

VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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2010, International Year of Biodiversity

Plagues of locusts are a serious problem in inland Queensland, NSW and northern Victoria. The cause is given as flooding rains leading to the growth of locust food, namely grasses, both native and pasture. However, what has compounded the magnitude of locust plagues has been the loss of biodiversity since white settlement. This is due to the conversion of former grasslands into pasture mainly for sheep and cattle. Whereas the former habitats included a mix of plants and a range of animals that could feed on the locusts, clearing and growing of vast tracts of a monoculture of a single pasture grass have expanded the food for the locusts while devastating its natural predators.

In a natural ecosystem the great variety of different species provide checks and balances on each other. If favourable conditions support plant growth, herbivore numbers will grow. This in turn enables predator numbers to rise. However, as much of the expanded food supply dies off or is eaten, a corresponding fall in herbivore and predator numbers follows. These changes take place over varying periods of time depending on the life cycle of the species involved. The ups and downs of populations over time result in an ever changing, yet balanced ecosystem. Along with keeping all species numbers in check, potential pests and disease organisms are also held in check; a factor that greatly enhances the health of individual species as well as the whole ecosystem.

In recognition of the central importance of maintaining the greatest possible biodiversity in the many different ecosystems across the globe, e.g. forests, grasslands, woodlands, shores, oceans and rivers, the United Nations has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity. This is intended to encourage all countries to raise the profile of research supporting the value of biodiversity, and help inform citizens of the role all of us can play in supporting the retention of maximum biodiversity.

We can do this by planting species indigenous to our locality that will in turn provide habitat for indigenous animals, both invertebrates as well as birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. We can lobby for more wildlife reserves and national parks, and the banning of logging in old-growth forests. We can also avoid buying imported goods that are the outcome of the destruction of natural biodiversity in another part of the world.

Along with other assaults on our planetary home, human over-population is squeezing the vast majority of species to extinction. Every species lost undermines the viability of an ecosystem. Humans can continue to hasten this process or we can reverse our overly large ecological footprint and try to live much more sustainably. Without a great diversity of other species to share this planet there is a fair chance the survival of our species will be greatly diminished.

Roslyn Ives



HSV Monthly
Public Lecture

TUESDAY
25 May
7.30 for 8.00pm

Balwyn Library Meeting
Room
336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)



Neil Francis
(Dying With Dignity
Victoria),

on

***‘Dying
with dignity
– knowing
your rights.’***

IN THIS ISSUE:

Diary Dates	2
Humanist News	3
Submission report	4
Public lecture, Dr Sabura	
Report by Jennie Stuart	4
Public lecture, Roscoe Howell	
Report by Howard Hodgens	5
Letter, Rudi Anders	5
Motions for CAHS convention	6

Submission Report

On the subject of racism in Australia we made the following main points.

- We expressed concern at the recent spate of racist attacks and abuse and at the inadequate response of governments to this dangerous social trend.
- The universal Declaration of Human Rights and the World Conference to combat racism and racial discrimination put an obligation on all governments to take specific measures and mount a co-ordinated response against racism.
- The First Australians still continue to be incarcerated in high numbers, mostly for minor offences. Recent deaths in custody are further appalling examples of the institutionalised racism reported in the 1989 National Inquiry into Racist Violence.
- A recent study has found that racism permeates Australian schools and that consistent prejudice was displayed by Australian youths towards other cultural groups, particularly dark-skinned students from Africa and India. (*The Age*, 19.11.09)
- The recent spate of attacks on people of Indian appearance are in many cases racially motivated.
- The pogrom at Cronulla was facilitated by modern technology where the attackers were mobilised by text messages. There is now a proliferation of networking social groups peddling incitement to hate and harm.
- Superstition and prejudice are not innate, they are acquired usually in childhood at home, in peer groups or preachings. The consequences of prejudice can lead to genocide, ethnic cleansing, pogrom, abuse of rights, apartheid. It is therefore essential to combat racism and xenophobia by starting in early years of life and onwards.
- We support the move to establish an internet Ombudsman with the power to remove racist material from the net, as mooted by the Prime Minister. (*The Age*, 27.2.10)
- We urge new legislation that makes such conduct actionable. We do not regard this as a limitation of the freedom of speech. Racial, religious or ethnic vilifications are an abuse of the freedom of speech and should not be condoned. Rights entail responsibilities; in this case it is the respect for the dignity of others.
- We urged a vigorous education campaign, in schools, work places and community groups; the participation of all media; the consultation between ethnic groups and educational authorities to formulate an effective anti-violence and anti-racism campaign.
- We recommend a booklet titled *Racism*, issued by the Human Rights Commission, as a teaching aid.

