

Radioactive Exposure Tour

(9 - 18 May 2008)

Jessie Boylan



It's 3am on the 8th of May (the night before we leave) and we have just finished packing one of the trailers chocka block full of food, sorted all the equipment, and gone over our lists several times – there will still be bread delivered to FoE in the morning, the large baggage trailer still needs picking up at 6am, and Steve still needs to pack his own gear.

This is a pretty normal start to these ten-day adventures into the semi-arid regions of South Australia, meeting and learning from traditional owners and local residents about the effects of uranium mining and the nuclear industry on people and the land in Australia.

The journey begins in Melbourne for most people, where we meet and greet at FoE with pancakes and coffee to get us all into order. There are about 23 people leaving from Melbourne, and 6 people to collect in Adelaide. People have come from all over to join the tour, from Alice Springs, Canberra, Colac, Perth, Melbourne and Adelaide. We then head off in our 22 and 12 seater buses.

We stay at 'Single Step Printing', a printing press/community space in the northern suburbs of Adelaide for our first night, where David Noonan, the National Nuclear Campaigner for the Australian Conservation Foundation, gives us an introduction to SA's nuclear industry. It's scary to realise how big this industry is, and now with the 'No New Mines' policy scrapped by Labor it is even bigger and scarier. Noonan also highlights the achievements the anti-nuclear campaign has made in the past 20-30 years in Australia, and for these reasons we continue to have these tours; to build the campaign and broaden the education about this devastating industry in Australia and the rest of the world.

We head north along the Stuart Highway and stop off at Avon Hudson's house in Balaklava. Avon is a Maralinga veteran from



Food trailer & kitchen set up, Alberrie Ck

the Australian-British atomic tests in the 50's and 60's in South Australia. He later became a whistleblower on the operation and has written books recounting his story and the way the army personal and indigenous people were treated during the tests. Avon is a talker and usually joins us for part of the tour, where we have hours and hours of history and stories around the fire at night. However this time he was unwell and only able to meet us for lunch, but this didn't stop him talking for a couple of hours.

After 6.5hrs hours driving and 12 hours since leaving Adelaide we finally reach our camping destination for the night off the highway in the dunes just out side of Woomera. For some people it is the first time stepping on semi-arid sands like this and although it's night time – we can feel the difference, the change in the land from just a couple of hundred kilometres down the track. Fires on and swags out, cooking is happening – but I'm off to bed, it's out here, with these billions of stars and subtle desert sounds that I sleep the best.



Olympic Dam uranium mine

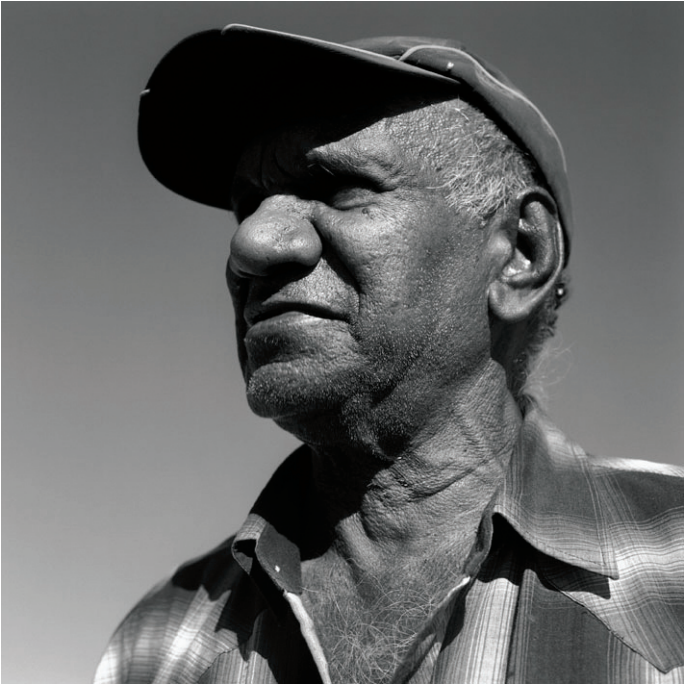
The tour is extensive and a lot of stories are told, information shared and knowledge learnt about not only the nuclear industry and the affects on indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, but knowledge about the land, the history of this part of the country, the plants, the animals, the geology the geography, everything out here has meaning to someone, some place, some time. The landscape is expansive, vast, full of life, never empty, always sacred.

Along the way we meet up with Rebecca Bear Wingfield, a Kokatha woman who along with her mum, Eileen Wani Wingfield has been fighting against the Olympic Dam uranium mine at Roxby Downs, and for five years with the Kupa Piti Kungka Juta's in the Irati Wanti ('the poison, leave it') campaign, which, in

2005, stopped the radioactive waste dump that was proposed for Woomera.

