

The Planners view of Conservation

I recently joined the world of Planning. It was a strategic move, linked to a desire for new professional experiences and the opportunity to contribute to conservation issues at a grass roots level.

There is, of course, a technospeak that I struggle with. But Mr Google helps me cope with that. Much more difficult to embrace is the thought process. While studying law a few years ago, I learned that scientists and lawyers viewed the world in such fundamentally different ways that they would always struggle to talk to each other. It ought to work, as both are constantly seeking alternative explanations for a phenomenon. But it seems that an objective search for a deeper understanding of natural processes (laws?) and a fiercely biased defence of a client's interests involve fundamentally different thought mechanisms.

If conservationists are from Mars and lawyers are from Venus, then Planners are somewhere in between, and right here on Earth is a good place for them to be. In simple terms, their role is to balance community and individual needs in relation to land use. The notion of community is interpreted broadly, to include downstream users of land in both time and space, and ecosystem effects. Thus Planners ought to be Big C conservationists, because they are the nerve ends of Gaia.

Unfortunately, Planners are also a blunt instrument. They operate in a world where momentum is the primary determinant of environmental outcomes. Precedent is a key ingredient in a decision process, current land use explains most of the variance when predicting future land use, and development proposals routinely use one-off special case arguments to justify one more small bite of the cherry. For a Planner, a highly valued environmental feature is a "constraint" (because it obstructs development opportunities) and an "amenity" (because it is valued by the community).

I suspect that Gaia would not consider these adequate perspectives for maintaining a healthy planet.

Planners use data, so they might think like scientists. Key differences are that their use of data is primarily spatial and entirely descriptive. The notion of a "what if" thought experiment certainly occurs. "What if we changed the zoning

structure?" "What if we relaxed the rules on boundaries?" Unfortunately, opportunities for empirical exploration of such questions barely exist due to the twin constraints of history and a requirement for consistency. A planner cannot divide the district into two halves and document the consequences of an experimental rule change in one half.

The Planner can, and does, ask other Planners if they have performed the experiment. A note will appear on the Planning network: "because of pressure for higher density housing, we are considering reducing the required minimum lot size to 300 m². Has anybody done this?" