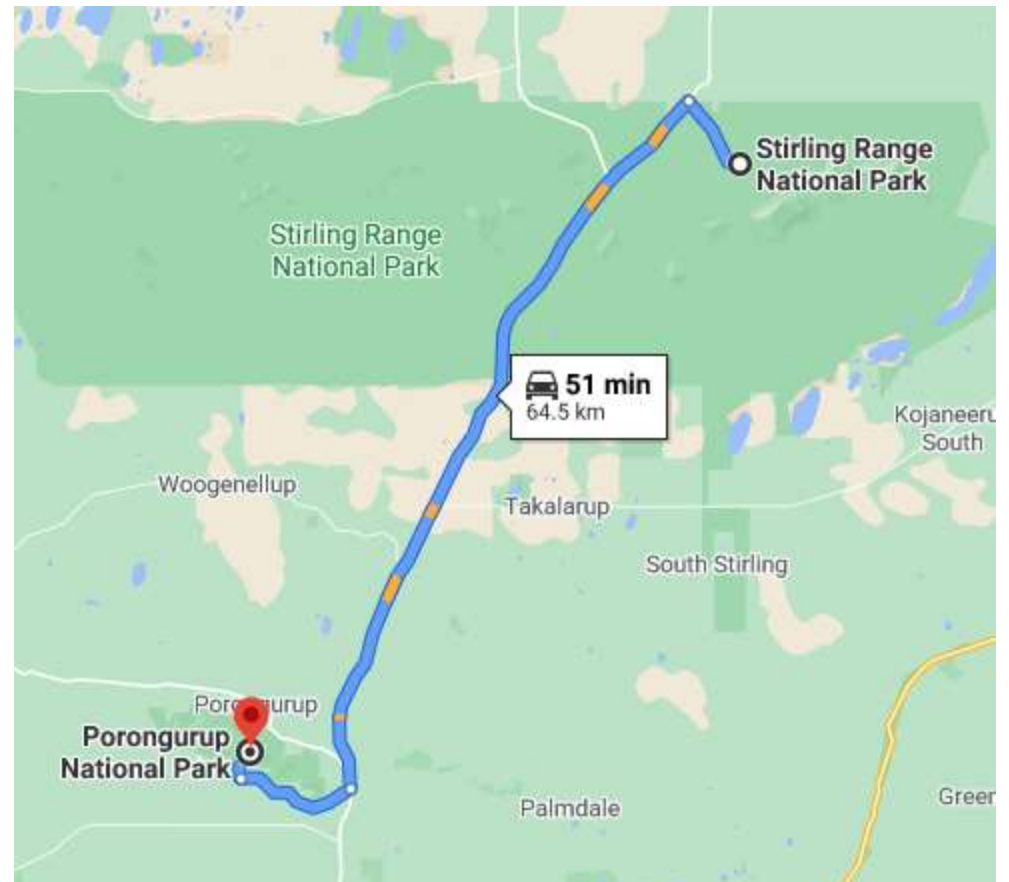


# Contemplating the Interior Impact of Ecological Restoration in the Light of St John of the Cross

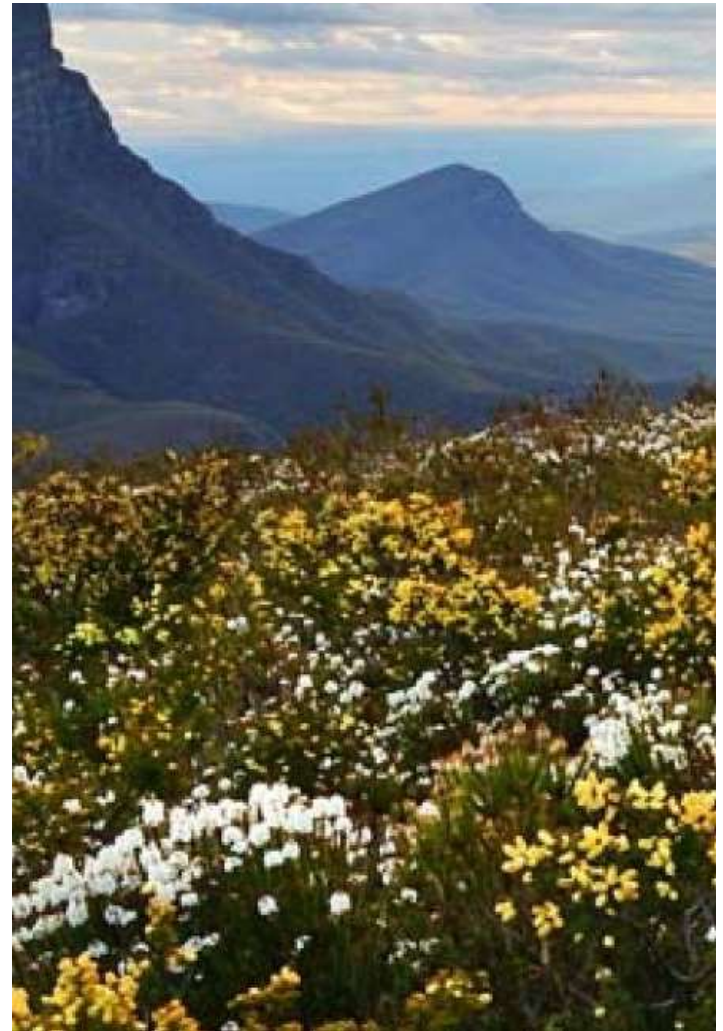


# Introduction: Transformative Ecological Restoration in My Neighbourhood and Beyond

- Porongurup – in the Great Southern region of WA
- Locale named after the Porongurup Range
- Granite rocks of the Porongurup Range about 1.1 billion years old
- Stirling Ranges
- Stirlings about 2.2 billion years old



- Porongurups and Stirlings have different geologies; each range has diversity of plants, animals, insects, and birds that take advantage of the unique microclimates offered by the mountains.