Geoff Allshorn, Halina Strnad

Submission report correction

In the submission report on education, April VH, the word 'rote' was omitted from the point critical of National Testing. It should have read as follows.

- We expressed the view that the current practice of National Testing promotes **rote** learning rather than critical thinking, life skills, positive social interaction and a broad knowledge base. We pleaded for a reassessment of educational policies and practices particularly in regard to proper and equitable sourcing of schools, public and private, with positive discrimination towards disadvantaged schools and their teachers.

An evolutionary perspective of intimate relationships

HSV Public Lecture by **Dr J. Sabura Allen**, of Monash University, on 23 February 2010 at Melbourne Unitarian Church, East Melbourne. **Report by Jennie Stuart**

In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation.
(Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 1859.)

In evolutionary psychology the principles that are accepted as operating in biological systems are applied to psychological traits. The central assumption is that the human brain is composed of a large number of highly specialised mechanisms, both cognitive and emotional, which have been shaped by natural selection and adaptation. Evolutionary psychologists have developed a perspective for understanding psychological mechanisms in terms of the survival and reproductive functions which are assumed to have operated over the course of human evolution.

There are numerous adaptive problems involved in enhancing reproductive success. These revolve firstly around the selection, attraction and retention of a mate for reproductive purposes. The problems related to survival, such as the competition for resources, may involve the establishment of a hierarchy of status, as well as the formation of alliances outside the close family unit. Finally there are adaptive problems involved in the selection and maintenance of supportive friendship networks.

Intimate relations in evolutionary theory

Darwin's concept of fitness related primarily to genetic inheritance, the ability to survive to reproductive age and the potential of offspring to survive and reproduce. A broader perspective encompasses the fitness and reproductive success of biological relatives, postulating an indirect advantage from the shared gene pool.

Strategies to enhance sexual attractiveness and gain sexual access vary between men and women, and the initial motivation to have intercourse may appear to be only loosely connected with the more fundamental motivation to reproduce. Despite this, and notwithstanding the availability of highly effective methods of birth control, much of our behaviour involved in sexual attraction is still governed by neural and hormonal systems that evolved for reproductive success.

There appears to be a default process which favours longer-term relationships for both men and women. This option may be viewed as facilitating reproductive success, despite psychological adaptations possessed by both men and women towards short-term mating. For men, multiple mates offer sexual variety as well as reproductive benefits. In addition, men usually have less onerous parenting duties, compared with women. The differential in nurturing behaviour is considered to be biologically determined. However, for women, short-term mating may also have evolved as an evolutionary advantage, as it offers access to a variety of men and thus a wider range of resources or protective friendships.

The child-parent bond has an evolutionary function, providing protection from danger and the alleviation of distress. Attachment theory stems from John Bowlby's observation that infants and young children maintain a degree of physical proximity to their primary care-givers and are distressed if they become separated from them.

Continued from Page 4 ...

There is an organised pattern of infant signals and adult responses which fosters a trusting, protective relationship during the early stages of development.

Infant attachment may vary from the secure child, to one who is anxious and ambivalent having experienced erratic or inconsistent nurturing.

Alternatively, children who have suffered abusive or cold and rejecting care-givers may show avoidant behaviour, being unresponsive to social contact. Patterns established in childhood are likely, later in life, to have an effect on selection of a mate and maintenance of an intimate relationship.

In general, the goal is to find a secure partner in adult life, someone who is trustworthy and likely to be available for the long term. In this way the survival of offspring and optimal attachment between infant and care-giver is ensured. Adults who have a history of anxious or avoidant attachment in childhood are less likely to establish successful intimate relationships. But this is not always the case. Even if there is a past history of poor attachment, human beings are malleable and adaptive, with the capacity to respond and change if a trustworthy partner turns up.

Slavery today

HSV Public Lecture given by **Roscoe Howell**, social activist, 23 March 2010 at Balwyn Library.

