



Lead Was the Greatest Killer

From the writings of Percy Robert Cornford, a self-taught campaigner who wrote to The LEAD Group in 2011

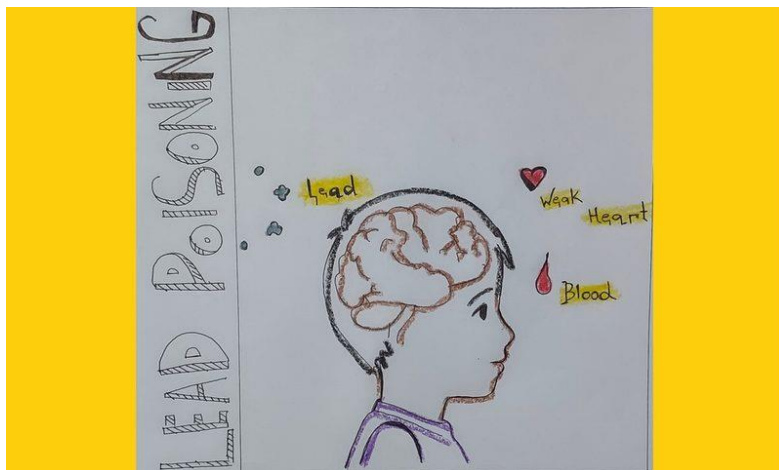
Quotes from Percy Robert Cornford, collated and strung together and illustrated by Volcano Art Prize entries selected by Claude AI, under instructions from, reference-checked and edited by Elizabeth O'Brien BSc GradDipHealthEd, Lead Scientist, The LEAD Group Inc. NB: LID means Library Identifier from The LEAD Group's Library Database.

In late 2011 a man in far north Queensland searched online for the Toxic Chemical Committee (TCC) which I, Elizabeth O'Brien, was a member of in 1994 when I worked as the Toxics Campaigner for the Total Environment Centre (TEC) in Sydney, which hosted the TCC. He did not find the TCC. "It came up with 'LEAD'," he wrote. He had wanted a newsletter; he found somewhere to send a lifetime of worry.

Between September and December 2011, Percy Robert "Bob" Cornford sent The LEAD Group charity, which I co-founded and have run since 1990, a bundle of writing: a manifesto for self-sufficient communities, a long health manuscript he called *Precious Morning*, a piece on mercury fillings, and a last letter about a distressed stretch of coast. The pages are dense and urgent, and shot through with one conviction that has not dated: the metals we scatter into the world are poisoning it, and us. This article is drawn entirely from his own words. Where he ran ahead of the evidence, we say so; where his instinct was sound, and on lead it usually was, we say that too.

He found us by accident

Cornford came to lead through a long argument with the world, not a laboratory. His covering note was disarming: "This is my old rough work. I apologise as people find my writing so offensive." He signed off "Regards, Robert," and promised to send more. He kept the promise. Every small charity knows the type: the citizen who has thought hard, alone, for decades, and at last found someone who might listen.



2026 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Paula Jacobo, Age: 11, School in the Philippines.

Title: How Lead Harms.

Lead-Safety Message: Lead replaces Iron in the blood causing anemia, reduces IQ making it harder to learn, and increases the risk of early death from stroke and heart attack. Protect Their Future: Keep Kids Safe from Lead Poisoning.

Description of Work: Pen and coloring pencils on paper.

URL:

<https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/how-lead-harms/> [LID 29411]



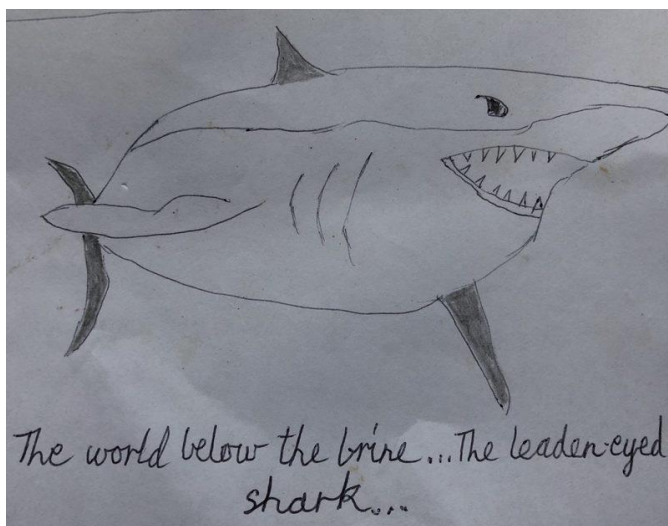
A campaigner since the 1970s

"In the 70's, I wrote two books," he told us, "'Land Care - How to enhance biodiversity' and 'Last Gasp - State of environment'. Totally rejected." He was writing about biodiversity forty years before the word entered common speech. One line, dropped at the foot of a page, holds everything: "Lead was greatest killer. Fought against bad in 70." Lead was not one hazard among many for him. It was the first and worst, and his fight against it ran back to the start of his adult life. That he reached The LEAD Group by accident, four decades later, has a certain rightness.

