Revering the yokel and writing sustainably
Tamsin Kerr

For five years, I wrote from my straw-bale studio with its look-far eyes, gazing across the Sunshine Coast hinterland. I wrote myself into this bit of land. My occasional forays into the world included speaking on the role of animals in city planning at Spain’s Guggenheim, on bunyips for a symposium on Place and Memory in the USA, on the place-based emotions of Spain’s Guggenheim, on bunyips for a symposium on Place and Memory in the USA, on the poetry of landscapes to Braidwood’s Two Fires Festival. But I was the fly-in, fly-out expert, ironically talking about how we might make stronger connections to the natural environment and our own places.

As climate change becomes a reality, we need to revere and respect that which comes from our own regions. Instead of looking for overseas keynote speakers and writers, we might look for the extant wisdom within our own places. Writing is born of, and shapes, its communities of place. It is a symbol of the love of place and local community. But when creative process is imported from elsewhere, it becomes both less and more spectacular: powerful connective symbols become mere labels of consumerist genericia.

In a sustainable future, Australia might again reflect the traditional regions and boundaries of Indigenous Australia, defined by its walking and Dreaming paths. Perhaps we need new and positive words for the parochial and the yokel? Instead, these become the welcome to country: waymarks and people who have a fine-grained knowing of the places they inhabit.

And who do they welcome? We need to remain open to the diversity of many cultures, to other ways of knowing, within this now well-established global commons. While we might decrease the value we place on the visiting expert, we still need real community cultural exchange. We need the shared experience of spaceship earth, the ecological knowledge of global impacts. We need to continue to understand and experience the global consequences of our local actions.

How might we achieve the apparent contradictions of sustainable living and cultural diversity? Rather than just intellectual exchange, we need greater emotional and spiritual connections to country. It is difficult to write about spirit objectively, as an expert or as an experience. We need translation between such artistic practice and intellectual thought; a new type of writing that privileges the subjective and the emotive as keys to sustainable living. This too is more-than-human writing; it is how nature writes back to our unbalanced human lifestyles. Words help us experience the wider and wilder world.

Two modelled examples of these processes show how art engages us in place, the importance of creative thinking, and the power that writing offers. Both Floating Land at Boreen Point and Catchment near Lake Macdonald went for 10 days, bringing together environment artists, photographers, film-makers, and writers of art and place. It was a good start to an ongoing creative environmental conversation.

The writers stayed on site for the 10 days, talking to artists and organisers, as well as locals (who acted as both host and audience) and visitors. Leasing a large house with a couple of potential meeting places allowed for communal creativity between writers. This became known as The Writers’ House and was the place of many late-night keen discussions amidst locals, artists, and writers. Ten days might, questionably, be long enough to get a whiff of the land’s spirit or to understand an artistic practice, but it is not long enough to think and write cognitively and coherently about the ideas and issues raised. The local writer’s workshop and the live-in writers did produce short poems, captions to the event, which formed part of the last weekend’s exhibition. Their words encapsulated many issues, but needed further explication. These may emerge in September’s Art Monthly (its editor, Maurice, has set a writing task for participating writers of Floating Land). So the writing and the relationships will continue, at least on paper.

Catchment was a different process. I was the only writer, employed to give a public face to a private and collaborative experience of a local artist-led initiative in environmental art. I had an established and ongoing relationship with all the artists, making commentary more subjective, if not more problematic. But this also meant focused and detailed knowledge, which allowed the process to become personal and enabled an honest and interesting debate. Writing entirely about the local as an embedded inhabitant is no easy task. Your friends are your subjects and the writing becomes more overtly subjective. This is a different form of writing from that of the visiting expert. It involves telling the loved landscape memoir of my own geography; it involves a deeper understanding and knowledge, this wisdom of local place.

But I clearly have not perfected this place-process writing in celebrating and respecting the complexities of the local. I still feel most readers would not be convinced by my knowledge if it is not attached to international (and national) credentials. I have yet to say that I am simply a local north Sunshine Coast woman who is passionate about writing about local art and environment. I have yet to fully immerse myself in valuing the local. But that is a long-term lesson in sustainability for us all – not just writers and artists – to inhabit.

Further information
Floating Land www.floatingland.com.au
Cooroora Institute www.cooroorainstitute.org

Tamsin directs the Cooroora Institute and has had many articles published in magazines, newspapers, and journals. She recently ran the writers’ component of Floating Land and judged the inaugural Green Pens competition. She lives in the Sunshine Coast hinterland after far too many years as a senior bureaucrat in environmental and cultural positions.