**A Thirst that ends Lives**

In the movie *Avatar*, the machine devours life. The greedy extraction of resources destroys the living environment and human culture. While a few earthlings profit, the voices of those in the kill zone struggle to be heard and much is lost in translation.

This parable is repeated in Rio Tinto’s cynical destruction of the 46, 000-year-old cultural archive at Juukan Gorge in Western Australia. No one listens until it is too late. In the Northern Territory, the same mindless damage to human wellbeing will be inflicted by the massive escalation of grog sales close to dry, Aboriginal communities.

This is what we mean by *shock capitalism.*  Some corporations consciously target vulnerable populations because they are the ideal zone for astonishing levels of profit.

In an announcement that has certainly shocked every health organisation in Australia, the NT Director of Liquor Licensing, Philip Timney, has approved four controversial liquor licences that will turn rivers of grog into a Top End tsunami.

More Dan Murphy’s booze in Darwin’s suburbs, two new Coles’ licences in Palmerston and a new pipeline for the white man’s poison in the beautiful Tiwi Islands, is a lot of Christmas cheer for the biggest alcohol companies. Compared to Australia’s national average of 9.5 litres of pure alcohol per capita, Territory drinkers consume 11.6 litres. While the rest of the nation has seen grog sales slowly but steadily decline, the NT is the last frontier for unbridled profit, albeit at a terrible human cost.

After a five-year battle, Woolworth’s alcohol division, Endeavour Drinks Group, has been given the nod for its plan to build a mega Dan Murphy’s liquor barn in Darwin, destined to be one of the largest in Australia. It will be within easy walking distance of three Aboriginal communities where health services struggle to slow the death and destruction.

“This store should not be built,“ says Olga Havnen, the Aboriginal CEO of Danila Dilba Health Service. “Our opposition to this store is because of the harm alcohol causes in the Northern Territory – Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), violence, hospitalisations, chronic disease, death.”

In my post-television work in health and education over the past twenty years I have met large numbers of FASD children, families and carers. Estimates of the number of damaged brains from FASD in Australia range from half a million to almost 1.8 million. Of the three million children born over the past decade by a conservative estimate some 105,000 of them have brain damaged caused by exposure to alcohol in utero.

In the Aboriginal communities that I work closely with alcohol abuse is linked to childhood suicide, violence, disruption of family life and impulsive behaviour that makes education near impossible. Many of these kids, through no fault of their own, are so incapable of sorting cause and effect that bewildered they drift from juvenile crime into hard core prison. When I visit some in jail, they have no idea how they got there.

We have normalised the abuse of this toxin to such an extent that we appear blind or deaf to the voices crying out in warning. Victims, carers and whole communities have pointed out the painful rapid collapse of human life.

It is why I wrote to the NT Chief Minister, Michael Gunner, suggesting that if he took a walk from Parliament House in Darwin he could sit and yarn with the broken spirits of the *long-grassers,* hundreds of them lost in the haze of the white man’s poison.

I asked Gunner, what had happened to his five-year moratorium on new knew liquor licences? Surely the annual $1.4 billion dollar social and health cost of alcohol related damage in the Territory would outweigh the corporate hunger for profit or his government’s eagerness to top up their dwindling treasury funds?

The Chief Minister in part replied:

*Dear Dr McMullen…The NT Government has delivered nation-leading alcohol reforms that aim to reduce the demand, supply and harm caused by alcohol.*

If that were so there would have been no reason for the NT’s Independent Liquor Commission to last year reject Woolworth’s application for the mega grog shop. Gunner didn’t blink after that hiccup because his Government merely bypassed the massive objections from the health sector by allowing a single public servant to give the grog peddlers a Christmas present. Woolworths *the fresh food people* now sell well over half of all the grog in the country.

“I believe the decision by Woolworth’s Chair, Gordon Cairns and CEO, Brad Banducci, to aggressively pursue their desired outcome is a good example of corporate wilful blindness,” says Olga Havnen whose 13,000 Aboriginal clients at Danila Dilba Health Service display hazardous drinking in 42 per cent of cases.

“Woolworths and Endeavour Drinks know that serious harm will inevitably follow,” Havnen says. “This is unconscionable conduct. Juukan Gorge destruction is no different to the inevitable destruction of lives.”

In my correspondence sent to the Woolworth’s Chair, Gordon Cairns and management of Endeavour Drinks Group, I set out the evidence on the damage caused by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. What disturbs me most is the epigenetic impact that means the toxic impact on an unborn child can be passed on in slightly milder forms to a second and even third generation.

Beyond the mandatory pregnancy warning labels to be introduced by 2023, the grog industry should be informing men and women that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption when it comes to creating a new life.

Young and older people need far more education to grasp that one of the oldest human pastimes, raising a glass to our lips to celebrate, can also through abuse destroy the life of an innocent babe.

“We agree that FASD is an inter-generational problem in Australia and believe that, as an industry, we can always be doing more to help address this issue,” replied the Endeavour Drinks Group.

In another email, Steve Donohue, Managing Director of Endeavour Drinks Group, says,

“We absolutely acknowledge the current levels of alcohol related harm in the NT and the disproportionate impact that this has on the Indigenous population.”

The corporate spin will not hide the history of grog in the Top End or for that matter throughout Australia.

While the cricket crowds down south cheer “Come on Aussie, come on,” and some Top End drinkers call for more cheap grog, the truth is that this thirst is killing some of us.

Without some check on the corporate lust for profit, it is a thirst that will end lives.

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