

LEAVING COONABARABRAN**Susan Harris Rimmer**

COONABARABRAN, A SMALL country town in Central West New South Wales, is much like many other small Australian towns: 3,000 close-knit souls and a big sandstone clock tower in the main street that's also the war memorial. All directions reference the clock tower. Farmers live on large properties – for sheep and wheat – around town, and these are often in drought. The Castlereagh River never troubles its banks with more than a trickle. Good high school; tidy main street; lively CWA; three pubs; proud First Nations heritage. No one is particularly well off. People stop to chat, and young ones tend to head off to Sydney.

What makes Coona different are three remarkable attributes. It stands on the Newell/Oxley highways, exactly halfway between Brisbane and Melbourne, which means it has more motels per capita than anywhere I've ever seen, and a lot of trucks and grey nomads pass through. For many years, my mother ran the John Oxley Caravan Park, and I reckon she met a good third of all Australians during that time.

Coonabarabran is also the 'gateway to the Warrumbungles', a truly spectacular mountain range formed by an ancient volcano and now surrounded by a huge national park full of wildlife. The Pilliga Forest is nearby, exciting everyone from birdwatchers to yowie hunters. And Coona has stunningly clear skies for stargazing. The Siding Spring Observatory is fifteen minutes from town along Timor Road. Some of the best optical telescopes in the Southern Hemisphere are up on the mountain there (we sneer at the Parkes radio telescope). International astronomers coming and going add a certain cosmopolitan flavour to the town, and every shop adopts its own star or constellation: Mum's caravan park featured the Horsehead Nebula. The nearby Warrumbungles have been declared the first International Dark Sky Park^[i] in the Southern Hemisphere, an honour kept for places that have exceptional starry nights and a unique nocturnal environment. It's the best place in Australia to see the Dark Emu.

As a child, I thought these attributes made Coona the place furthest away from anything interesting. As an adult, though, my favourite place to be in the world is just outside this small town, at the observatory lookout, staring across the range towards the Breadknife rock formation. The best of human striving is behind me, and the best of nature is in front. This place delineates the lines where human need meets the natural world.

As a human rights lawyer, I live by Eleanor Roosevelt's 1958 maxim on how best to measure global progress:

...where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.

Recently, I've started thinking about the future of climate justice and the associated problems of mobility and adaptation. And I've realised that one way to start exploring these issues is by going home and posing a simple yet painful question: what would make the people of Coonabarabran walk away from the place where they live? And have they already started to leave?

WHEN I WAS growing up, I wanted Coona to be somewhere people had heard of, where exciting things happened. Life always seemed to happen elsewhere when I was a girl. Then, in January 2013, lightning hit Split Rock and I heard the name of my birthplace on the news every hour of every day for almost six weeks:^[ii] a ferocious bushfire in the Coonabarabran area caused the loss of over 56,000 hectares of land, 95 per cent of the Warrumbungle National Park and fifty-six homes. Twenty-eight firefighters were injured during those forty-one days. Forty-one days of waiting to see if the wind would change, if containment lines around the town would hold.

It felt like every journalist in Australia was on the radio mangling the name of our neighbouring little town Bugaldie ('Bugle-Die'). The Prime Minister visited. All eyes were on Coona, and it was enough to break my heart.

I lived in Canberra then and had just returned from a visit home with the kids. It's a long drive (Coona is, in fact, a long drive from anywhere, at least ninety minutes from Dubbo and two hours from Tamworth), and the Central West was baking.

I knew about fire, too. Because I love Siding Spring, and because my husband is a Canberra boy, we'd been married at Siding Spring's sister observatory, Mount Stromlo in Canberra, in December 2002. A fortnight later, a roaring fire wiped out the observatory's dome as we cowered in our suburb below. It was my first experience of a catastrophic bushfire and it was terrifying. I've never felt such visceral, primal fear. Go through it once, and you'll always carry a knot of apprehension in your stomach when the weather feels as it did on those days.

I felt that sense of dread again when, letting my mum know we'd made it safely back to Canberra, she said there was a fire at Wambelong. No one was sure how it had started (and no inquiry has since determined a definite cause), but it was getting out of control. Fires are not common in the Warrumbungles, so that was noteworthy enough. At that stage, all the concern was for the National Park and its wildlife. But over the next few days, it became clear this was no ordinary fire – and residents on Timor Road were starting to worry.

