The protesters who live life on the edge

Letter from Australia

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"Aboriginal embassy, all welcome" the sign read, diverting travellers a short distance off the Oodnadatta Track, near Lake Eyre, in outback South Australia. In the distance a black, red and yellow Aboriginal flag flapped frantically, and rangy, orange dogs barked themselves hoarse.

Up close the compound was made of corrugated iron that swayed and clattered in the gale. At one end green plastic sheeting and hessian cloth provided shade from the desert sun. The outer walls were daubed with slogans. "Stop the Genocide," read one, and the menacing nuclear hazard symbol was everywhere.

But the man who came out to meet us was not an Aboriginal Australian. He had a pale face under a shock of dusty hair, and a winding scar across his forehead as if something had burrowed a ponderous path between his skin and his skull. Nor did the five or six others in the shadows claim to be Aboriginal. They were what Australians call "feral"; people who have abandoned mainstream values.

"We're here to protect the water," the first man said, and offered us a drink and some flyblown bread. The Keepers of Lake Eyre, they called themselves, this band of full-time, itinerant protesters, veterans of direct environmental action in this country of such delicate ecological balance. The title seemed spiritual; incongruous. Perched on a sand dune with the salt-encrusted expanse of the lake in the background, their camp of twisted metal was like something out of Mad Max. Strange that they should be champions of water.

It is not the waters of the vast Eyre salt lake system that concern them so much. The waters they are campaigning for are largely unseen: the Great Artesian Basin, which underpins 1.7m square kilometres of this parched continent. Before the arrival of Europeans this water surfaced only in springs that were oases for desert people, and which remain microcosms of wetland life. Now the basin is being threatened by one of the world's largest mining companies. "They're sucking the nation dry", the protesters said, "and we're here to stop them."

Their target is the Western Mining Corporation (WMC), which operates the giant Olympic Dam copper mine 100km to the south. Licensed to use 30m litres of groundwater a day, the mine will also produce 1m tonnes of uranium. Citing a shameful history of nuclear testing and dumping in the South Australian desert, the protesters vociferously oppose the mine. There are also plans for an international nuclear waste dump in this most geologically stable of territories. "These are acts of genocide against this land's original people," one protester said.

WMC begs to differ. Environmental impact research and consultation with Aborigines and pastoralists have been thorough, it says. Four times the water it uses is wasted each day at bores for livestock. The protesters are illegal squatters, says WMC — "terrorists", even. In the year since the camp was set up there have been many incidents at the mines: road blockades, vandalising of pumping equipment, assaults on security personnel. The protesters, with their matted hair, tattered clothes and piercings, also intimidate people in the mine township supermarket, the company complains.

Repeated court action to evict the protesters has failed: they refuse to give their names and origins. Thirty Aborigines and anti-uranium, pro-water protesters made a 1,800km "peace walk" from the camp to Sydney this year, keen for their campaign to be taken up by the international media there for the Olympics. The media proved more interested in the sport.

As we talked, I watched a young boy with a wide leather collar studded with 7.5cm metal spikes, lying listlessly in the half-dark. What could this boy do? Was his being here making a difference? And what did the protesters do all day? Their acts of blockade and sabotage had been only sporadic: their chief action was simply to be there. What did they live off? Surely they didn't collect dole cheques from the society they so obviously rejected?

As we left we felt uneasy. These people were dedicated, but hopelessly marginal. Yet they were doing what they believed in. They were doing more than I was, more than most. When we parted I promised I'd write about them. So I have.