



SEASON 1, EPISODE 1
Explore Like a Local with Brad Chilby

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SPEAKERS

Brad Chilby, Chilby Photography
Robyn Johnson, Blend ESQ

Brad Chilby 00:00

I started hiking probably at about seven years old. We had a family friend that lived up the road called Ray (Raymond) Peace, so we called him Mr. Peace. He is a long-term Illawarra resident and so is his family, and he worked up at Corrimal Mine from the age of 14 up until about 76, I think it was, so a long period, and he also knew the bush really well, and the escarpment, and told us all these amazing stories about crystal pools and waterfalls and cascades.

Robyn Johnson 00:25

Hi, I'm Robyn Johnson, and welcome to Wollongong, Let's Get Salty! For 20 years I've advised industry and business in environmental management, with leaders from community, environment and industry we'll deep dive issues that impact us all and discuss how we as a community can take action to move towards a sustainable future.

Today I have with me Australian landscape photographer Brad Chilby of Chilby Photography, Welcome! (Brad: Thanks, Robyn). Now, many people listening will have seen your photos in newspapers, local publications, and social media, and you have some epic photos. I'm particularly drawn to one called 'Pool of Drama'. (Brad - Okay). And this is taken at Coledale Ocean Pool with this huge surf behind it, and this amazing stormy sky, and the photo is like you've slowed down all this energy and movement into what was just a snapshot in time, and I just get lost in this photo looking at all the water movement going on, what the clouds are doing. It's just such a great shot. I love it! (Brad - Oh, thank you).

So to be honest, I've spent way too much time on your website, and it's because I actually love reading your photo descriptions. You write about how you've visited places since you were a kid, or how you've climbed slippery slopes to capture fog because it creates magic in the shot. (Brad - Sure). And it seems you love exploring far off the beaten track in search of capturing the very essence of nature in your images.

I understand you've been hiking the escarpment from a very young age. Tell me how that came about for you?

Brad Chilby 02:02

Okay, so I started hiking probably at about seven years old. We had a family friend that lived up the road called Ray (Raymond) Peace, so we called him Mr. Peace. He is a long-term Illawarra resident and so is his family, and he worked up at Corrimal Mine from the age of 14 up until about 76, I think it was, so a long period, and he also knew the bush really well, and the escarpment, and told us all these amazing stories about crystal pools and waterfalls and cascades and the waterfall tree and all that sort of thing. And we're about seven and he started taking me my brother and a friend up the mountains. I was only about seven at the first time I went to the top of Broker's Nose, which was amazing at that age. (Robyn - Yeah, that's young) Yeah, and we explored rainforests and giant fig trees and a lot of those stories he told us, we got to go and see which was really good.

And I guess that started my interest in nature and hiking and exploring. And we saw a lot of old history up there as well from old tunnels to old mine equipment. And he sort of told us a lot of the stories about the Illawarra as well, which was really nice. Yeah, awesome, so you were hooked. (Brad - I was hooked straightaway, and still am).

Robyn Johnson

It's such a beautiful place, I can completely understand why you are hooked. So in a recent interview that you did with the Fold Illawarra you mentioned that COVID lockdowns had provided you with this opportunity to have a look back through all your Illawarra landscape photos. And that you were reminded of how incredible this place is. Now, I couldn't agree with you more. I feel a really deep sense of connection to Wollongong, even though I didn't grow up here. And it draws me in every day with its escarpment views, and it's cool and calm bush and it's deep blue ocean, and just it's laid back beachy culture.

So, I think that we have this topographical advantage here in Wollongong, where we kind of get this big welcome home hug as you come over Bulli Tops and you can see, Lake Illawarra and the escarpment and the beach and then you start your descent and you kind of feel cooler, and it's like this tropical rainforest in here, where it just kind of feels like home to me.

Brad Chilby

Yeah, I know, I get the same feeling and I think so many others do as well, it's amazing feeling. There's a really good quote about that. (Robyn - Oh, right) Yeah, so do you want me to tell you what that is? (Robyn - yeah, yes). Okay, *"so it seemed on the descending and entering the Illawarra that we had suddenly become transported into a glen of tropical vegetation. The dry, arid soil of the stringybark forest with its stunted vegetation was exchanged for a damp humid region presenting a prodigal luxuriance and a wealth of vegetation, almost inconceivable"*. Yeah, that's a quote I've sort of known for 20 years or so that I found or came across and thought it really told the story of the Illawarra pretty well, and it was by George Angus in 1847.

Robyn Johnson 04:48

Huh, I love that. It's like descending and entering Illawarra. I think we're so lucky with the escarpment that we like, come down into it.

Brad Chilby 04:59

Yeah, and there's not many places with the mountains like we have, as a backdrop as well. So it's sort of, you know, you really feel at home with them.