By mid-January, Mum was reporting that Siding Spring was damaged, Bugaldie was under serious threat and properties had been lost. For the next fourteen days, the fire was uncontained, of exceptional ferocity: no matter the firefighting experience thrown at it, it was not enough. My mother and stepfather, second-generation residents, owned the caravan park then. For the duration of the fire, my mother looked after tents full of SES workers on the racecourse behind the caravan park as well as evacuees with singed pets in the cabins. 'Everyone is crying,' she told me. 'All the tough old blokes, everyone. Everyone is scared.'

Years later, Coonabarabran residents are still trying to forget the terror of the fireball in the sky; the choking smoke; the arbitrary nature of a fire front that could destroy one house and leave its neighbour untouched; the speed of its run; the livestock that had to be destroyed; the wildlife that was decimated. Now, after the massive fires of the 2019–20 summer, so many other Australians across the country are familiar with that knot of fear.

Those fires in January 2020 put Coonabarabran in the news again: this time they were out of control in the Pillaga, very close to where my parents have now retired. But the fires weren't all Coona had to contend with. There'd also been years of severe water restrictions: average daily consumption was limited to around 0.5 megalitres; baths had to be no more than thirty centimetres deep; showers no more than five minutes' long; and all the town's gardens were dead.^[iii] People were carting water from their washing machines to try to keep their plants alive. None of those motels could fill their pools.

As well as this, the ongoing impacts of the 2013 fire – including impacts on tourism – meant people had fewer resources in terms of money and networks. Some had moved away rather than rebuild, and anger remained over lack of compensation and underinsurance. Neither a coronial inquiry nor a NSW parliamentary inquiry had found negligence involved in the 2013 fire or the ways it was fought. They found what the 2020 Bushfires Royal Commission is finding: these fires were unprecedented, and we were unprepared.

Coona people pride themselves on their resilience, but it had been shaken. Everything felt more precarious; more and more new shops opened on the main street only to close again. My parents were evacuated twice through that 2019–20 summer, and my mother said two shattering things as she was evacuated for the second time. First, that she was worried people might not have the resources to go somewhere safe anymore when they were evacuated. Second, that for the first time in sixty years of living in Coonabarabran – and loving it – she and my stepdad thought that they might have to leave the town.

But where, they wondered, was a safer place when so much of the nation was burning in so many places you'd never expect?

Most Australians probably think of Pacific Islanders when they think of climate refugees – the region's people are already at the forefront of the impacts of our changing climate. And we should be thinking about and acting in solidarity with our Pacific neighbours. But this issue is drawing closer to home. When will Australians have to move due to climate change, and on what terms?

In March 2020, the rains finally came. The bores were switched off, and then the COVID-19 pandemic made living as far away from other humans as possible an attractive proposition. My mum has made many jokes this year that she's been socially distancing all her life. The sudden stop of tourists, the lifeblood of the town, was the next cruel blow.

WHEN I BECAME a professor in July 2020, it made page three of the Coonabarabran Times, our town's family-owned newspaper. The Times still reports when interstate people visit,^[iv] and it enjoys agricultural puns. It plays an important role in keeping the community connected, as does the local radio station, 2WCR FM. Most of my major life events have been recorded in the Times. As a human rights lawyer who works mostly on refugee issues, my career choices were not always popular at home. Working for charities was acceptable, but academia was seen as an odd choice, the opposite of a useful, grounded life.

The way I see it, all human rights now depend on climate justice – and when the opportunity came to focus my research on climate action in Australia, I jumped at it.

The scale of change in Coona made me want to explore what was going on. Coona has experienced more than its fair share of floods, fires and drought recently. So what would make Coona folk give up – people such as my stepdad, a third-generation Chinese-Australian, and my mum, whose own dad took up a packet of land after his service in World War II? Who of these people could move, and where, even if they wanted to?

If these questions sit at the heart of climate mobility – questions increasing numbers of people will have to face around the world – what could the microcosm of Coona show me? When the Times wanted to talk about my professorial appointment, I took the opportunity to ask Kaitlyn Estens – a local journalist – some questions of my own.