Homes and communities must be self-sufficient

His manifesto reads like a constitution written by one man for a country that never asked for it: "Preservation of humanity and civilisation is impossible without intrinsic rights of life and ecosystems to exist." His "essential requirements" ran to clean technology, biodynamic farming, a Community Bill of Rights, an Environmental Legal Defence Fund, and an end to mining coal, oil, gas and uranium.

But he wanted more than law. Each citizen, he proposed, should serve "a period of service to humanity and our environment", because "without caring and compassion then one is separate, angry and confused with the world". It is a striking line from a man who felt the world had turned its back on him: the repair of a poisoned country begins with caring about it. He knew what stood in the way. "The toxic industry constructs Government, media, judges, Government Department." Some of that is the language of a man who has stopped being heard; some of it names, plainly, the regulatory capture that campaigners would spend the next fifteen years describing more politely. "For evil to exist decent people do nothing," he wrote. "When industry is the law then resistance is one's own duty."



2020 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Elizabeth O'Brien.

Title: The world below the brine...The leaden-eyed shark...

Lead-Safety Message: Great White Sharks Have Toxic Levels Of Mercury, Arsenic And Lead In Their Blood - it's likely if we eat the same fish that sharks eat, we'll be poisoned too!

Description of Work: Title from a poem in Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' book of poems. Lead pencil and pen drawing.

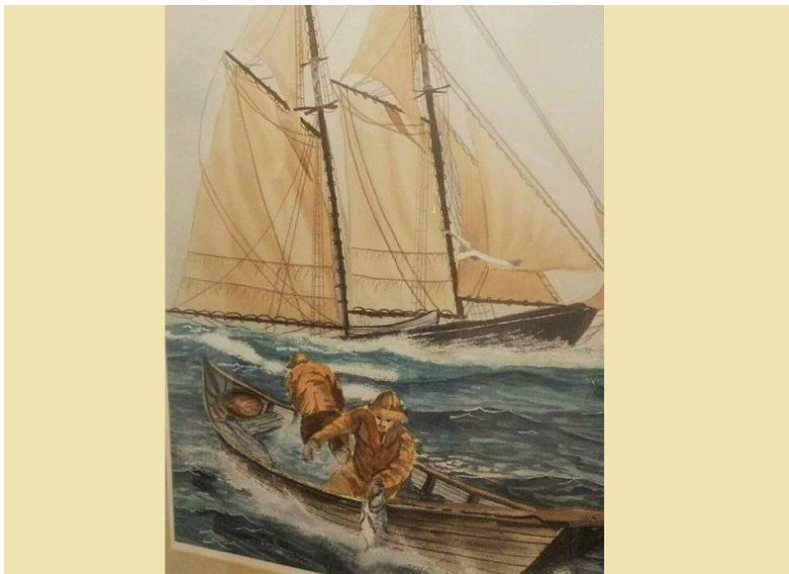
URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/the-world-below-the-brine-the-leaden-eyed-shark/> [LID 19632]



The convictions

Most of what Cornford sent was about health, and here we must be careful on his behalf. His manuscripts argue that heavy metals and man-made chemicals cause nearly all disease, that medicine conceals it, and that almost any illness can be cured naturally. He calls cancer treatment “a cruel hoax” and says disease is “easily cured naturally”. These were his convictions, and we present them as his, not ours. The LEAD Group does not endorse them, and no reader should act on them. His medicine ran well ahead of the evidence, and often against it.

Strip that away, and the core is something The LEAD Group has worked on for decades: lead, mercury, cadmium and aluminium are real neurotoxins, they accumulate in bone and brain, and small childhood exposures carry a lifelong cost. There is no known safe level of lead in a child’s blood apart from zero. The mechanisms Cornford invented were his own; the underlying worry, that we have filled the world with metals the body cannot handle and the young pay most, is one we share.



2018 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Susan Pelaggi.