We tour the Olympic Dam uranium mine, and hear the spin from Richard Yeels and other BHP workers, about the benefits of the mine; it's a sickly place, hard to fathom what is has done and continually doing to the people and the country of this area. Olympic Dam uses 35 million litres of water per day from the Great Artesian Basin to operate the mine. Due to this water usage some of the sacred Mound Springs in the surrounding areas have been drying up.

Kevin Buzzacott, an Arabunna man who grew up on Alberrie Creek Station along the Oodnadatta Track, has been a long-term environmental activist and plays a strong role in the opposition to Olympic Dam. He meets us just north of Roxby and we travel with him for the next couple of days, learning about the Mound Springs, the country, some of the dreaming stories of the area, his family, and his resistance against the mining. He is an amazing person, so much knowledge, humour and strength that he shares with everyone on this tour.



Kevin Buzzacott



Mound Springs

We travel along the Oodnadatta for a few days, driving driving, but never bore of this landscape. We then head South and East to Nepabunna Aboriginal Community, Andyamathana country, where we meet with Kelvin and Judy Johnson who have been affected by the Beverly Uranium mine in the Gammon Ranges. The country changes again, from being semi-arid desert, to the high country with mountains and valleys and different sounds and smells. We camp just outside of the community near the bush tucker garden, a dry riverbed just down in the valley. The winds are strong up here and everything is getting blown around.

We visit Beverly uranium mine, and again feel dirty and sickly listening to their spin, and the planned expansion, and the

processes of In-Situ Leach Mining, a process which makes the surface of the mine look like it has minimal effect, but underneath is where it all happens. They pump sulphuric acid into the ground water and to extract the uranium and then pump back in to the ground water whatever they don't want. It is supposed to be a closed loop, where no harmful chemicals get loose, but this isn't the truth.



Outside Nepabunna

After the tour, we're feeling tired and disheartened by the constant ignorance and apathy that mining companies seem to have, and almost at a loss at how big this industry truly is, and from where to begin and where it might end...

Also in the Gammon Ranges is a place called Arkaroola; we meet a woman there named Margie Sprigg, who we haven't met before, she is currently working to stop the uranium exploration and mining of the area surrounding Arkaroola. She tells us more horrible stories of the mining companies processes of exploration and drilling, the lies they tell the local community and the waste they are leaving behind. She is amazed and happy that there is a community and campaign to work with her to try and stop this industry from continuing to damage this amazing country.

After Nepabunna and five flat tires we stop in Copley at the bakery to repair the buses damage and eat some quandong pies; it is nearing the end of the journey and our last night out of any city will be in the Flinders Ranges National Park at a place called Brachina Gorge. It is a very rocky track along the way and the storm clouds are building up and darkening and later explode into heavy rain and strong winds just as we are setting up camp; but our strong crew construct a shelter over the kitchen area and we seem to have an instant lodge amongst the chaos.

For our last evening before arriving in Adelaide we stop in to Gladstone to meet with Jillian Marsh who is an Andymathana woman who has been heavily involved in the consultation processes of the mining companies at Beverly. She tells us of the cor-



Brachina Gorge, Flinders Ranges NP

ruption and royalties, the division of tribal groups and the long term affects created by the policies and legalities and terminologies that override and overwhelm indigenous knowledge and land claims. It is a massive process and there are so many different ins and outs it is almost too hard to understand or process it. Jillian is strong and won't give up until her people have the proper consultation process and know exactly what they are being told and what it means to them, their people and the land.

On the journey we have all made strong connections to one another and to the country and the blues start to kick in as we have to say goodbye to everyone in Adelaide and Melbourne. I never want the journey to be over, but we all have to return to our respective homes, to begin the "where to from here?" process; the process of new strategies, new alliances and new visions of how to tackle this industry and mentality; we have to keep fighting, keep campaigning, keep strong and live our own lives to counteract all of the destruction, ignorance and apathy - And we will.

Thanks to everyone that came on the tour, to everyone we met along the way, to everyone who donated yummy organic food and to the organisers for months of organising in making sure the knowledge is spread and experiences shared.

A tour participant, Hideko Nakamura's feedback from the tour:

"The tour was one of the most memorable events in my life. I had some knowledge on the British nuclear tests conducted during the 50s and 60s in SA because I am very much interested in nuclear issues, notably the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki of 1945. I, however, had not been aware of the unimaginable effects of the tests on people and environments until I listened to Avon Hudson's talk. I can relate the tragedy of the bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Avon's story. I was inspired by his long-term courageous campaign in trying to tell the truth. When I stood on the outback, I could not help but imagine how indigenous people loved and looked after the land with care for so many years. At the same time I noticed how much core members of Friends of the Earth made efforts to cultivate and strengthen bonds with these beautiful indigenous people we have met. Now I miss each participant of the tour. Thank you for sharing ideas and aspirations with me."