Robyn Johnson 05:08

Beautiful place. So, I want to talk a bit about immersing yourself in nature, as I feel this helps us to establish a connection with a place and when you're connected, you care about its environment, and certainly being in nature has benefits for my well being. So I'll notice that if I haven't been walking or

swimming in nature, and I'm going to ask you in a sec, what your favourite way is to immerse yourself in nature. (Brad - Sure). So have a think, I'll go first.

My favourite way is to swim laps in an ocean pool, and I often finish with a few laps of underwater breaststroke (Brad - Okay). But instead of being face down, I'm face up, on my back. (Brad - Okay). And so, what I love is being submerged and looking up at the sky, and I just watch bubbles from my breath rise up to the surface, and there's just like watery sounds around me. Then each breath to the surface is this re-emergence, and I just feel alive and happy and salty, and I do it all with this crazy big grin on my face. So, I just love it! (Brad - that sounds amazing). Yeah, it's my favourite thing. (Brad - it's really good). So, what's your favourite way to immerse yourself in nature?

Brad Chilby 06:20

I guess for me, it's hiking and exploring, I love going off the beaten track places where there's not too many people around. And I guess the biggest thing for me is exploring new places or going further than I've been before. I love finding new hidden places around the escarpment or in the Southern Highlands, the base of waterfalls and things like that. (Robyn - Yeah) And photography wise, I love waterfalls, just the sound after heavy rain, the water tumbling down the mountainside, sounds amazing. Yeah. There's something about that power of water. (Brad - There is, yeah, it's incredible). Yeah, awesome, I totally agree with that. I think it's also that the bush sort of changes to, it's like this deeper green, and it's, you know, that moisture that comes and then all the mosses. (Brad - The ferns and moss and rainforest vegetation).

Robyn Johnson 07:08

You have a huge collection of Illawarra historical photos on your website, including this great shot from Bulli Lookout in the early 1900s, where the people in the photo are dressed in their long suits and long dresses and their broad brim hats. They're on this timber lookout that looks way too far over the edge of the (cliff) (Brad - yeah, I know it does) and it's just such a juxtaposition to today where we would be taking selfies in caps and singlets and short shorts. But at the time that that photo was taken in the early 1900s, your family had already been here for a few generations. (Brad - Yeah).

So, tell me about your long family history post settlement, and I guess how that then lent itself to you having a passion for local history?

Brad Chilby 07:59

Sure. Officially, my family arrived in 1818, with a guy called Thomas Childerly, and he changed his name when in Wollongong to Thomas Chilby, so we're all descendants of Thomas Chilby, and there's quite a lot of Chilby's in the Wollongong area, particularly at Bulli. He lived in the first house in the Illawarra, with Charles Throsby Smith, in Smith Street in Wollongong, and then moved shortly after to Bulli. Him and his wife had seventeen children. (Robyn - Oh my gosh!) I know, huge, and a couple of those kids went on to have 13 and 10, so in the early days, there was tons of Chilby's in Bulli and the hill at the bottom of Bulli Pass, which is called Bulli Hill now, but it was known as Chilby Hill back then, and almost every house on the hill there was a Chilby in it or a relation of a Chilby. Yeah, so there was a lot around, it was the most common surname in Bulli at that point, and it's still the 10th most common surname in Bulli now. Yeah, for an unusual surname, that specifically a Wollongong surname really, so they've been in Illawarra for a very long time.

That's on my dad's fathers' side, on the Chilby side, and also on my dad's mother's side they've been Wollongong for a long time, too. They had Henson's buses which ended up getting bought by Hills but had a bus company in Corrimal. They also had a nursery, a service station and a few other small businesses around Corrimal, sort of, from 1929 to 1970. (Robyn - Okay).

Yeah, so I've got a really keen interest in the Illawarra history. Not just them all stories about the Illawarra, whether it's war stories, or mining stories or Red Cedar getters, or Aboriginal history and dream time stories. I think we've got a really rich history here, but some areas probably don't have as much as us.

Robyn Johnson 09:40

Yeah, and so some of those photos that are on your website have they come from like family photo albums?

Brad Chilby 09:47

Yeah, most of them have. A combination of from my own family and some from Ray Peace, the guy I mentioned before that I went hiking with, some were from his family. But a lot of the inner Wollongong ones, and the CBD ones, and the Corrimal ones were from my family, mainly from the Henson's that had the bus company.

Robyn Johnson 10:05

I love looking at old photos. So, you're obviously very passionate about local history and you've found a way to merge that with your love of photography, so people can book you for the day in a small group to do a tour of the local history of the Illawarra, and at the same time you help them hone their landscape photography skills. Tell me what you love about doing that?