Title: Reality at Sea.

Lead-Safety Message: Keep our oceans and fish lead free.

Description of Work: Photo of Painting.

URL:

<https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/reality-at-sea/> [LID 28344]

The coast that was dying

His last letter, in December 2011, turned from the body to the sea. “Death to any fish that stray into Gladstone Harbour with high levels of fluoride and lead. Now dugongs and turtles float dead on the water.” He wrote of rotting seagrass, sulphur on the Hervey Bay beaches, coal-seam gas, and creatures he believed already gone. “Where have all the fish, pipis, yabbies gone... Guess no one still care or interested.”



2022 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Christopher Nguyen, Age 10, Creative Einstein.

Title: Sea Turtle.

Lead-Safety Message: The ocean can be a dangerous place for a sea turtle, help them out by keeping it lead free!

Description of Work: Colouring pencils on paper.

URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/sea-turtle/> [LID 26422]

The timing is worth sitting with. He wrote weeks after one of the worst marine-health crises in the recent history of the Queensland coast. From about April 2011 fish in Gladstone Harbour turned up diseased; on 16 September the government closed some 500 square kilometres to fishing; more than forty fishermen reported boils after contact with the water. The port corporation blamed the previous summer's floods, not the dredging then under way for gas export. But an independent investigation by the fish veterinarian Dr Matt Landos, in early 2012, judged the floods an unlikely cause and pointed instead to sediment, heavy metals and toxic algae in the turbid water created by Australia's largest ever dredging project. A pensioner on a beach had reached for nearly the same list.

The last letter

By the end of 2011 he was tired. He thought of setting aside *Precious Morning* to begin a book on extinction, *Seahorse Epitaph*. He was on a pension; good health, he said, was "impossible on pension". He still camped around Australia alone, though he doubted he could afford it much longer. Beneath it all sat one plain request: "Before I die like to know the truth."

2023 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

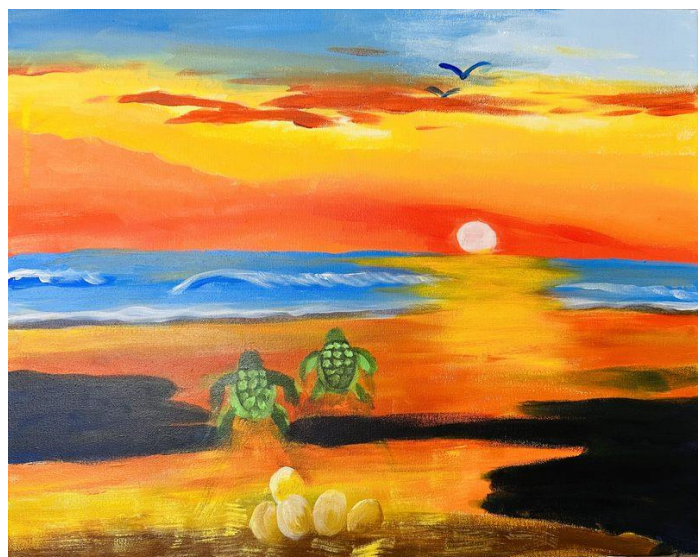
Artist: Haoze (Allen) Li, Age 11, Highgate Public School.

Title: Habitat of sea turtles.

Lead-Safety Message: If you let out lead and not put it away safely, it can destroy the safe places where sea turtles can live.

Description of Work: Acrylic painting.

URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/habitat-of-sea-turtles/> [LID 27666]



We cannot tell readers whether Robert Cornford is still living. Percy Robert Cornford corresponded with Elizabeth O'Brien of The LEAD Group between September and



December 2011, and Elizabeth sent two emails to him since, in 2014 when he did not reply, and in 2026 when the email address failed.



2023 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Azalea Manttan, Age: 18 months.

Title: My Life is in Your Hands.

Lead-Safety Message: Please make the world lead-safe and climate-safe by the time I grow up.

Description of Work: Hand prints with non-toxic children's paint.

URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/my-life-is-in-your-hands/> [LID 27644]

What he was trying to tell us

- It would be easy to file Cornford as a curiosity: an autodidact certain the media had “knocked me out twice”, wrong about a great deal. That misses him. He had cared, at real cost and for no reward, about the same things The LEAD Group cares about, since the 1970s. He grasped early that lead and its fellow metals are a poison, not a nuisance, that children bear the cost, and that the health of a body and of a coastline are one question asked twice. He was right about the shape of the danger even if he was wrong about the detail.

