

Eulogy

Peter Cullen 1943-2008

We are here to recall, celebrate, give thanks, lament his death, weep and mourn for the life of Peter Cullen. It is real honor to stand here to try to help us celebrate Peter. Please hear me as the voice to help you to do all of that... to give thanks, to recall, to celebrate, to lament, to weep and to mourn... by trying to paint a picture of Peter's life...as the scientist...agricultural scientist first... later river ecologist, science communicator, reformer and champion of the rivers, the landscape and most importantly its people.

I hope what I say can help us all see glimpses and flash-backs to the Peter we knew, loved and today celebrate. There are so many facets to Peter's life...and all are important....I will touch on a just a few.

1. Peter the scientist –first feet in mud then head under water

Peter started his career as a science teacher and he always had his feet on the ground and mud on his boots. He was an agricultural scientist. He spent time as a young man plodding around irrigation farms. He was employed by CSIRO while at university of Melbourne to conduct on farm surveys on water use and irrigation efficiency in the 1960's.

He first met Bruce Thom when he became interested in rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal matters in the early 1970's. Peter had become a highly skilled scuba diver. He was in fact a trainer and instructor and he actually managed to train Bruce as a scuba diver in 1972. Bruce tells us that Peter was fantastic scuba diving instructor. In 1992 CSIRO acknowledged his contribution to Scuba diving with a special award.

You see Scuba offered whole new observation opportunities for aquatic science...you could be in it, see it and measure it.

Now Peter had his head in water and grew his passion for aquatic ecology. But then Peter gave the coasts away.

He told Bruce Thom they were just too complex....so Peter became a freshwater ecologist working in the area of water in the landscape.

He has worked on environmental flows...the water the river needs to live, on nutrients in lakes and rivers and on wetlands and how they worked.

He taught all these things at Canberra College of Advanced Education, later University of Canberra where became founding Chief Executive of the CRC for Freshwater Ecology from 1992- 2002. He was a Visiting Fellow at CSIRO Land and Water.

He was a founding member and leader of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. And to quote Tim Flannery - "He was the best of us." ...and he was. He led and gave the Wentworth Group presence.

Peter was also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering and a Member of the International Water Academy and the International Ecology Institute. He was a past president of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) where he drove successful initiatives like "science meets parliament"

Peter Cullen is a Commissioner to the National Water Commission (NWC), chair of the Victorian Water Trust Advisory Council, a member of the Natural Heritage Trust Advisory Committee and a Director of Land and Water Australia.

He was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Environmentalist of the Year in 2001 for his work on the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

Peter Cullen was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2004 for service to freshwater ecology and the Naumann-Thienemann Medal of the International Limnology Society 2004 "for his exemplary scientific leadership".

So Peter, the scientist, grew in stature and wisdom from a young man with mud on his boots and head under water to become a great scientist celebrated by colleagues at the top of the international scientific community. But let me tell you that is only the beginning...that was the easy stuff.

2. Peter bridges science to policy and science to community and finds ways to speak truth to power.

Peter bridged science to policy and politics.

He pioneered and found ways to bring science knowledge into the conversation and experience of people and communities.

He was very articulate. He was able to take the complex scientific issues, and turn them into simple, clear, accurate language.

He was master of metaphor:

1. "By now we should have learned that praying for rain is no substitute for good planning".
2. "Disconnecting the fuel gauge might be one way to stop worrying about how much fuel might be left, but it's a pretty stupid strategy".

Peter would have to be the best communicator of water science that we have yet to see. It was a clear, in everyday language sort of message.

He set out to do that very deliberately.

When he became head of the CRC for Fresh Water Ecology he could see that there was all this knowledge out there but it just wasn't getting through to ordinary people. And he set himself the task of pulling all the knowledge together, integrating it, getting all the bits of the jigsaw, taking an overview but then expressing it in really clear language for the layperson and decision maker.

That was really his great gift.

But he worked very hard at doing that.

It was something that he really determined to do....be it in a woolshed or in the great hall of parliament house.

He was an enormously compassionate person with insight and empathy with those who held very different views.

He often had to speak uncomfortable truths to people.

But he was able to speak with courage what needed to be said, in ways that always gave a way forward.

But according to his many close friends, he softened the hard facts with a mix of science, compassion, honesty, wicked good humor and ideas for the future. He was so witty, so articulate.

In Tim Flannery's words ".Peter was like a great jolly hangman. He could tell politicians the truth and they would still like him."

He was inclusive.

He did not blame... "While politicians like to blame other levels of Government, the reality is that our politicians reflect what we as a community are telling them. We are all responsible for the mess we find ourselves in."

In these exchanges he was able generally to retain the trust and respect even when these folk strongly disagreed with him...there was room for further listening, conversation and change.

