Editorial

Opportunities for the future

IN the last issue, David Paton wrote about water rationing in Australia's largest cities and lost opportunities. The opportunities Australia passed by were those which would have avoided the need for water rationing, protected the continent's river systems from degradation, conserved continental biodiversity and contributed importantly to achieving an ecologically sustainable economy. Had Australians been prepared to work together, the opportunities missed could have been taken up at no great cost to either society or individuals. Indeed, the environmental and social benefits generated would have more than compensated for any imagined losses in productivity and income.

Land clearing is the classic example of a lost opportunity, especially in relation to water conservation and quality, and the protection of continental biodiversity. Just the simple action of retaining at least 30% of agricultural and urban landscapes under native vegetation would have gone a long way to realizing all the economic, social and environmental benefits of ecological sustainability. Unfortunately, successive Australian governments ignored the advice of scientists and engineers alike and not only allowed, but encouraged through regulation and taxation, broad acre clearing across the continent. It was never a question of ignorance; land clearing was and is a deliberate policy of government.

The consequences of clearing the land were well-understood since the 1890s, and probably earlier; they are certainly understood today. Yet, State and Commonwealth governments continue to actively encourage land clearing. Some of the world's highest clearing rates (both on absolute and proportional terms) occur in New South Wales and Queensland. Both states already experience massive problems with declining water quality and soil degradation, not to mention the cascading collapse of both rural society and native flora and fauna, but neither show a serious interest in ending clearing. Land clearing and the degradation of national river systems is allowed to continue in Australia despite sound (and to me, moderate) advice on how to deal with the issues from some of the nation's best scientists, such as the much publicized Wentworth Group.

None of this surprises me. A political system which manufactures a mandate from voters to entomb women and children, not to mention their husbands and fathers, in razor wire concentration camps, while their fate as "refugees" or "illegal immigrants" is pondered with manifest lethargy, is unlikely to demonstrate much concern for the continent's future or the welfare of other species. Is there an answer? Probably not, or at least not until the problems become hopelessly intractable and lead to a decline in the standard of living that expresses itself on polling day. That is still a few years off and until then we need to take every opportunity to try and change how Australians manage the continent's resources.

Change can be effected. The closure of quite large areas of the Great Barrier Reef to fishing, both commercial and recreational, is a case in point. So are efforts to integrate the management of commercial and recreation fishing. Integrated resource management seems much harder to achieve on land than at sea. Perhaps, as John Pickard put provocatively in a recent exchange of emails, it has a lot to do with attitudes about ownership of land. No one really owns the ocean, or even parts of it. Nations and states declare rights to the marine resources within 200 km of their shores and individuals may acquire a licence to exploit some of those resources for their exclusive benefit. But these are not the same as taking out a mortgage on a block of land in Darwin or holding the lease to a pastoral property east of Carnarvon. There is no "land office" with maps showing property boundaries for the sea. Australians hold the view that an individual who "owns" the land has "rights" to use the land for the individual's benefit. This view of "land rights" fails to consider the "costs" to others, including future generations and other organisms, of inappropriate use and poor management. Unfortunately, so long as this notion of private land ownership prevails, we will continue to see politicians wringing their hands and beating their breasts about the problems of land clearing and water degradation, but not ending clearing nor providing the environmental water flows that sound, dispassionate science says is needed to recover Australia's rivers. Washing their hands of the blood of the land is an apt analogy. Talk about missed opportunities.

A new opportunity

So much for cynicism. Let us look for different and hopefully more positive views on the environment and biological conservation in the Pacific Region.

Each year, I receive requests from students at Australian (and American) universities for help with their research projects and term papers. Sometimes this is just a request for my publications or advice on the literature, but from time to time I am asked to comment on how a

particular project should be done or to discuss the ideas being presented in an essay. I have always been happy to give what help I could and have occasionally been rewarded with some excellent ideas and novel approaches to old issues. It is also encouraging to find there are students willing to make that extra effort. During one such recent exchange, it occurred to me that students put a great deal of thought, passion and time into preparing papers which address important issues of conservation biology; ideas which are never shared outside the classroom.

Recently a student asked for some of my papers published in the *Australian Zoologist* for use in a term essay. As is happening within many Australian universities, his library could no longer afford the journal. Whether it was the student's initiative, a weak moment on my part, or my annoyance at the decline in funding to universities and their libraries, but I have asked him to submit his essay for publication in *Pacific Conservation Biology.*

Yes, it may only be a term paper on a topic set by a lecturer as part of an undergraduate education programme, but the effort in producing the paper belongs to the new generation of conservation biologists. Whatever their age, students willing to go that extra distance earn the right to submit their work to a wider audience. The publisher, Ivor Beatty, agrees and we will make space available in each issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* for publication of a student paper. There are some rules. Papers submitted for publication need to have the written support of the lecturer concerned. The paper must conform to journal style and should not be more than 2 000 words in length, exclusive of references, figures and tables, although editorial discretion will prevail.

This is not an invitation to lecturers to get some free "marking" and for an entire class to submit term papers. This is not a contest, but an opportunity to hear the views of the next generation on important issues in conservation. Papers will be refereed in the normal way, but I would expect the lecturer to act as a referee and ensure only well-thought and crafted papers are submitted. The refereeing process will be constructive and conducted knowing that the paper's author(s) is a student who may not have a great deal of experience. To spare the editor a great deal of anguish (ask my students), clear expression with correct punctuation, spelling and word use is essential.

Topics can cover any aspect of conservation biology relevant to the Pacific Region, but should be more than a rehash of the literature. We are looking for individuality; it is an opportunity for able students to express their ideas on the kind of environmental future they would like and how they think that can be achieved. We do not censor ideas and opinions, even those that we disagree with. The papers published will give appropriate credit to the university (or school) and the lecturer from which it originates.

Here is an opportunity. I hope it will not be missed.

HARRY F. RECHER
Editor