- Porongurups and Stirlings two precious islands of biodiversity.
- Ecological restoration project called the Ranges Link
- Mission of Ranges Link: “To increase the amount and quality of bushland between the Stirling Range and Porongurup National Parks to enable the area’s rich biodiversity to persist across the agricultural landscape into the future.”



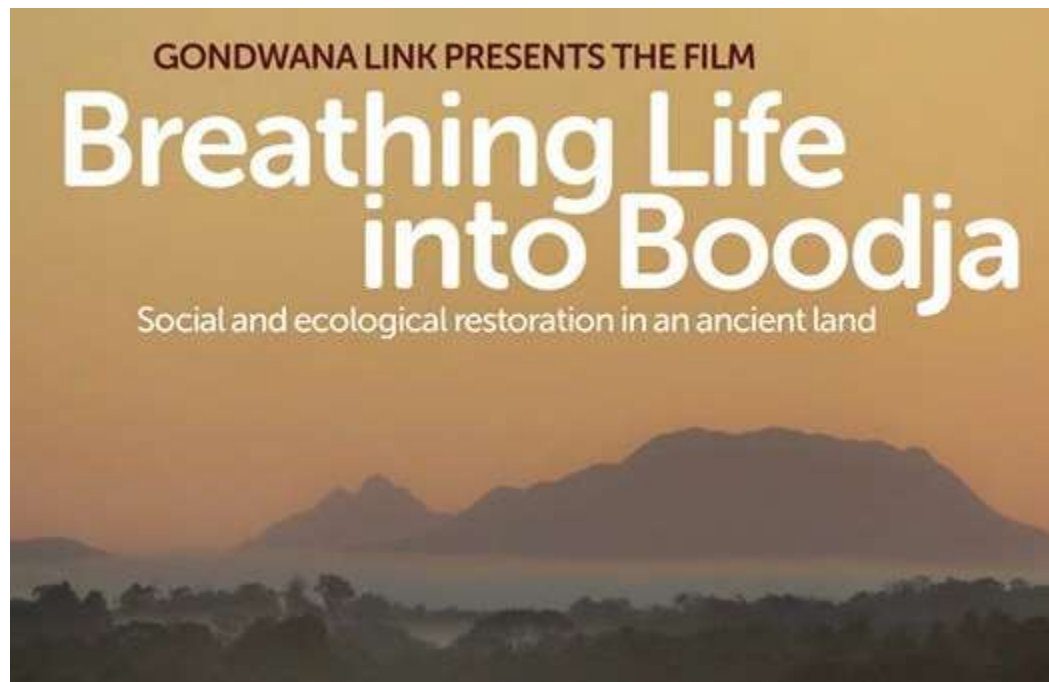
- Ranges Link project run by volunteers
- Strikingly contemplative spirit of people involved in this local ecological restoration project
- An attentiveness, a generosity, a simplicity of purpose that is captivating and admirable



