

Conversations with the Mob



PETER EASTWAY INTERVIEWS MEGAN LEWIS

WHEN I VISITED PARNGURR in Western Australia's Little Sandy Desert with the ND5 photographers as part of a shoot for The Pilbara Project, I was instructed by some of our 'minders' how to act and behave with the

Martu people.

I was also shown a book, *Conversations with the Mob*, written and photographed by Megan Lewis, and told not to let the locals see me reading it. Apparently they were very unhappy with Megan because, after living with them for several years, she had broken their trust by revealing aspects of their private lives in the book.

In the light of these warnings, what I discovered was somewhat perplexing. Our time with the Martu was very much

like a meeting with any other strangers. I don't for a minute profess to know or understand all the issues that impact their lives, but we exchanged pleasantries, helped the local kids with their cameras and, superficially at least, seemed to be accepted for what we were: photographers. I think that good manners go a long way. Perhaps others in the past have been less well behaved than our collective and that was what concerned our minders.

However, I couldn't understand why the Martu didn't like the book. Following my return from Parngurr, I purchased *Conversations with the Mob* and read it from cover to cover. In my opinion, the photography is one of the strongest documentary portfolios ever made - and I still feel that way today. And as someone who knows relatively little about



Above: The Trackers: (Left to right) Ngili 'Neil' Bidu, Timmy Patterson, Bruce Thomas, Nyaparu 'Burt' Lane, Muuki Taylor, Waka Taylor, Teddy Biljabu, Bill Williams, Smithy Robinson, Grant Judson and Norman Sammy.

Opposite: Deidre Anderson, Sydney Tinker and Edwina Booth, who holds baby Ezekiel, delight in the wet season's first rain, which cooled everybody down. The 2003 year experienced the hottest summer on record to that date, with temperatures reaching the high 40s day after day.



Elder, Muuki Taylor leaves Parnngurr community store with supplies and his dogs in tow.

the Aboriginal situation, I found Megan's 'conversations' to be incredibly informative and enlightening. And as I felt the Martu people had been portrayed with empathy and dignity, I couldn't understand how the community as a whole would object to Megan's work.

14 Years Later

Earlier this year, I met Megan Lewis at the launch of Fujifilm's X-T1 camera and was heartened to learn that most of the community loved the book. It was just one or two people who didn't like it.



Elder and traditional healer Waka Taylor (who saw his first whitefella as a young man in 1963) poses proudly with a tube of plastic through his septum. Traditionally, the piercing of the nose was an initiation rite and was done with a sharpened spear, followed by a bird bone. No longer practised, only about four men remain who have it.

"It's been 14 years since I started Conversation," Megan began. "I first went up into the desert in 2000 with the newspaper, but I always had this gut feeling that I had to do the story from the inside looking out, not the outside looking in."

Megan spent the next two years saving up her annual leave from the newspaper in Perth where she worked, driving 1600 kilometres into the desert and back, building rapport with the Martu, until she realised she couldn't shoot the project properly unless she gave up full-time work and lived with them.

After taking up residence in Parnngurr, where summer temperatures regularly exceed 50°C, Megan says it took her six months before she took her first meaningful photograph.

She ended up living with the community for three years. "Once you're in the middle of the river, you can't go back," she smiled.

Returning to Sydney, she stayed with her parents while she saved more money, working on the book late at night when she could. She returned to the desert several times, showing everyone in the community what she was doing, ensuring that everyone was comfortable with their portrayal.

"Where I had quoted someone, I read to them exactly what had been written to ensure they were okay. I was extremely nervous because if the community rejected my book, then I had nothing. But fortunately, they agreed."

It was a total of eight years before her book was finally published, but that wasn't the end of her involvement with the Martu. One of the young Martu women ended up in hospital and it was Megan who looked after her two children. Then another Martu woman went in for a routine operation, but



The annual Punmu Footy Carnival attracts Martu players and family from all the desert communities, as well as from Nullagine and sometimes Roebourne. Competition is fierce and taken very seriously – sometimes games go over time as accusations of cheating are yelled out by supporters. Fights occasionally erupt, with boomerangs and jurna sticks being thrown, but by the day's end everyone smiles and it's life as usual.



Nyniyika 'Catherine' Biljabu stretches and contemplates her next move after digging with a crowbar for the much desired, fat, juicy lunki grub. Catherine's daughter, Levina, and her baby, Shakira, also came along for the hunt in country near Parnngurr.



Noelene Campbell (70) sitting on her bed in the early evening outside her house in Parnngurr, hugs her beloved dog Blacky. Noelene is unable to walk very far and spends most of her days sitting in a chair outside her family's house.

became infected and nearly died. Again, it was Megan helping the family.