As Kaitlyn noted, the toughness and resilience quotient of the Coona population has always been high. Landholders leaving would, she thought, be more likely driven by drought than by fires. She went back to the situation through January and February 2020 when there was less than 20 per cent in the town's dam and that water wasn't usable: 'I'm not saying the drought is over,' she clarified, 'but if we didn't get the rain when we did, some [people] might have walked away.'

By mid-year, she said, people were watching the situation in nearby Murrurundi, where water was being carted in because the pipeline from Glenbawn Dam had been delayed. Coona avoided Murrurundi's fate thanks to emergency NSW Government funding for two new bores for the town. 'For someone who lives in town, [water] is a human basic need, isn't it?' Kaitlyn asked. But while Coona's population might be in gentle decline, blocks of land are still usually snapped up when they go on sale.

We moved on to COVID-19: there was still a run on toilet paper in August, and people were wearing face masks in town. Transport trucks still made their way along the Newell/Oxley highways. And even though Coona depends on tourist dollars, Victorian tourists during the winter school holidays had local people on edge.

If fire threatened the town again, said Kaitlyn, she would 'pack up the kids and go the opposite way' – her choices being Gunnedah (an hour away) or Dubbo (ninety minutes). But that meant staying in a hotel, and that meant having the funds to do that.

And then there were the droughts: enormous amounts of roadkill all along the highways as animals flocked to the grass on the verge; koalas falling out of trees; birds dropping from the sky, kangaroos growling at people in the National Park toilet block to turn on the tap for them. There were terrible dust storms that drove everyone indoors.

We looped back to the 2013 fires and their ongoing legacy. 'Those who were affected...they know how quickly things can change,' Kaitlyn said. 'Timor Road happened in a matter of hours. That is not something we will ever get over. Such a catastrophic bushfire...people were waiting with bated breath for the town to fall.' Kaitlyn's husband had been chased out of the National Park by the firestorm.

And there was so much adrenaline: people cooking in their kitchens for those who'd been displaced, organising clothing drives, fundraising, opening their homes. 'It was amazing to see the response of a community,' says Kaitlyn. 'I have never seen anything like that before.'

She reminds me that 'some families did give up after the fires. There was a lot of hurt, a lot of blame as the two inquiries went on.' There's still frustration at the results of the NSW parliament and coronial inquiries into the blaze: the NSW Government didn't respond until 31 March 2016, and the question of compensation was left unresolved.^[v]

And I wonder: will we look back on those families who gave up on Coona as part of the first waves of forced relocation that will happen due to climate change in Australia? Do people realise climate mobility issues are already happening?

Our conversation reaches an impasse, and Kaitlyn and I pause. Coona people are bred tough was the maxim of our childhood, and it underlines many of our jokes. We are stoic; we do not give up and we do not complain. The idea that there is a breaking point feels uncomfortable for both of us. But in the second half of 2020, it was obvious there was no clear plan for what the community should do if – or when – any of these things happen again.

ACCORDING TO A study of the geological records of large fires in Australia's history, the 2019–20 summer bushfires were also 'unprecedented'^[vi] – as was the 2013 Coona bushfire, which had a particular impact on First Peoples in the area. In the wake of these events, there's increasing awareness of the specific climate mobility issues that First Nations families face, not only in Coona but around Australia – communities who have distinct cultural connections to place and who have already experienced another kind of dislocation. Some of Coona's First Nations families were forced to come to Coona after being displaced by colonisation.

Almost a fifth of Coona's population – about 500 people – identifies as First Nations, spanning the Kamilaroi, the Wiradjuri and the Weilwan languages. 'Warrumbungle' is an Aboriginal word from the Kamilaroi people meaning 'crooked mountains'. The Kamilaroi used specific stars in the night sky to help them remember routes to meeting places. These stars formed a map that could be passed between generations. Cultural practices were affected not only by the fires, but also by drought: water sources in the Warrumbungles that First Nations peoples had relied on for thousands of years dried up, leaving only rocks in creek beds.

The region also holds other built heritage sites that are significant places for the Kamilaroi people, such as the Burra Bee Dee Mission and the cemetery on Forky Mountain. The Burra Bee Dee Mission was land granted to Mary Jane Cain, a Kamilaroi woman, by Queen Victoria in the early 1900s after a series of letters were exchanged between the two women. It was gazetted in 1912 as an Aboriginal reserve. I crossed the Castlereagh River on my walk to school every day by the Mary Jane Cain Bridge. It would be a loss to all Australians if this cultural heritage was lost to fire.