Peter led a number of working groups for Prime Ministers Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC). In my experience of working with him Peter took the science and turned it into an actionable policy and sets on-ground action that engaged community. He was one of the architects of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water quality and the National Water Initiative.

Then...He was everywhere.

He advised Prime Ministers and Premiers in nearly every state.
He just had such a great outreach of work to communicate, and he did it so well.

He understood that..."When scientists do enter the political arena, they must understand they are playing to different rules from those used in science and need to learn the rules of politics and the media. Unless they understand the rules and tactics of policy debate it is like them walking on to tennis court equipped only with golf sticks,"

Numerous commentators have said since Peter's death that it was very important to understand how Peter spoke to power in the way the Wentworth Group evolved since 2002.

It was Peter who stood at the initial meeting of the Wentworth Group and said, as I well remember, "it's up to people like us to say what needs to be said."

Most scientists work in the public sector. There are a lot of pressures on people not to speak out and not to say things that would make governments of the time uncomfortable. Peter and others that night decided they were coming towards the ends of their careers and if people like them did not stand up and speak out on what they believed in, who would.

You can't underestimate how courageous it was for Peter to speak out and to say what he has been saying. Peter and Wentworth Group were really challenging the way that we have managed land and water in Australia for over 200 years. And there are a huge number of vested interests with a lot of money behind them to defend that. And people like Peter just have themselves and their own energy.

In Peter's case he - in his retirement he committed himself to this huge public service of speaking up for what he thought was right.

He wrote a fabulous paper last year called "Science and Politics - Speaking Truth to Power", which I think really encapsulates a lot of what he believed. And he says in that scientists have an obligation to speak out. But it can be hard for them because they are committed to truth and the experience in the public arena is that it's not so much about truth but about winning.

3. Peter the person

Peter Cullen was a big man.

He was of towering physical presence, big ideas and a wicked sense of humor.

He could laugh at himself.

Recently when he had difficulty walking I asked him how he was doing ...He told me he was moving like "a startled gazelle"!

He was a big man in every sense of the word. He was comfortable with Prime Ministers and Premiers, scientists, journalists, irrigators, farmers – a man of great courage – who could never be bought or intimidated - always cool under pressure – always respectful. He was a great scientist, a great statesman and an even greater man.

And the true mark of Peter Cullen is his humanity.
He is adored by his family and is adored by his friends.
He loved life and he loved people.
And because he loves people, he cared how change, particularly radical change, affected them.

What made him a household name in Australia was not only his science but also his tireless efforts to work with people from all backgrounds, to carve out a way to get us from where we are to where we need to be.

Peter's greatest legacy is his contribution in placing science front and centre in public debate.

He has transformed environmental debate from slogans to science to solutions.

He was a very interesting person... disarming in a lot of ways ... very friendly and very open.

But he had a mind like a steel trap and he didn't really stand for any nonsense either.

But he had a great ability to communicate with people, to listen to people, and no matter where they came from in life, and take on board what they were saying.

Because of his size he found taxi travel most uncomfortable...so he was most relieved when we found a cab company in Sydney who specialized in Greek weddings. They were used to ferrying around large buxom brides in huge white wedding dresses...so Peter was comfortable in these and surrounded by Greek women taxi drivers who grew to love him, to be his advocates and do all they could to assist him get about Sydney.
Can't you just see it!

He devoted much time to the Wentworth Group... he kept us on our toes...he was our leader.

He knew how important it was to be able to provide solutions. He tried to teach us when to listen, when to sit still and think, and when to speak.

That's wisdom. Wisdom he was willing to share.

Today we feel the loss of a pillar of environmental leadership.
Today we remember his humor and warmth, his foresight and wisdom.

4. Conclusion:

He was just such a gentle giant, always had time to listen and give of his advice. We will all miss him, his passion for the environment and his determination to make a difference. He so loved the land, its rivers and its people.

Peter questioned and challenged the existing ways of doing things. He was adept at using simple and straightforward language in discussing and tackling quite complex problems. Today we feel the loss of a pillar of environmental leadership. Today we remember his humor and warmth, his foresight and wisdom.

His constructive and civil input will be sorely missed, but he leaves behind a solid technical and public policy legacy for us to build on.

Peter Cullen was a big brave pioneer man of water. We will miss him for his wisdom & for his courage to question everything that we all do with the water in this increasingly waterless country.

We will miss you Peter.

We will miss your extraordinary sense of fun, love of life, generosity - in addition to your great intellect, wisdom and pragmatism.

Peter was a big man. He was strong, He was soft...He was gold
Yet he was no saint.
He hated hypocrisy and double talk...we must not do that here.
He encouraged us, challenged us, and he changed us.
And He loved us...and we loved him.
Andhis legacy will live on.

Personally Peter was a supportive colleague and a good friend.

I will miss him.

And I offer my deepest sympathy to Vicky and all the family who will surely miss him much, much more.

John Williams
19th March 2008