- Ranges Link part of larger project: Gondwana Link
- Mission of Gondwana Link: “Reconnected country across south-western Australia, from the [tall] wet forests in the south west corner to the dry woodlands and mallee bordering the Nullarbor Plain, in which ecosystem function and biodiversity are restored and maintained.”
- Various groups, Aboriginal communities, and individuals involved in Gondwana Link working towards re-establishing over 1000 kilometres of connected bush roughly from Margaret River to Kalgoorlie.



- Documentary about Gondwana Link: *Breathing Life into Boodja: Social and Ecological Restoration in an Ancient Land*
- Again, a contemplative spirit discernible
- “Transformation,” “hope,” “community,” “self-sacrifice,” “rejuvenation,” “vulnerability,” and “healing”
- Words used in reference to interior lives of people involved in the restoration work – not just to transformation, healing etc. of land.

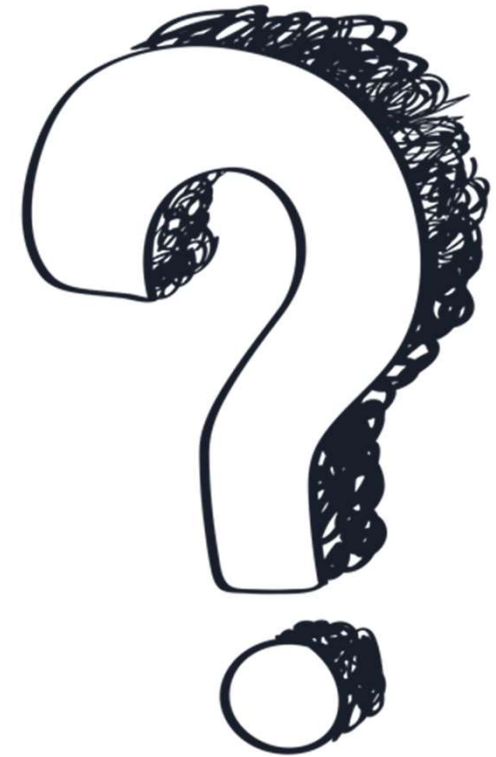


- Others across world talking about impact of ecological restoration on people's interior lives.
- “What restoration could and should be for us is the transformation of our souls. In addition to what this work may accomplish in the land, I yearn for it as the yoga that will cause us to evolve spiritually” (Stephanie Mills, cited in Gretel Van Wieren, “Ecological Restoration as Public Spiritual Practice,” 237).



# Contemplating the Interior Impact of Ecological Restoration with St John of the Cross

- “How, if at all, does working with a wounded, yet self-healing nature shape the types of spiritual-moral experiences that restoration practice engenders?” (Van Wieren, 248)
- “Are there ways in which the world’s religious traditions might helpfully contribute to public discourse regarding restoration practice?” (Van Wieren, 252 )





- St John of the Cross's description of the spiritual pilgrimage can be applied to the soul-transformation experienced by those involved in ecological restoration.
- John's account of the spiritual journey is applicable even if a person involved in ecological restoration isn't a Christian – yet still experiences somehow being transformed through their work.



## Deep Incarnation

- Deep incarnation: an idea from contemporary ecotheology based on scientific insight that all things in universe – humans, stars, echindas, orchids – are profoundly connected.
- “It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet – physical, chemical and biological – are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 138).

- This inescapable interconnectedness has consequences for the meaning of the Incarnation.
- In Jesus, God didn't step into an isolated unit of humanity; no such thing exists.
- Rather, God stepped deep down into the interconnected tissue of reality.
- “In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation in order to share the fate of biological existence. . . . In the incarnate One, God shares the life conditions of foxes and sparrows, grass and trees, soil and moisture” (Niels Gregersen, cited in Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 185).

