

Vision for a Sustainable Future

IN 1996, the Australian Federal, State and Territory governments ratified the *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity* (Commonwealth of Australia 1996). This strategy states that production systems must be sustainable and not result in further loss of biological diversity. Although there is a considerable amount of work addressing the issues of landscape degradation and sustainability, it is largely conducted in the absence of any clear vision of where Australia, as an environment in which we live, should be at the end of the 21st Century and beyond. That is, Australia lacks an integrated, long-term strategic plan for the future. As a nation, Australia is not alone in lacking a vision for the future. At whatever scale we choose, from global to regional, effective environmental management and the conservation of natural systems are hampered by the lack of vision and planning on the ecological and evolutionary time scales appropriate for complex and continually changing ecosystems.

The absence of a vision and the need for strategic planning to achieve sustainability has long been recognized by those living and working in the Western Australian wheatbelt. As early as 1990, researchers, land managers and farmers came together to develop a conceptual framework for integrating management on a landscape scale and create a vision for sustainability. Their efforts culminated in the book, *Reintegrating Fragmented Landscapes* (Hobbs and Saunders 1993) and more user friendly brochures intended to assist land owners and managers in creating a sustainable and productive environment. Despite the advances made during the 1990s, progress towards integration lagged and the vitality of the wheatbelt declined as the degradation of the environment intensified biologically, physically, socially and economically. Western Australia's wheatbelt was not alone in this. The need for a collective national vision for sustainability and an integrated environmental programme at a continental scale became increasingly apparent as evidence of significant land and water degradation throughout Australia's urban, agricultural and pastoral areas became more widely available.

By 1996, the State of Environment Report for Australia commented that "...unless Australia develops management systems which integrate the conservation of biodiversity with production on land and in the sea, the future for much of its unique flora and fauna is bleak" (State of Environment

Advisory Council (1996). Using different words, the same views were expressed five years later in the 2001 State of Environment Report for Australia. Of equal, many would say "greater", concern were the threats posed by land and water degradation to Australia's economic viability, the social cohesiveness of rural and urban communities, and ultimately the nations' ability to feed itself. This perception of loss and the need for integrated planning and management on a landscape scale reflected a significant shift from the traditional view of land management in which large portions of the continent were dedicated to single objective purposes aimed at maximizing profits, with little consideration of other landscape values. Under this view, it was assumed that the conservation of biological diversity could be accomplished within a limited system of strategically located nature reserves and national parks. While this approach has generated substantial wealth for the country, in too many instances wealth has come at a cost to other land values including degradation of the environment and the impoverishment of the continent's flora and fauna. These are not challenges unique to Australia, but typify the environmental, social and economic problems challenging the world.

The approach to land management suggested by Australia's 1996 State of Environment Report implies that landscapes should be managed in an integrated fashion, with issues addressed at scales larger than that of individual properties. If such an approach is to be successful, it will be necessary for all stakeholders to have a shared vision of what such landscapes should look like and what values need to be represented in them. The wheatbelt of Western Australia offers a special opportunity at the start of the 21st Century to explore the issues of integration, while contributing to the evolution of a national vision. Ultimately, a global vision will evolve.

The wheatbelt is typical of farming regions throughout Australia. Farmers rely on a relatively small number of crops for production and issues of land degradation and the decline of rural communities are cause of considerable concern. As illustrated by the drought of 2001–2003, the weather seldom does what we would like compounding problems and making the need for national integration even more imperative. Imposed on this are substantial losses of flora and fauna, changes in ecosystem processes, and the export of the wheatbelt's land problems to other areas via the salinization of drainages and rivers rising in the wheatbelt and

flowing to the coast. Where the wheatbelt is unique is that it is a well-delineated and almost isolated region. Coupled with its relatively small size and a significant research effort into landscape issues throughout the region, the wheatbelt can serve as a model or case study for all people on the way to foster integration and develop a collective vision.

Farmers, land managers and researchers from the wheatbelt saw the need to stimulate and accelerate the development of a collective vision that would contribute to the integration of land management and the conservation of biodiversity within agricultural areas on a continental scale. Together, they have contributed to this issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* with three goals in mind:

- develop a vision of what the landscape of the wheatbelt could or should look like and how it could and should function ecologically in 150 years time;
- identify the issues that need to be encompassed by the vision; and,
- identify pathways to achieving the vision, define individual and agency responsibilities, construct measures of achievement, and explore likely obstacles to success.

Pacific Conservation Biology is a forum by which these ideas can be shared. Hopefully, others, elsewhere in Australia or overseas, will be stimulated to take collective action and show individuals that they do not act alone. Although the focus is on the Western Australian wheatbelt, it could be about any farming community and the dreams and efforts of countless farmers and land managers across Australia and overseas. It

is a statement from the 20th Century and a vision for the 21st.

There is a special message for conservation biologists. Whatever we might desire in the ways agricultural lands are managed, farmers are constrained by the land, ecology, climate, economy, history, and the society in which they live. The accounts of individual farms and the visions of their farmers show us that there may be many ways to achieve our collective goal of conserving Australia's, the Pacific's, and the world's living resources. We do not need to rely on wilderness and conservation reserves. Indeed, we cannot, but to understand this we need to have a better understanding of what others are doing and what constitutes their vision of the future. Biological conservation in the 21st Century is about farming and farmers, as it has been since the advent of agriculture nearly 10 000 years ago. It is about farming "as if we belonged".

REFERENCES

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