Megan's involvement with the Martu community expanded when in 2008 she was invited to Warralong, another desert community, and asked to help with their physical and emotional well-being in a changing world.

Working with the local Strelley Community School, Megan set up a Healthy Eating Program which moved school-aged children away from foods high in artificial flavours, sugar, wheat and dairy. Within weeks there was a noticeable improvement in the children's well-being and behaviour, and the program continued successfully for six years.

"So, that's the story. When you come out from the desert, you don't really come out. You can't just walk away.

"The irony is that there was just a couple of individuals telling the community that I had run off and was making money out of their story, whereas the reality was that I had used all my life savings and then had to borrow to get the book published."

Just an Interpreter

"My photography is really a reflection of the relationship I have with people. When I meet someone, I don't just want to know about them, I want to know how they feel about the world and how they see it.

"Sometimes I came out of the desert feeling very disappointed because while my experiences were multi-dimensional, my photographs were limited in expressing the relationships I had.

"Yet the camera was the vehicle I was using to help people connect, so others could look at the pictures and find their connection with the Martu.

"Some people say the book is about my relationship with the Martu, but it's not about me. I am just an interpreter – if I can interpret something on a deeper and more meaningful level, then that opens the door for others to see and understand.

"When shooting documentaries, the emphasis is on capturing the moment. Other aspects like light are secondary. If there happens to be pretty light, that's great, but my objective is to capture the moment and the experience."

In addition to producing an incredibly strong visual story, Megan interviewed the Martu and added the spoken stories as well.

"I didn't feel that the photos told enough. It's a bit like having a vehicle with wheels, but no tyres. The words are the tyres that complete the wheel, complete the picture.

"You simply can't understand everything in a photograph. You can interpret what you are seeing, but you don't always know the details. I always knew that the book would have to include words.

"However, it's not in the Martu tradition to talk about their feelings, but the whole motivation behind the project was to break down their barriers. I could see so much beauty going through their thought processes, yet from the outside it is never explained. When you add in the words, it opens up another doorway into a world that at first seems so foreign, yet we see that what they are thinking and



After the tiring work of making boomerangs, Minyawu Miller encourages his grandson Charleston and his friend Dierran Marney to experience their culture.



Punmu Clinic health worker, Ray 'Longman' Thomas, takes his teenage daughter Cassandra and wife Gundai for a sunset drive on Lake Dora. Their 4WD is typical of Martu vehicles – it's not important for them to look good or have luxuries like windcreens, they just have to get from A to B, somehow.



Exhausted, Julia Burton and Sebastian Parker sleep sitting up during a hunting trip.



Amos Simpson (centre) with Derek Bidu (left) and Sebastian Parker (right), attempts to hold Shantelle Parker's burning feet above the hot desert sands after a breakdown during a hunting trip.

feeling isn't so dissimilar to what we think and feel.

"When you are given the opportunity to understand, I think you are also much less judgmental."

Megan explains that the words are the literal conversations she had with the Mob. "I had to be able to recall very accurately what had been spoken about, to go back and write it down. Often I would make my notes and then take them back to the Mob and ask if it were accurate."

Pretty Rough

Understanding the personal commitment required to complete a project like this is difficult for people like photography magazine editors, sitting comfortably in a chair in air-conditioned comfort.

Megan's car was her base and, like the Martu, she slept everywhere. "Sometimes I stayed with the Mob, or if I were lucky, I might be in the co-ordinator's house. Travelling with the Mob meant that I slept where they did and I never really knew where that would be. All I knew was that I would be in my swag.

"It was pretty rough and to get any quiet time to myself meant getting up at 4:30 a.m. and walking out into the desert with the dogs. But I'd be back by 6:30 a.m., ready to start the day with the Mob.

"Sometimes I could go for a week or a month without taking a picture, and then I might get three photos in one day for the book. However, halfway through my time in the desert, I started wondering if the book really mattered. It was the old people who said it had to come out and this gave me an overwhelming sense of responsibility to get it right – and to have it published before some of them passed away."

As Megan explains, the book is not just a collection of photos or portraits. "Photography is tremendous as an interpreter. It gives you privilege and licence to enter other people's worlds, but it also comes with a lot of responsibility, particularly out there in the desert. I had to ensure everything was done with the utmost integrity.

"So when you work this hard on a project and people accuse you of not being genuine, it's incredibly disappointing. But I'm a realist and I know you can't be attached to other people's opinions of you.

"If happiness depended on what other people think of you, then I think your life would go up and down like a yo-yo."



You can see more of Megan's work at www.meganlewis.com.au. And you may still be able to purchase copies of *Conversations with the Mob* at UWA Publishing. Try this link: <http://uwap.uwa.edu.au/books-and-authors/book/conversations-with-the-mob>.

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