

What happens for people when they become disconnected from their environment; when language or culture is lost? How does that bear relevance for the wellbeing of the planet? These are some of the questions I asked during the *Grounded* residencies.

The residencies for *Grounded* began in the Gaelic-speaking Outer Hebrides of Scotland; a place steeped in cultural pride and natural beauty. In recent years the revival in Gaelic Language and the renewed confidence that people have in their cultural identity has brought a new vitality to their place, their culture and wellbeing. This is a long way from the devastation of the Highland Clearances, where people were forced from burnt and ransacked homes to far-off lands, with no land rights, their language banned, their rich culture eradicated; a place where deeply heart-felt songs could wrap the shoreline and back again, about loss and longing for loved ones and a country that many never saw again.

While I was in the Western Isles, though many young people I spoke with did grow up speaking Gaelic in the family home, others said they had not, but wished that they had. They are aware that there are opportunities that exist for Gaelic speakers and there is a sense that the language is a vital connector to culture, a strong link to identity and a source of pride. Gaelic language now has protected status under Scottish Law.

Since the 1970s there have been steady improvements in the profile and importance given to Gaelic. Statistics show that the declining number of Gaelic speakers has almost stabilized. In Glasgow, Gaelic has flourished. The city is positioned at the Scottish forefront of Gaelic Arts, Education, Literature, Broadcasting and Language development. But there is no room for vigilance to flag. Language alone cannot ensure survival of a culture; it must be combined with a way of life.

In the second stage of my residencies, I crossed the globe to meet with the original inhabitants of a country where many of the historically and contemporarily displaced Gaels landed: Australia.

There is a resonance between the stories of the Australian Aboriginal people and the Scottish Gaels. But in Australia, the brutal history is more recent and the consequences achingly raw.

Australia is a country that is much admired for its sun and surf; its apparently laid-back lifestyle. But there is another side to Australia that lies comfortably invisible in the day-to-day life of most on its affluent coasts. It is not a story that is readily exported to the world.

Of approximately two-hundred-and-fifty language groups with around six hundred dialects in Australia before colonisation, today fewer than twenty are considered as strong; that is, spoken by all generations and expected to survive. Less than sixty languages have any form of extensive dictionary produced by linguists. Stories of The Dreaming are lost, Songlines have been broken, and Nations of peoples still reel under the horrifying consequences of displacement, massacre and rape; and the forced removal of children from their families into missions where language and culture were banned, right up until the recent 1970's.

It was not until 1976 that the first Aboriginal Land Rights Act secured rights to land and came close to reaching its goal in 1983. But the mining industry and pastoralists have fought back, often with support from government at all levels.

The questions raised in *Grounded* relate to the consequences of such disconnection for both people and the environment.

For people the evidence is there in the sorrow of many of the Gaelic songs; and glimmers of light in the healing through reconnection that can be found. In Glasgow the work of Galgael is a good example. As an organisation they place value on traditional skills development and the creation of an urban community for those thrown to the edges of society due to unemployment, depression or addiction.

In Australia, likewise, healing is often found in reconnecting with Country. Many Aboriginal Australians who shared their stories for *Grounded* had come back from depression, alcoholism or nervous breakdown, by reconnecting to their land through traditional culture, finding pride in their skin, and shaking off the shame they had been made to feel. As one young Bidjara woman said, "*You have to work out who you are to be the person you are.*"

My arrest in Alice Springs, exemplifies one of the many problems still facing Australian Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory today. The consequences of oppression and displacement, in the view of many, are being compounded by government responses such as The Intervention and protective custody. The liberal powers of the police, subject to sparse accountability, created a situation where I could be arrested, with no redress, for simply inquiring about police arresting my companion for no sensible reason. My case, promptly dropped in court, provides a window into treatment metered out to the local Aboriginal population.

The second question posed is how disconnection also transfers to environmental wellbeing; the concerns I heard from many over the ever-present threat to Hebridean moorlands from large foreign-owned wind farm developments; the threat of mining and fracking on Aboriginal lands; the languages that embody ecological knowledge facing extinction.

Perhaps all manner of destruction could not have been dreamt of had we remained more connected to the land. The Aboriginal people walking, navigating Songlines that connected them across the whole country, the speed of their travel conducive to absorbing the entirety of their surroundings; the pat-pat of feet on ground physically imprinting a memory; or the connection to the moors that came with the family migration to the shielings each summer.

There is much to be learnt from celebrating the ways of traditional owners of the land. The folly of ignoring and oppressing this knowledge might well be the destruction of our planet; the disease that leads us down this path might be our evolved disconnection from the very land on which our lives depend.