He asked us to help him “fill in all the false that exist”. The honest thing is the reverse: to keep what was true, mark where he went past the evidence currently available, and let a man who spent his life being turned away finally be read. Lead was the greatest killer, he told us. On that, he was not wrong.

NOTES and REFERENCES

Cornford's words are quoted verbatim from the seven documents he sent (Sept-Dec 2011), original spelling and grammar kept.



2018 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: William Nguyen, Age 11, Creative Einstein.

Title: Turtle.

Lead-Safety Message: Never use lead sinkers where turtles swim because they might swallow the sinkers and die.

Description of Work: Colour pencil.

URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/turtle-creative-einstein-education-tutoring-school-age-11/> [LID 19169]



The added Gladstone figures are from Gladstone Harbour 2011 online search results:

The Conversation, “Is dredging killing the Gladstone fish and making us sick?” (23 Sep 2011),
<https://theconversation.com/is-dredging-killing-the-gladstone-fish-and-making-us-sick-3517>
[LID 29820]

Crikey, “Call to stop Gladstone dredging...” (19 Oct 2011),
<https://www.crikey.com.au/2011/10/19/call-to-stop-gladstone-dredging-until-fish-human-health-impact-resolved/> [LID 29819]

Fishing World, “Gladstone cover-up exposed” (18 Nov 2013),
<https://fishingworld.com.au/news/gladstone-cover-up-exposed/> [LID 29821]

Dr Matt Landos’ independent investigation (2012) was not found online as at 29 Jul 2026 but the above Fishing World article included:

“...Dr Landos suggested that other factors, including exposure to sediment, metals and toxic algae, may have been implicated in the disease outbreak. Dr Landos noted that all of these potential causes could be linked to plumes of poor quality turbid water originating from port development works which included Australia’s largest ever dredging project.”

2025 Volcano Art Prize (VAP)
Entry.

Artist: Phoenix Jewson, Age 5,
Home-schooled.

Title: Rainbow the Turtle.

Lead-Safety Message: Climate change significantly impacts coral reef ecosystems through ocean warming, acidification, and altered weather patterns, leading to coral bleaching, reduced growth, and increased mortality among fish, turtles, crabs and seahorses. Get your lead-free energy from the sun like we do at our farm.

Description of Work: crayon and watercolour drawing.



URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/rainbow-the-turtle/> [LID 28907]



2023 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Arooba Sultana, Age: 8, Creative Einstein.

Title: Aboriginal Turtle.

Lead-Safety Message: Lead could hurt animal, plants and other living creatures, we must be careful with lead.

Description of Work: Dot Painting (Non Toxic Oil Pastels on Acid Free Paper).

URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/aboriginal-turtle-2/> [LID 17609]

Adelaide Advertiser (The Advertiser) "Dugong deaths in Gladstone Harbour spell 'ecological disaster'" (26 Jul 2011) <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/ipad/dugong-deaths-in-gladstone-harbour-spell-ecological-disaster/news-story/c3fd6904e55453b46ab8080594771f2e> [LID 29822] which includes:

ENVIRONMENTALISTS have warned of a disaster on the Great Barrier Reef after the discovery of a dead dugong.

It was found washed up on a beach in Gladstone Harbour, the fourth dugong, along with three dolphins and 40 turtles that have been found washed up around the harbour since May.

Friends of the Earth spokesman Drew Hutton said he had seen first-hand the destruction around the harbour since construction of the LNG facilities had started.

"Gladstone is the end-point of the export coal seam gas/LNG industry in Queensland and liquification plants, pipelines and port facilities are being built in this part of the Great Barrier Reef world heritage area," Mr Hutton said.

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He said the harbour might be a dugong sanctuary but at the moment it is full of shipping and loud noises and the only dugongs being found are dead ones.



2014 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Muhammad Nadjamuddin, Age: 8, Creative Einstein.