This year, the Bushfires Royal Commission heard that one in eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia had been directly impacted by the 2019–20 bushfires. It also heard that while Indigenous land management is critical to preventing catastrophic bushfires, Aboriginal voices have been ignored. It is clear that First Nations people hold distinct, diverse and spatially extensive legal rights and interests in land, including across much of the fire-affected areas. How do we become more inclusive and find just outcomes in a climate crisis?

PEOPLE ARE ON the move around the world thanks to our changing climate. The United Nations has identified different types of mobility that may be driven by climatic and environmental changes, including migration, displacement and planned relocation. It has also identified some of the reasons why people affected by these same stimuli do not always migrate.^[vii]

In 2017 alone, 68.5 million people around the world were forcibly displaced, more than at any point in human history. Approximately one third of these people were forced to move by 'sudden onset' weather events such as flooding, forest fires, droughts and intensified storms.

At between 22.5 and 24 million people, that's roughly the entire population of Australia. The sea level is rising at a rate of twelve millimetres per year in the western Pacific. It has already submerged eight islands and two more are imminent. At the end of 2020, there are Australians still displaced by the 2019–20 bushfires; there are Australians whose coastal homes have already been damaged or lost – some have even fallen off cliffs – after storms.^[viii]

There is now consensus under the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change that climate change is a cause of human mobility; that human mobility is an adaptation strategy to climate change; and that climate change policy should consider human mobility.^[ix] Around the world there are already ‘trapped populations’: people who do not have the resources, assets or networks to enable their migration. There are also voluntarily immobile populations, who choose to remain where they are for reasons of place attachment, sociocultural continuity and values.^[x]

What we haven’t seen in Australia is a public discussion about what this idea of climate mobility means. Will people have to leave their towns in Western Queensland for six months of each year? Will some places become modern ghost towns? What about storm season in Queensland: will rising insurance premiums drive people away? What happens if those one-in-a-hundred-year fires/floods/droughts start hitting every few years? Who will help – and who will have to help themselves? Should people stop building houses so close to the coastline? Will some places run out of water so often that livelihood is no longer possible?

As an academic – as the Coona girl least likely to end up a law professor – I’m shifting my human rights research focus on climate justice. This is the idea that when we adapt – as we must – to climate impacts, the actions we take should be fair, equitable and just; they should not leave behind the most vulnerable, the least powerful. All states have a human rights duty to protect men and women, boys and girls in all their diversity from the harmful effects of the climate crisis, including displacement. What plans should governments and communities be making right now? What resources do we have, and what resources do we need?

There are fundamental climate justice questions. First, how to define the burden of loss and damage when the risks often fall more heavily on those least able to reduce or recover from them. Second, how to protect the rights of vulnerable people during increased natural disasters in Australia. Third, how to understand and delineate the need for mobility and sanctuary due to displacement – both inside Australia and throughout the region – from climate impacts. Fourth, how to define ethical parameters for climate action and protest. And finally, what urban and rural climate justice looks like in terms of the politics and governance of ‘more than human’ cities; strategies for redressing inequalities by defending the urban commons; and our rights to sustainable, resilient, affordable housing and more.

Even before the fires and drought, Coona was small, relatively poor and isolated. It needs the tourists, the astronomers and the bushwalkers to survive, and most of its population lives without much of a buffer. But Coona folk look after each other. And if an event on the scale of the 2013 bushfire sorely tested the resources of the town, it did not, I am happy to report, entirely break its heart.

Coonabarabran residents still have their three unique ways of seeing the world, immersed in nature and the daily awe inspired by living at the foot of the mountains, welcoming travellers and their stories and seeing clearly in the dark, dark skies. There is potential in these perspectives for owning our history and facing the future. Can we find a kind of ‘star map’ that preserves heritage and environment against climate impacts and could be passed down between the generations? Coona residents may have something to teach the rest of Australia about the difficult days that are coming. But these days, instead of longing for relevance, I’ll be happy if my hometown stays out of the news.

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