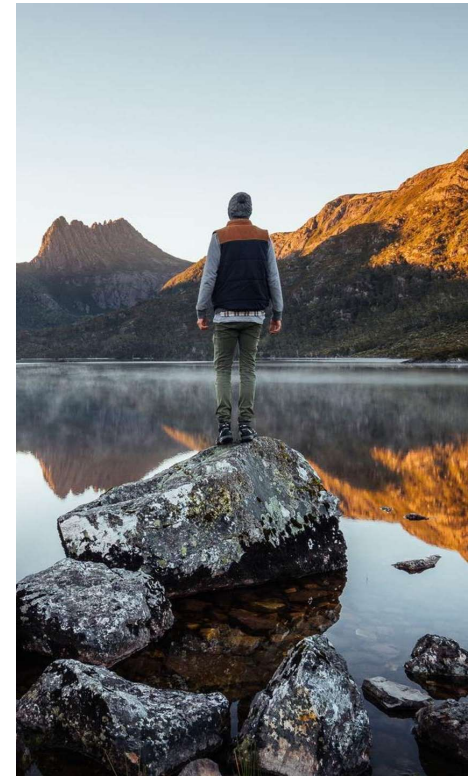


- “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” a profound reality.
- If we consider the incarnation in the light of contemporary scientific insight, we discover it is even deeper, more radical, than perhaps our spiritual ancestors realised.
- “Deep incarnation understands John’s gospel to be saying that the *sarx* [flesh] that the Word of God became not only welds Jesus Christ to other human beings in the human species; it also reaches beyond us to join the incarnate one to the whole evolving biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed” (Johnson, 186).
- “The one ineffable God who creates the heavens and the earth is free enough to participate personally in the created world this way, and loving enough to want to do so” (Johnson, 187).

- Idea that entire cosmos – not just humanity – infused with divine life because of the incarnation present in John’s writings.
- “My Beloved, the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys, strange islands, and resounding rivers, the whistling of love-stirring breezes, the tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn, silent music, sounding solitude, the supper that refreshes, and deepens love” (“Spiritual Canticle,” 14-15).



- Insights of deep incarnation tell us there is no such thing as “pure nature.”
- Through the incarnation, whole web of creation is imbued with presence of God.
- Whenever a person is intimately involved in caring for land, they are intimately involved with the living God – whether they realise it or not.
- This brings us to John of the Cross’s presentation of the spiritual pilgrimage.
- The experience of personal transformation recounted by people involved in ecological restoration projects can be described using John’s stages of the spiritual life because in being intimately involved with creation these people are intimately involved with the living, if hidden, God.



# The Beginning of the Journey

- “Where have you hidden,  
Beloved, and left me moaning?  
You fled like the stag  
after wounding me;  
I went out calling you,  
but you were gone” (“Spiritual Canticle,” 1).
- “Before anyone starts out on the road to union with God, God awakes a desire for this within the heart. It is a desire to go beyond the ego and its circumscribed world, and venture into the reality beyond.  
One ‘wants’ to climb the mountain [that is, Mount Carmel] and not remain earthbound. I call this initial wanting a ‘wound’ of love. It makes us restless, ready to begin the search. It is a sure sign that we have been touched by God” (Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, *To Live is to Pray*, 41-42).

- Two interconnected points
- (1) At beginning of the journey we are wounded, broken open, by a call from beyond ourselves to go beyond ourselves.
- (2) We are driven to pursue this “Other” who is pursuing us; we are convinced that we have to *do something* about this “something more” that has shaken the depths of our being.
- “We have to make up our minds to want God alone whatever the cost. . . . From the depths of our being, with all the sincerity and determination we have, we must explicitly and continually affirm that we hand ourselves over to God, that we are not concerned with ourselves, we want nothing for ourselves. This is to put our selfishness in the night” (Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 22)





- Accounts of those involved in Gondwana Link suggest that they experience the woundedness of the land as wounding them and compelling them into action.
- The cleared, suffering, threatened land calls to their depths and stirs within them a need to step out of their own securities and comfort zones and to respond, to do something.
- There is a wounding, a breaking open, by a call from beyond oneself to go beyond oneself. And one is driven to pursue this “Other” that is pursuing them.



- “An interpretation of John of the Cross in terms of ecological spirituality. . . begins from the experience of the absence of God in the wounds of the earth, its creatures, and its ecosystems. They are wounds aggravated by human sin, and in *penthos* [sorrow for sin that rends the heart and opens it to God] they turn us toward God. With a theology of ‘deep incarnation’ we recognize in them the wounds of Christ” (Mary Frohlich, “‘O Sweet Cautery’: John of the Cross and the Healing of the Natural World,” 327).
- Very same interior dynamics are at work even if Christ remains hidden from view for the restorationist.