Report by Howard Hodgens

Roscoe Howell presented a forceful case that slavery is still with us. He pointed out that, although it is now 200 years since slavery was 'abolished', it still exists in the form of child labour, debt labour, child soldiers, sex slavery, sale of body organs and inter-country adoption. He illustrated his lively and engaging talk with a range of photographic images via the HSV digital projector. He posed the question, 'is there a country without slavery?'

Australia's history of blackbirding in the '50s, 'nickel and dime' hospitality work and immigrant labour suggested that we do not have a clean slate. The definition he gave is that 'slavery exists when one person owns another.' He gave a range of examples of slavery currently operating such as the mining for the mineral coltan (used in mobile phones) in the Congo by Rwandans, child trafficking in Malaysia, and the kidnapping and use of children as forced soldiers in Nigeria, Burma and Somalia. Even in Britain today there is exploitation of immigrants. It is the third largest profitable activity after drugs and arms.

Who bears the cost? Answer: the children, the family and the whole of society. If you have been born into slavery it may take a generation, as the bible illustrated when Moses led the Israelites out of the wilderness after 40 years. Howell mentioned several films that covered to topic of modern-day slavery, *Blood Diamonds* about slave labour in diamond mines in Sierra Leone, and *The Jammed* about sex slaves in urban Australia.

In discussing sex slavery he cited the Australian High Court case of a sex worker, Wei Tang, who was required

by her 'owner' to service 600 male customers, for a bit of pocket money and a chance to shower, in order to pay off the money given to her family. Another example he discussed was of a Burmese child soldier who escaped was recaptured then made a case for refugee status, but by that time he was adult. He also mentioned several cases that have succeeded in getting in compensation for the victims.

There are many organisations fighting slavery, including ILO, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, World Vision, Fair Trade, UN Office on Drugs and Crimes and UNICEF. Howell urged members to seek out fair trade chocolate, tea, and coffee, to ensure we promote just working conditions back through the supply chain. Some-times poverty is so bad that slavery is the only way to avoid it. In many cases debt is passed on from one generation to another. This is why the Grameen Bank scheme operating in Bangladesh and India, which Muhammad Yunus established, has enabled many families to escape the debt-bonded poverty and the bonds imposed by the landlord class. The difficulty is widespread corruption, which Transparency International tries to track; but fear and lack of power keeps the engine of slavery going.

The greatest hope lies in the education of children. In response to the lecturer's question of what that would mean, the audience suggested time for school, safety and protection in working conditions, health checks. In the end the cost of talking is lower than that of fighting. That in turn means Global Witness. A website, *Slavery Links*, is an anti-slavery body which links together businesses, organisations and individuals active in philanthropic activities relevant to modern slavery

* How to make the big swap to Fair Trade. Fair Trade Fortnight, 1-16 May, <http://www.fairtrade.come.au>.

Letter

Scepticism

I CHUCKLED at the item in *VH* of April 2010, 'On Scepticism', in which Jiddu Krishnamurti is critical of accepting anyone's authority. A shaman retorts, 'Oh yeah? Says who?' It reminds me of someone saying, 'Don't take my advice.' If you don't take that advice you have taken it. To be fair to Krishnamurti, he often said, 'Don't believe what I say, check it out for yourself.' My problem with choosing an authority is, if I don't have wisdom to know the answer I also don't know which authority to choose.

Rudi Anders, Fairfield

IHEU General Assembly 2010

The IHEU General Assembly 2010 will be held at the offices of Centre d'Action Laïque (CAL), Campus de la Plaine – CP 236, Avenue Arnaud Fraiteur, Acces 2, 1050, Brussels, Belgium on Friday 6 August 2010 and Saturday 7 August 2010. Please contact HSV secretary Mary Bergin if you are interested in attending this event, possible as an Australian Humanist representative.

Motions for CAHS Convention

Humanist Society of South Australia

2. 'That all Societies be encouraged to prepare their own motions for social reform etc. at any time and when passed by their own members issue them directly to Government etc. in their own name advising CAHS and other societies of their action.'