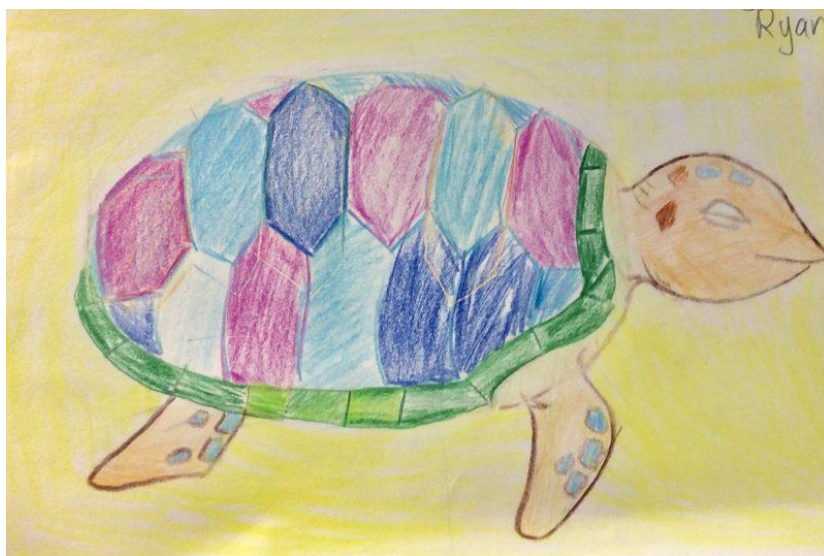
Title: Aboriginal turtle.

Lead-Safety Message: Lead is really poisonous because it could kill lots of animals and it could even kill lots of us.

Description of Work: Dot Painting (Non Toxic Oil Pastels on Acid Free Paper).

URL:

<https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/aboriginal-turtle/> [LID 17605]



2018 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Ryan Hou, age 10, Creative Einstein

Title: Tortoise.

Lead-Safety Message: Please don't lead poison the turtles.

Description of Work: Colour pencil.

=URL:

<https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/tortoise-creative-einstein-education-tutoring-school-age-10/> [LID 19175]

Limpus, Colin, Marine wildlife stranding and mortality database annual report 2011 III. Marine Turtle. Conservation Technical and Data Report 2012 (3):1-46, (2012)

https://www.academia.edu/22196584/Marine_wildlife_stranding_and_mortality_database_annual_report_2011_III_Marine_Turtle_Conservation_Technical_and_Data_Report_2012_3_1_46 [LID 29823]

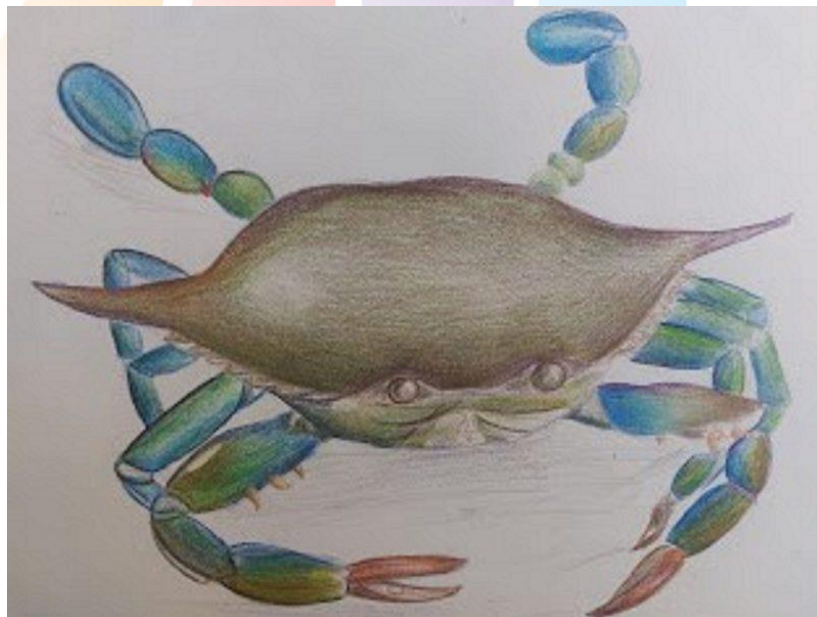
2024 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry.

Artist: Tianyang Zhao, Age: 11,
School Name: Creative Einstein.

Title: Blue Crab.

Lead-Safety Message: Blue crabs are eaten by fish, bigger crabs, mammals, birds and turtles so its lucky that crabs are generally lower in lead and mercury than other sea creatures.

Description of Work: Coloured pencil drawing.



URL:

<https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/blue-crab/> [LID 28194]

The marine turtle URL (above) includes the following AI-generated:

Key takeaways

1. 2011 recorded 1793 confirmed marine turtle strandings, the highest since 1996.
2. Natural causes accounted for 56% of identifiable turtle mortalities; human activities 44%.
3. Vessel interactions caused 126 turtle injuries or deaths, predominantly affecting green turtles.
4. Gladstone region showed over fivefold increase in turtle records from 2010, raising conservation concerns.