To the first video:  
“In Defence  
of the Forests”

<https://vimeo.com/channels/gondwanalink/482458677>

# Beyond the Beginnings

- For John, as we progress in spiritual journey, we come to experience a life that is not our own.
- Burgeoning of this new life involves dismantling of tyranny of the ego and emergence of a new, soul-expanding way of knowing and willing.
- “Contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love” (*The Dark Night*, Book I, Chapter 10:6).
- “There is a process of substitution: the life of Jesus, God’s life, replacing that of the ego” (Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*, 100).



- In order to respond to life of God unfolding within our depths, we need to lay down our innate tendency to want to be in control and instead allow the self-emptying life of Jesus to become more and more embodied within our lives.
- As life of God blossoms within us, our limited, human ways of knowing and willing give way faith, hope and love.
- “Live only in dark and genuine faith, and sure hope, and unmitigated love. . . . Be joyful, and trust in God” (John, cited in Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God*, 98).
- “Where God is this close, our response has to be at root a receiving; and that receiving cannot but put us in contact with such a God. . . . Believe, hope, love, and you are receiving God” (Matthew, 101).



- John's teaching on second stage of spiritual life remarkably in tune with experience of restorationists.
- People deeply involved in restoration work speak of the self-healing capacities of land; working closely with land, they experience an unexpected vitality within that land.
- This vitality cultivates within restorationists a letting go of control, a surrender to this mysterious life-that-is-not-their-own.
- And vitality of land also seems to be a force for soul-expansion; the land's life-of-its-own, its surprising power for self-healing, brings about hope, healing and the ability to endure within restorationists.



- “In restoration’s case, persons are drawn into and experience nature’s relentless life-force and capacity for regeneration. Restorationists find meaning, a home, within particular ecosystems and their slow, self-healing ways” (Van Wieren, 243).
- Soul-expanding ways of meaning-making, of new ways of knowing, engendered by being in communion with a life that is not our own.
- “Restoration activity can enable a de-centering, or loss, of the self that comes through the realization that humans are dependent on and interdependent with larger Nature. An important part of this de-centering is the feeling of human limitation, and, in turn, humility that restorationists often experience” (Van Wieren, 248).



- ““It’s not about control but about surrender;’ not about imposition, but about being ‘drawn into the slow beauty of the self-healing nature of living places’” (cited in Van Wieren, 249).
- Keeping in mind the theology of deep incarnation, it seems theologically plausible to suggest that the **impact of being in intimate communion with creation** can be considered alongside the **impact of growing in union with God through the inflowing of mystical grace.**





# The Culmination of the Journey

- For John, the culmination of the journey is about both unalloyed union with the living God and the fulfilment of our identity as human persons.
- Created to be completely united with God, so to be utterly imbued with the life of God – becoming God by participation – we become fully ourselves.
- “By his divine breath-like spiration, the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to himself. . . .

This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in his image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance” (*The Spiritual Canticle*, 39: 3, 4).

- This reality of being fully in communion with the divine and fully ourselves can be discerned in experience of people committed to ecological restoration projects.
- Accounts from Aboriginal people of the South-West region of WA, the Noongar people, about being personally healed through being involved in healing the land.
- Speak of becoming fully alive, fully themselves, through being profoundly in communion with country.



To the second video:  
“Healing Land,  
Healing People”

<https://vimeo.com/channels/gondwanalink/482458835>

## Conclusion: Some Personal Reflections

- (1) John's teaching gives me a framework for understanding soul-richness that is so evident in many involved in Gondwana Link.
- (2) My sense of what I'm doing through my life of prayer enriched:
  - Perhaps I am able to express the praise, gratitude, and laments that maybe remain unexpressed within the hearts of my restorationist neighbours.
  - Participation in Mass enhanced: more deliberate about including local and global ecological labours in the work of human hands that we offer to God; more mindful that somehow all of creation is divinized by the mystery of the Eucharist.
- (3) Idea that John's depiction of spiritual life is incarnated by those involved in ecological restoration offers me a way of presenting John's spiritual teaching to others.