of deep time.

As the landmass, destined to be our Australian home, separated from the great Gondwana super continent and started its slow, inexorable drift northwards, its geological form began to give expression to 'the great south land'. Today's archaeology and history are unpacking our past and illuminating our future. For more than 70 years the study of ancient Australia has taken us to new depths of geological time and new boundaries of human engagement with the land. As archaeological historian Billy Griffiths says: "It is only through a long view of Australian history that we can come to understand the Australian landscape, which is as much cultural as it is natural".

Slowly Australia's 'deep time' is being decoded and laid bare and this process challenges radically the accepted starting points of our national narrative. It also draws us to an irresistible reconciling, requiring an openness in our hearts, such as the data requires of our minds. The Australian story began long, long ago and the history of Australian humanity stretches back 65,000 years.

As with other living things, wattle began its own journey, evolving into more than a 1000 different species across the whole continent. Wattle has been the witness to the whole of the Australian story. We should embrace it as our talisman in this larger journey. It is with us today, but it has been with us always. It has welcomed us all – from the first Aboriginal people to walk its lands, to successive groups of immigrants who followed European settlement.

Wattle has survived the rhythms and upheavals of this land. It has adapted and evolved in response to nature's challenges. Its resilience and ability to adapt and change are relevant to life in our twenty first century nation. Wattle can help us understand our past and discover our future. Its many

applications and associations help us to learn the rhythm of Aboriginal cultural life that has pulsed throughout this land for thousands of years.

Aboriginal people invited the wattle into their own lives and societies. It fed and sustained them. It gave music and rhythm to their cultural gatherings. It was a marker of season events – a signpost for the coming of the whales and the emergence of the eels. Today wattle continues to be a signpost, heralding the spring and the change of season - from the struggles of winter to the warmth of another year of seasons. And all around us, at wattle time it paints our nation's colours across our land.

What a great time for Australians to celebrate the land, the people who have lived here many thousands of years and our shared commitment to forging a united modern Australian nation. Wattle reminds us of the power of Aboriginal connection to land – this land is not mine, this land is me. It teaches us a more powerful sense of authentic Australian pride and humility, drawn from and sustained by the land.

In the Uluru Statement of the Heart, Aboriginal people invite us to share a rich history born of 65,000 years. It is a generous invitation that asks essentially for only one thing – respectful recognition. It is a request to walk together into a future inspired by a rich past. And wattle can be our shared companion.

Wattle time! What a wonderful natural symbol and what a great time to celebrate Australia. National Wattle Day (1 September) is the obvious day to unify the nation - an alternative to 26 January. Happy Wattle Day.

Terry Fewtrell is President of the Wattle Day Association Inc. The Association's website, www.wattleday.asn.au is a co-ordinating resource for events around the county to celebrate wattle and National Wattle Day.