Rationale:

1. Our action needs be speeded up to keep pace with the ever-increasing pace of events.
2. Our members will have a sense of ownership and interest in the outcome of their motion. It will increase their belief that their society is doing something worthwhile.
3. HSV has a submissions committee, co-ordinated by Halina Strnad for over two decades, which has and still creates much interest for Victorian Humanists who have been involved with their drafting at the monthly Discussion meetings. The profile of the Society has been raised and all members are proud to be associated.
4. The Humanist Society of Queensland conducts campaigns on issues of concern.
5. The number of motions to be dealt with at the Convention would be reduced and consequently the workload of the CAHS executive would be eased.

3. 'That the State which has undertaken to host the next CAHS Convention be required to provide to CAHS Executive, and State Societies not later than 15 November of the previous year the dates and location, of the event, together with a projected program and anticipated charges/ costs for Registration, outings, Convention Dinner.'

Rationale: Since a State Society knows two years in advance that it will be its turn to host the Convention, it is not too onerous to expect this sort of information six months ahead. In most cities, rooms for a conference over two or three days need to be booked months in advance. This year, we have had nothing except the dates (received since 1 January) with more information not received until 24 February. That is just twelve weeks before the event and we are told with this information that the less expensive rooms in one of two nearby hotels are booked out, since the football is on that Saturday. While twelve weeks notice may be all right for those who can book standby online with a credit card in hand, not everyone who wants to attend is in that position, the state reps who have the longest distance to travel may be in the worst position.

Humanist Society of Victoria

1. 'That CAHS calls on the federal government to institute a Tobin tax on each foreign currency transaction made by Australian banks. The amount taxed need be no more than 0.05% of the amount transacted. The revenue should be deposited into a special trust fund for foreign aid projects. Further, Australia should promote adoption of a Tobin tax by the G20 group of nations.'

Rationale: The Australian economy is swamped by speculative foreign-exchange currency trading. Nobel-prizewinning economist James Tobin proposed, in 1972, a minute tax on all foreign currency transactions, which would slightly dampen short-term investments more than

long-term investments. Since then supporters have nominated various rates from 0.005% to 0.25% and suggested widening the scope to include domestic financial transactions, which may not suit Australia. If the major economies followed suit and there was appropriate international co-operation, the revenue would solve the world problems of UN Millennium Goals and help underdeveloped countries adjust to global warming. Already the EU, President B. Obama, G. Soros, G. Brown and World Council of Churches support a Tobin tax. In the wake of the global financial crisis, the time for regulation is now. However, universal agreement is unnecessary, and the Australian government could quite properly proceed without any international treaty.

2. 'That CAHS appeals to the Australian government to strengthen its stand against racism in this country, (1) by discontinuing the intervention against indigenous Australians, which has been pursued in violation of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975; and (2) by working in co-operation with indigenous communities so as to develop equitable and non-paternalistic practices which enable and empower them to protect themselves.'

Rationale: The 'top down' policies of government are not closing the sociological gap between indigenous and other Australians. The federal government is to be commended for its 2008 apology to indigenous Australians, which brought it into line with the states and territories, and which acknowledged that endemic racist attitudes and practices have the potential to cause profound and long-term damage to individuals and communities. In November 2009 the Minister for Indigenous Affairs introduced a bill to re-instate the Racial Discrimination Act, suspended in 2007; but to date this has not been passed by Parliament and the issue remains a matter of grave concern.

3. 'That CAHS calls on the federal government to exert its power to disapprove of Victorian Anti-Discrimination legislation which continues to allow special exemptions for religious organisations.'

Rationale: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), to which Australia is a signatory nation, guarantees equal human rights for all people and equal protection under the law. Article 30 of the UDHR states that no person or party shall be permitted to use their human rights in order to deprive others of those same rights. It is the responsibility of all governments to provide fair and equal protection for all their citizens under the law, and Victoria proposes to continue with exemptions that violate this obligation. The current Victorian legislation perpetuates two classes of human rights and is a retrograde step in efforts to foster a cohesive Australian society.

4. 'That CAHS calls on the federal government to act decisively and promptly in response to recent racist sentiment and violence in Australia. This includes educational and legal measures.'

Rationale: Recent attacks on people of Indian appearance have highlighted the growing spate of racial abuse. Consequences of such prejudices can include genocide, ethnic cleansing and pogroms such as the Cronulla riots. There is an obvious need for legal intervention to prevent incitement to racism in the mass media and on social networking sites on the Internet. A recent death on Palm Island and a horrifying one in a police van at lethal temperature are appalling examples of institutionalized racism, which must be prevented.