Undulant time, rivers and seas

***Jay Griffiths** writes on the connection, ancient and modern, between water, tide and time.*

all photos Susan Derges

Eden 2, by Susan Derges, part of Susan's Eden Series for the Eden Project's educational centre, The Core

In parts of Indonesia, two of the waxing nights of the moon are called the 'little pig moon' and the 'big pig moon'; the nights the Western calendar would call the eleventh and twelfth nights of the moon's growing. They are so called because these are the nights when pigs and piglets get moonstruck, tickled pink by moonlight at night and squeakily overexcited, they bust out of their pens and go for a cavorting, giggly, piggy scramble in the fields. The waning nights, when the moon gets stubbier, are called the nights of the 'long tree trunk' and 'short stump'.

Unlike the nights of the little pig moon, embedded in that natural world and in a specific locale, the modern Western calendar and clock is disembodied from nature, and place, and the same all over the world. 2/6/05, 11.24pm.

In Rajasthan, in India, the moment when the herds return at evening is called 'cattle-dust time'. Cow-time is local, social and steeped in nature's processes. Whereas clock-time is global, applicable anywhere, cow-time is local to the very udder-hour.

Nature's multifarious clocks are evident everywhere, but perhaps nowhere is there a more fascinating complex of time than in the seas. Cicero recorded that the flesh of oysters at sea waxed and waned with the full moon (and so, women know, does the human 'oyster'.) Seahorses mate at full moon. (And the male ones, rather delightfully, get pregnant.) Mussels keep in synchrony with the sea tides of the place where they were born and will adhere to this even when moved to still water. The palolo-worm in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans reproduces only during the neap tides of the moon's last quarter in October and November.

Humanity has long known – and used – the sea's times. In some places, such as Puget Sound near Seattle, the sea's clock is one of almost unfathomable complexity, complicated to the point of eccentricity. But the Native Americans, having learnt to tell its time, could exploit its ferocious and quick tides, using it for communal activities and for collecting food – the gathering of clans and clams alike.

The sea, clock of ages, is full of time. In the tide's ebb and flow the sense of the moment is critical, but it is the coasts which are affected by tides, not the ocean depths, so while the sea, at its shoreline, represents the *now* of events, yet the paradox of the ocean is that in its depths it is a symbol of *eternity*. (Byron called the sea 'the image of eternity'.) The everlasting consolation of the sea is not *all will be well*, but *all will endure*. To Western scientists, the sea is the source of life. In Taoist thought, similarly, the ocean is equated with the Tao, the primordial and inexhaustible source, 'informing at