

SOUNDS, SCENTS AND SENSIBILITIES IN THE TASMANIAN BUSH

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Ahh, the smell that hits you as you first enter the forest. A blend of eucalypt oil, musk, sassafras, and an all-pervading sense of dampness. And just a hint of a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* that really gives this place its unique identity. Except it's not quite *je-ne-sais-quoi* because I do know what it is, it's floor polish. *Floor polish?* Of course. It wafts in whenever someone opens the door. You know, the door that leads from the forestry dome to the offices beyond. This is what greets me every day as I arrive for work at Forestry Tasmania. It's like a little bit of the Southern Forests transported to the middle of Hobart – apart from the floor polish, that is.

We underestimate the role that scents play in our daily lives and our sense of place, but I'm not on a crusade for greater public awareness, unless it can be balanced by a greater sense of responsibility over the impacts of media control over our senses. In the current climate, I fear that if there were a groundswell of opinion that modern life was depriving us of olfactory opportunities, the pressure would really be on to develop smellivision. Would that be a bad thing? Most of us naturalists derive a great deal of pleasure from watching a good David Attenborough documentary; wouldn't it be so much better if we could smell the exotic location too? Well, quite apart from not particularly wanting to smell David's armpits as he descends on a rope from the rainforest canopy, my concern is that the producers would get it wrong, and we'd end up sniffing in some ersatz chemical cocktail of inappropriate aromas. It would be the TV equivalent of having to fight one's way through the perfume section of Myer in the week before Christmas.

Okay, so smellivision is fortunately a long way off - though I recently read in *New Scientist* of advances in 'aroma recording and playback' by a Japanese research group. But what I'm concerned about here is a more general phenomenon exemplified by our addiction to TV viewing – a sign of our times which could be called the macdonaldisation of our sense of place. It's all-pervasive and many of us probably don't even notice it's happening. Let me give you a couple of local examples. They both concern films that received widespread media acclaim.

Paul Scott's film, *The Oldest Living Tasmanian – The Huon Pine*, screened on the ABC in 2004. Make no mistake, this is a beautiful film, combining

rare archival footage of piners at work, with top-notch wilderness photography from Tasmania's mountainous western rainforests. It could have been wonderfully evocative of place – except that someone dubbed the wilderness footage with birdcalls from the mainland. It's as though there exists in the producer's office a CD entitled 'Australian evocative bird sounds' – a one-size-fits-all source of sound suitable for any occasion when there's a need to evoke a sense of wildness. But whose wildness? Surely one of the things that's special about the west of Tasmania is that it doesn't resonate to the calls of whistling kites and pied currawongs? Would the smellivision version of this film also have assaulted us with the stench of dry kangaroo dung in the dusty outback, or wafts of resin from a stand of Bunya pines?

Then there's Katherine and Roger Scholes' *Last Port of Call*, a portrait of Flinders Island shack life, also screened on the ABC in 2004 as part of a *Reality Bites* series. Again, a real masterpiece, but for one thing. The soundtrack was peppered with non-Flindersian avifauna. For me, it evoked some rural corner of England, which I'll bet is where the bird recordings were made. Couldn't we have been treated to fairy wrens and thornbills instead? Is there a closet latter-day member of the Acclimatisation Society alive and well in the bowels of the ABC's post-production labs?

My only reason for singling out these productions is because they are Tasmanian, but the same fate befalls footage filmed around the world, whether it appears in natural history programs or Hollywood movies. The sad thing about it - for me - is not so much that it happens, but that so few people seem to care or even notice. Imagine the outcry if the Scholes had shot their footage in a hastily constructed mock shack in England and then tried to pass it off as Flinders Island by dubbing the soundtrack with fairy wrens and muttonbirds. Who would rate a film on the Huon pine if the wilderness shots featured expanses of semi-desert or subtropical vine forest, or if the footage purporting to be of piners on the lower Gordon river showed the old shipyards of Botany Bay in the background? No amount of black currawong calls would allay our sense of deception.

Smells do matter too. I recently returned to a beach at Lulworth in England that I had not visited for decades, but was instantly carried back to my first visit there (a camping trip when I was five) by the unique smell of the place – a product, I can only surmise, of beached seaweed putrefying in an unusual way through being suffused with fresh water emanating from a small stream flowing onto the beach. The stream itself may have imparted its particular contribution through having its origins in a spring in the chalk hills and having passed through dairy country

and a duck pond on its way to the sea. There's probably a particular subliminal smell about my local Taroona beach too, which I hope my young sons will pick up on and be able to recall in decades to come. Though both beaches on different sides of the world share mounds of rotting kelp suffused with fresh water, they reek in completely different ways. They are very different places as a result.

Call me a grumpy old man, but few things annoy me more than having my sense of place rudely shattered by out-of-place olfactory sensations. As a naturalist, it's particularly galling when I'm rudely reminded of the city while out and about in the bush. It doesn't occur very often, but I get the feeling it's happening more and more in Tasmania. Maybe it's a further reflection of our increasing detachment from nature. I'm talking about 'perfumes', as in bottles of man-made chemicals applied to the human body, aimed at somehow bestowing on that person their own comforting sense of place, of sameness, wherever they go. If the perfume stayed on the person, I would feel sorry for the wearer but nothing more. But perfumes are designed to be detected by others, and to evoke responses. Flower scents are produced for a very similar reason – the plant doesn't make them because it likes the smell, it makes them because it hopes its pollinators will like the smell and will be conscripted into helping the plant to reproduce. My suggestion to perfume-wearers is to leave the perfume behind along with the city shoes when going bush. One's olfactory experiences will be the richer for doing so (and mine will be too should we pass within fifty metres of one other).

Humans are naturally a very visually-oriented species, far more so than most other mammals. The journal in which this article appears is a testament to that fact. Yet we implicitly recognise that sight is not the only important medium enabling us to engage with the world around us: we still talk darkly of the control exerted by 'the media' rather than 'the medium'. But the stimulus of vision is apparently over-riding, and in our modern world it is easy for us to be fooled into thinking that other stimuli just don't matter. Much as some travellers find it comforting to see the golden arches of Macdonalds wherever they go, so I fear we are being collectively comforted by being fed and brought up on anodyne soundscapes and homogenised smellscape. Tasmania is awash with special places not just because of the way they look, it's also the way they sound and the way they smell.

I think it's time to restore a sense of balance in our senses. It's time we pricked up our ears to the full range of sensual possibilities available to us in our interaction with the world around us. And it's time we smelt a rat more often than we do when watching the telly.