

FRANK FISHER - SUSTAINABILITY ADVOCATE, ACADEMIC, SOCIAL ACTIVIST
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PROFESSOR Frank Fisher, who in 2007 was named Australia's inaugural Environmental Educator of the Year, has died at home in Clifton Hill of complications related to a brain tumour. He was 68. Frank, who for seven years was at Swinburne University of Technology's faculty of design, where he was professor of sustainability and founder of the Understandascope organisation - the name derived from a Michael Leunig cartoon - had earlier enjoyed a 25-year tenure and associate professorship at the school of geography and environmental science at Monash University.

Born in country Victoria, along with twin sisters, to Hungarian immigrants Elly and Andrew Fisher (his parents decided early on to fully assimilate, and Anglicised their original name Fischer von Mefzlenyi), he grew up on a dairy farm in Gippsland. He attended primary school at Dumbalk East, near Stony Creek in South Gippsland, and started high school at Leongatha before the family moved to Melbourne, where he attended Balwyn High School. A degree in electrical engineering followed at Melbourne University. In the early 1970s he applied for and got a job with Brown Boveri and worked as a young electrical engineer on hydroelectric projects in Switzerland, where he began thinking about human impact on the environment.

After four years in Switzerland, he returned to Australia and continued working for Brown Boveri, but also began searching for environmental science courses. In 1974, he married Robin Teague. In the following year he was granted a scholarship and, along with Robin, went to Sweden, where he completed a master's degree in environmental science at Lund University - an experience that proved life changing, as he was introduced to the nascent sustainability movement. This, in turn, led to his long association with Monash University.

Frank's interests and teaching went well beyond environmental science. "I'm a greenie," he would tell classes, "but my main interest is not the wilds of East Gippsland. My interest is the wilderness within this room. If I can make you wilder when you leave than when you arrived - if I can make you less predictable - then I've done my job." His students were given every opportunity to foster "the wilderness within". From the introductory master of environmental science lecture spent sitting on the median strip at a busy intersection during peak hour, to his campaign to charge advertising fees for food packaging that ended up as litter, his was a quest for awareness, responsibility and transformation in all aspects of life.

Diagnosed with Crohn's disease at 19, Frank endured more than 30 operations over his life, including surgery in 2008 for a broken neck after a bike accident. The morning after his discharge coincided with a class excursion to the Essential Services Commission. With the help of his partner, MairiAnne - he and Robin had parted in 1988 - Frank managed to join his students for the outing, his head encased in the stainless steel scaffolding of a halo brace. It wasn't that Frank refused to let illness get in the way of life. Rather, he found ways to incorporate it, even appreciating the insights his disease gave him. If prompted to feel sorry for himself because of the chronic pain he endured, he would not ask "why me?" but "why not me?".

He involved himself in community work of all kinds, including various Yarra Council initiatives, and was instrumental in the development of Victoria's then-largest wind farm, at Chalicum Hills near Ararat. In later years he became increasingly passionate about the health movement, sitting on boards as a consumer advocate. Frank did not always feel accepted within the green movement, often saying he would fight for democracy before he fought for the environment, as the former was fundamental to a better understanding of the latter. Democracy underpinned a primary aim of his work: the shift from "being precious" to "precious being".

Though often frustrated by his constantly ringing phone, Frank made time for everyone who asked. He could be ornery - woe betide those who greeted him with a "How are you?" unless genuinely interested in an answer - but despite these quirks, or perhaps because of them, he drew people to him. Many of his ideas were championed in the media. Around the 2006 Commonwealth Games, The Sunday Age supported his push for Melbourne's public transport to become "free" - paid for by a Medicare-like levy. Some ideas may have seemed frivolous at first

glance - suggesting light switches be placed at knee height to ensure effort and thought went into a decision to use electricity - but all were aimed at moving through life with deeper engagement and sensitivity. Even while undergoing chemo and radiotherapy after being diagnosed with a tumour just before Christmas last year, Frank rode his bicycle everywhere, calling it the most efficient form of transport ever invented and one he credited with helping keep him alive. He delighted in the human connections it fostered among other travellers, as well as the vulnerabilities it exposed.

He never tired of pointing out society's "perverse incentives", from tax breaks rewarding regular car travel, to hospitals and other institutions making it difficult to find the stairs - thus ignoring the health benefits from the exercise they provide. Some will remember him for a front-page story in the local paper explaining how his household generated so little rubbish that the week's waste could fit inside a one-litre milk carton. (He achieved this by buying everything in bulk, with the aim of accumulating as little wrapping as possible and reusing everything, including every container, which was washed and reutilised.) This spawned a Melbourne City trial of "pay by weight" waste collection. Sadly, it was scuppered when municipal boundaries were changed.

Colleagues at the Swinburne faculty of design remember Frank's response to a bold message that appeared in the staff kitchen with instructions to "clean up your own mess and do your own dishes". A graffiti-style note quickly appeared, reading: "We are all vulnerable at different times in our lives and need people to look after us, so what's wrong with cleaning up for others sometimes?" This quiet insistence that we ponder the problematic and also act is something that will resonate with many who knew him. Colleague Anthony James describes Frank's struggle to show that "being the change" does not have to mean feeling ostracised. "One of the last things Frank said to me on this was: 'If only there was something I could say or do that demonstrated how much fun it is to participate in life in this way'," James said.

Other than his life's work, Frank subscribed to dozens of magazines and was an avid listener to ABC Radio National. He is survived by his partner, MairiAnne, sisters Barbara and Sue, his sons Tim and Sam and their mother, Robin. Tim Fisher is Frank Fisher's son.

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/obituaries/greenie-who-held-democracy-higher-20120923-26evz.html>

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