Brad Chilby 10:29

I guess I love promoting Wollongong, is a big part of it, and the Illawarra. I've been doing that since I was in school, I've always loved Wollongong. So many people used to say they wanted to move to Sydney, and I couldn't understand why, because I thought we've got everything here and it's much nicer and the scenery is better. Yes, I love talking about the Illawarra history and giving them a little bit of knowledge, taking them to some of the sites that they may not go to by themselves. All around the Illawarra, yeah I enjoy teaching them about photography as well. I enjoy it, and hopefully they do too.

Robyn Johnson 11:01

Yeah. So, what sort of a crowd do you get?

Brad Chilby 11:04

It's generally, I guess, people around 45 to 55, I'd say it would be the general age group. I don't really get to many younger people, very rarely actually. But yet, I think a lot of them these days would learn more so from YouTube and that sort of thing, but yeah, a lot of the customers are usually sort of middle aged, I guess.

Robyn Johnson 11:23



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Your landscape images are regularly used to promote Wollongong as a tourism destination. In fact, you've won many national, state and regional awards for your work. Tourism brings such a fabulous diversity to our local economy, and I truly believe that appreciation of natural landscapes is an important key to protecting them. (Brad - Sure). In a conversation you and I had recently you raised a concern that I thought would be interesting to briefly chat about here, and that's the ugly side of social media. Sometimes 10s of thousands of people will flock to a place in the quest for 'that Instagrammable photo' in order to curate a beautiful feed, and you've seen some horror stories in terms of local environmental damage. Tell me about one that sticks out in your mind?

Brad Chilby 12:45

I guess there's quite a few around the Illawarra with environments that have sort of being trampled and graffitied, and that sort of thing in, the bush that I hadn't seen in the past until Instagram came about. I guess the biggest one I saw change and very quickly was the base of Belmore Falls.

It was fairly unknown to most people how to get to the bottom of it, and down the bottom was absolutely amazing rainforest, probably one of the best areas that I've seen, it's really pristine, really beautiful. And the further you went downstream, there's waterfalls and cascades and moss covered rocks everywhere, it was really amazing. And it sort of got out there on Instagram, someone found it, they sort of had one million followers or something like that. And yet it started getting out where it was, once they started posting about it, and next minute there was thousands of people down there, it was almost every day, weekends were absolutely packed down there.

I saw this little path, if it was even a path down there, was absolutely trampled to the size of almost that fire trail going down. So the bush was all trampled, but the rubbish left behind was, incredible at the bottom of it. There was that cleanup I heard later on the news. Some people up in Southern Highlands cleaned it up, and there was truckloads and truckloads of rubbish that came out. Just a couple years prior, and I've been going there for 10-15 years, and I never saw one drop of rubbish, and I guess that's what Instagram can do.

And some other spots around the Illawarra, I've seen trees graffitied, rocks graffitied, and graffiti at the base of waterfalls. Yeah, so I think it has positives, but it's also got some negatives for the environment, depending on how you use your Instagram I guess, and yeah, some places should probably be kept a little bit quiet, I guess and take into consideration the environment, and do people actually know about it, and is it worth promoting it? Yeah, some places should be kept to yourself, I think.

Robyn Johnson 14:29

Yeah. Particularly when it directs everything to one spot. (Brad - Yes. Absolutely). I'd like to switch now to talk about the work you do for industry, which is actually how we met because you take corporate event photos for i3net, the Illawarra Innovative Industry Network. Business and government can hire you to take photos of a specific property from the air, and I have a favourite here to where you captured a rainbow or a series of rainbows in the dust suppression sprays of the Port Kembla Coal Stockpiles, I just thought it was such a great way to find some beauty in a very industrial scene.

So, you also get commissioned to do some pretty adrenaline junkie missions. What's it like hanging out of a helicopter to get that perfect shot? I imagine that must be pretty fun.

Brad Chilby 15:22

Yeah, it's really fun, it's probably one of the most enjoyable photoshoots I've done. I recently had an opportunity to do some aerial photography, shooting powerline poles, in northern New South Wales. And that's the door off the chopper with me sitting on the edge, harnessed in obviously, with a big camera shooting telegraph poles. Yeah, I absolutely loved it flying around, and at low level shooting them, but also the ferry in between, you do a set number of poles and then go to a different area. Sitting on the edge of the chopper, I was thinking this is absolutely amazing, looking at the mountain ranges,

and we were flying around at the time Mount Warning up in northern New South Wales. It's an old volcano and quite a dramatic looking mountain and just flying over that the views are absolutely incredible. (Robyn - Yeah, a different perspective). Yeah, it is, I really enjoyed it!

Robyn Johnson 16:07

So, what was the purpose of taking the photos of the telegraph poles?

