

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Whenever I talk to people about my kiln they are immediately appalled at the fact that I burn two tonnes of wood each time I fire. Even after I talk about the program of tree planting and other environmental measures I take to neutralize the carbon dioxide I put into the atmosphere they remain suspicious. It seems that allied as we are to the 'environmental monsters' of mining and forestry, wood firers run the risk of being tarred by the same brush. How do we avoid becoming victims of environmental issues and attitudes not of our own making?

We are after all modern humans, used to being able to choose what we do and how we do it. With that choice comes the responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Humans are adaptable, that's how we have survived and spread across the planet. There is change coming and we must adapt and take responsibility for what we have contributed towards.

Global warming is a reality and there will be winners and losers. Wood firers will be challenged both by the environment and society. I see water, fuel and people as our great challenges.

As I traveled through the Southern Highlands to Mittagong I was aware of a forested landscape with seemingly abundant water. It is easy to believe in this environment that the trees we need will always be there for us to use. After all trees are the ultimate biofuel. No processing required before we use them in the kiln and they grow so easily in this environment of good soil and abundant water. Global warming will bring changes maybe even to environments as rich as this.

The south west of Western Australia has gone through a long term drying trend. If this continues the majestic forests of Karri and Jarrah that occur there will disappear, indeed, they are already under threat in some areas. At York, where my property is, the drying trend has meant a change in tree species that grow there, with the larger eucalypt species being replaced by wattle, she-oak and smaller gums. We have found that although it's possible to grow species endemic to York, these days it is much easier to establish eucalypts that come from dryer areas further inland. Our challenge is to plant and keep alive enough trees to provide fuel and remove all the carbon dioxide we produce. A tough call when long dry spells slow tree growth and the species we can grow are not necessarily what we want to burn in our kiln.

Wood sourced as mill scrap is becoming increasingly difficult to source in Western Australia and this trend will continue as more uses are found for this valuable resource. Competition for wood scrap inevitably will force up the price and make it too expensive to consider. Growing our wood is a way of guaranteeing supply at a reasonable cost. It improves our own part of the landscape with benefits for the local birds and other small creatures

Although wood firers in Australia are minnows when it comes to carbon emissions (our total yearly carbon dioxide would amount to less than that flared at the Burrup peninsula in a weekend) we still must accept responsibility. Growing trees or paying for them to be planted is a relatively strait forward thing to do.

I was surprised to see the number of people so far out from Sydney and so many so close to the Sturt kilns. People seem to like the same rural areas that wood firers have moved to in the past. The simple fact is that people do not like to see smoke, no matter that in many ways it's the unseen stuff in smoke that does the harm.

At York we are in the process of being surrounded by people living on small holdings. Their attitude to what I do to 'their' clean environment is important. Given the environmental legislation that exists in Western Australia (and in most states) it is important that I give them no reason to complain to the authorities. No matter that I have been firing there for years. I am only one voice and my neighbours many. I cannot move away so I must take responsibility for my kiln and fire without visible smoke to avoid draconian action being taken against me and possibly other wood firers in WA.

There are other environmental issues around the use of fossil fuel. No amount of tree planting will replace one litre of diesel or petrol. We consider the reduction of fossil fuel use as a priority. We have a small diesel van, the building at York is solar powered for lighting, refrigeration and pumping rainwater. Apart from the aesthetic considerations I see the use of local materials as an essential way of reducing our fuel use.

People's attitudes to what we do are a major challenge to wood fire practice. I choose to work in a somewhat anachronistic way and I must be seen to take responsibility for the environmental impact of my practice. Possibly I demand that my practice replaces more than it uses.

I am an optimist. Wood firing will be possible for future generations but only if we are able to change people's attitudes or, more easily, our own practices before public pressure drives councils and governments to legislate.

There is an old saying "man walks towards the forest with deserts at his heels". I do not want to be one of those men.

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