



## Member in profile

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### Professor Richie Howitt

As an emerging geographer studying geography and education at Newcastle in the 1970s, I often thought of myself as a ‘barefoot geographer’ – not just because I never wore shoes, but because my surfing days had let coastal landscapes seep into my soul through my feet. Later, as a



University of New South Wales PhD doing fieldwork in Western Australia’s Pilbara region, my barefoot geography was both a bit more painful, but still revelatory as I felt the difference between spinifex desert and the soft, untrampled soils of riverbanks that hadn’t seen cattle.

I’ve also been a rather accidental academic, coming to geography via a combination of urban activism in community organising in Newcastle, Indigenous rights as Race Relations Officer in Newcastle’s Student Representative Council, and education. Mentored by David Lea at New England, then Mary Hall and Bill Jonas at Newcastle, and late Frank Williamson, Ron Horvath and Bob Fagan in the Sydney Branch of the Union of Socialist Geographers, I’ve been blessed to find pathways from the margins (working as a farmhand, a primary school teacher and education bureaucrat) through a series of accidents to what now looks like a career!

I’ve long suspected our discipline motto should be “Geographers get you lost in interesting ways” and I am certainly blessed to find myself lost in some pretty wild terrains – conceptual, methodological and material – over time, and to have found my way to some interesting destinations along the way.

My passion for teaching remains focused on nurturing people's capacities to understand and respond to their shared circumstances. My research focuses on Indigenous rights and the interface between Indigenous communities, natural resource development, governments and corporations at the scales of the project, the community, the landscape and the nation. In engaging with the institutions of mainstream society, my work has used metaphors of coexistence and engagement to reframe thinking about ethical practice through processes of corporate social responsibility, institutional capacity building, intercultural negotiation and sustainability. This has led me into engagements across Indigenous Australia, into East and Southeast Asia and into local government and university governance – as well as the Institute of Australian Geographers as Honorary Treasurer for several years.

My work on geographical scale has involved developing a 'relational' view of scale to provide a framework for reconsidering legal pluralism in environmental and urban planning systems.

So, the journey from an enthusiastic kid from the working class suburbs of 1950s Sydney to Professor of Geography at Macquarie University has not just been interesting, but it has been populated with many treasured and trusted colleagues, students and collaborators.