Brad Chilby 16:11

It was for bushfire prevention, so, since the 2019 bushfires, the energy companies need to inspect all their poles, I think it's annually. We take the photographs, and they have to look pretty sharp, so they can zoom in on it and check all the wires and everything's intact to hopefully prevent bushfires. (Robyn - and vegetation around them I imagine). Yes, that's right as well. Yep, vegetation or any fallen trees on the lines.

Robyn Johnson 16:33

Interesting mix of, you know, a way to do that, because I imagine drone technology is also big in that space in terms of having people do it through that technology.

Brad Chilby 16:43

Yes, it is. Yeah, the company I was doing the photos for has a drone crew as well. So, I'm not sure how they determine what parts the drones do and what the helicopter does. I guess a lot of the areas we did was quite remote in bushland and up in the mountains. And that was even better for me. The drones are probably used more so in the townships and that sort of thing, I think.

Robyn Johnson 17:02

Right, and you've mentioned to me previously, that sometimes you'll get out in a gyrocopter to take photos. What was that for?

Brad Chilby 17:11

Well actually did the aerial photography for five or six years out of the gyrocopter, and that was a really good experience as well. I met the pilot and we got on really well, he was a really good guy. Unfortunately, he was in an accident and lost his life out in Orange in a gyrocopter accident, sort of doing lessons for flying the gyrocopter. He was a nationally recognised down pilot and he was doing the training for some guys out at Orange, and they had an engine malfunction. So unfortunately, he's not with us. He was a really good guy, I got on really well with him. We sort of flew all over the Illawarra.

It was a Yeah, I guess an old fashioned way of taking photos compared to using a drone now, but I still really enjoy being up there and flying all over the place. And yeah, getting tons of stock images along the way of things that most people probably wouldn't see up on the escarpment and beaches and all over the Illawarra.

Robyn Johnson 18:00

Amazing. To round out our conversation today on the themes of connection to nature and local post settlement history. What do you think we can learn from past generations about protecting nature for future generations?

Brad Chilby 18:14

I sort of always look to my grandparents as pretty good examples of being sustainable, and they sort of really took care of the environment. I never littered, and they were sort of tough, they never whinged, they never complained. They reused everything they could from the newspapers to plastic bags to whatever they had, and they reused it and didn't just throw it away.

My grandfather fixed absolutely everything, they never threw anything away, and I guess they went through the depression and hard times. Yeah, I guess they were very good at reusing everything, and to the best of their ability, they had their own vegetable garden, fruit trees and everything like that, they left a minimal impact, I guess on the environment compared to someone probably these days, I would think and also think they'll quite content with what they had.

They didn't need the best of everything that you need to keep replacing things all the time. Yeah. So, I think they did a really good job. And, you know, I was sort of looked up to them. And the I guess tried to follow in their footsteps as much as I can.

Robyn Johnson 19:08

Yeah, I think there's a different level of pride in that generation and respect for the things that you did have, and probably came from value, the cost of things was higher. So therefore, you looked after it, and you fixed it. (Brad - Yes, that's right). Yeah. Whereas today, I constantly come up against this. It's in the argument of, well, it only cost \$30 to replace it. But it'll cost you \$50 to fix it. (Brad - Yeah, that's right). If it's fixable at all.

Brad Chilby 19:37

Yeah, and I think that generation as well had a lot of skills that we've seen a lot of people these days have lost as well, the ability to be able to fix things and work things out for themselves. (Robyn - That's so true). Yeah, so I think they are a great generation, I really sort of admire them in many ways, and I think part of it may be as well, we've had pretty good especially during my lifetime. We haven't seen the wars and the great depressions like my grandparents did and there haven't been as hard times. I think they learned to do the best they could with that, and whereas we've had it pretty good. Yeah, can be a bit wasteful at times.

Robyn Johnson 20:08

I think some of it comes down to busy-ness. I know as a working mother that the expectations are higher, and therefore doing things like darning the socks, and you know, when it's \$5, to replace them kind of become harder to justify. (Brad - Yep, absolutely). So, thank you for coming on today. I love your messaging about treading lightly and leaving nothing in the bush. And more broadly, just using what we need and fixing stuff. I think that's something that should make a huge comeback in terms of if we were to get more circular and be more sustainable in the way that we choose to live. Thank you for being the passionate historian, nature explorer and fabulous photographer that you are, and I hope you continue to teach people about our local history and to bring us these beautiful images that just present that essence of nature.

Brad Chilby 21:02

Thanks so much, and thanks for having me on. I appreciate it.

Robyn Johnson 21:05

You're welcome. (Brad - Thank you). So if people want to get in contact with you, how do they go about doing that?

Brad Chilby 21:11

I guess the best way is through, they can find my website, which is chilby.com.au, there's a contact tab on there or, they can email me brad@chilby.com.au and I'm also on Facebook under Chilby Photography and Instagram, Chilby Photography as well. (Robyn - Awesome). Thank you.

Robyn Johnson 21:27



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