

On being hopeful

I HAVE to admit that writing this editorial has been especially difficult. There are a number of reasons for the difficulty, but foremost was my feeling that I needed to be positive and uplifting, offering hope for environmental sanity and biodiversity conservation. Unfortunately, I found this very limiting and every effort at writing seemed to sink into another diatribe of "gloom and doom". I hope it is just me and not a true reflection of the State of the Environment in the Pacific. After all, there is much to be thankful for.

I can remember when I was on a scientific committee advising the New South Wales Minister for Lands on park reservations in the late 1960s thinking that I would be happy if government and industry simply mentioned the environment when planning another development. We have gone much further than that and consideration of the impact of development on our environment is now routine. The public has developed a sense of environmental awareness, environmental advocacy groups have proliferated and become much more ecologically sophisticated than I might have hoped for 40 years ago. A glance through any of dozens of newsletters passing across my desk illustrates both the extent of environmental concern and awareness, as well as the extraordinary level of action underway for protecting our biological heritage across the planet. Some of it is arcane, such as the recent proposal to save Africa's megafauna by introducing it (lions, tigers [sic] and elephants) to the American west where it can be protected while generating a new ecotourism attraction. Much more is uplifting and involves genuine community support and effort without the overtones of commercial activity. Typical is the winter 2005 edition of the newsletter of Australia's Threatened Species Network. This issue includes notices of community workshops on *Phytophthora* dieback in the south-west, one on woodland birds on the north-west slopes of New South Wales, a workshop for teachers on conserving the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo in Victoria, a forum on Cane Toads in Perth, as well as notice of National Threatened Species Day on September 7th. It is obvious that education and communication is paramount within the environmental movement. Besides workshops, there are accounts of conservation groups protecting important conservation areas through land acquisition and management (The Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Gluepot Reserve in South Australia is an example), a recovery programme for threatened flora in the

Illawarra Region of New South Wales, and the decision of government to accept Cane Toads as a Key Threatening Process. All very positive news and action on a regional, state and national level across Australia.

Given the plethora of positive reports on environmental action and the obvious extent of community involvement in environmental and biodiversity conservation, why do my gloomy thoughts persist? Isn't much better to be hopeful and look to the bright side, not the dark side?

Possibly I expect too much, and am disappointed by the lack of swift responses and strong action by government and industry on what I see as the underlying causes of regional, national and global decline in environmental and ecological sustainability. Here I think in terms of human population growth, as well as our seemingly insatiable demands for resources and energy. While many people and their governments appear to have developed a strong environmental consciousness, I see little evidence that we are prepared to accept responsibility for our actions and their environmental effects. We may turn out the lights when we leave the room and will carefully sort our recycling, but we complain about the high price of fuel as we negotiate the suburban streets in our SUVs and think nothing about cranking the air conditioner down to near freezing on a warm summer day.

Governments operate similarly. Governments across Australia are deeply concerned about present shortages of water for domestic and industrial use, and have even moved to provide environmental water flows down major rivers, but have policies that encourage population growth, water consumption and urban expansion. Recycling of water is rejected as an option for more efficient resource use, and the nexus between larger populations and consumption is (almost) never linked to water restrictions. Instead, the lack of water is blamed on a lack of rain in the relevant catchments. Linking changed rainfall patterns to global warming as a consequence of our demands for energy obtained by burning fossil fuels is grudgingly made by some in authority, but action to limit energy consumption is almost unheard of. Indeed, the New South Wales government proposes to "solve" the water crisis in Sydney not by more efficient water use and recycling, but by desalinization of seawater using fossil fuels, as has the Western Australian government for Perth.

Where governments do develop a strong environmental ethic, there is almost always the inevitable economic benefit to drive the "sea change". Thus, Australia now justifies an expansion of uranium mining, with hints at a domestic nuclear power industry, because nuclear energy is a relatively low emitter of greenhouse gases. This from a government which consistently rejected a human cause of accelerated global warming and has been long opposed to the Kyoto protocol because of the costs to the economy, meaning Australia's large and powerful coal industry. Why the change? Suddenly uranium is in high demand globally and what better way to justify an expansion of Australia's mining and export of uranium and make all that money than to link it with good environmental outcomes.

Where there is no tangible (or great) economic benefit in environmental posturing by Australia, you can be certain there is no economic cost, but considerable political gain. This was seen earlier in the year as Australia led opposition within the International Whaling Commission to a resumption of limited commercial whaling as proposed by Japan and other whaling nations. It is hard to believe that a government which this year cut funding to state conservation councils, wound back support for threatened species programmes within Australia and has failed to stop the massive clearing of native vegetation is really so concerned about a resumption of limited harvesting of whales, an

eminently manageable and renewable resource. But the voters have elevated whales to the same dewy eyed status as Bambi and koala bears and opposing blowing apart and eating supposedly intelligent and sensitive animals doesn't lose many, if any, votes. Australia's only whaling industry is based on tourism and viewing, not butchering them for the BBQ, although we don't seem to mind drowning the odd whale or two in nets set to protect swimmers from sharks.

Whatever the reason for opposing whaling, the fact that an Australian government actually takes a public stand on the issue is positive and to be applauded. It is evidence of significant progress in environmental awareness and responsibility. We simply need to take that next step and create an environmental ethic among our various national leaders and the people who elect or appoint them that goes that next step and dissociates environmental action from economic costs and benefits. Can I be hopeful that we can and will do that? Yes, I can hope. We have the means and wealth across much of our part of world to do this. The technology and knowledge is at hand, as are large numbers of willing, well-intended and well-informed supporters. We probably need to work a lot harder at education, so the complex links between our actions and environmental decline are better understood. We definitely need to communicate better and we need to be positive. I am trying, but it is hard.

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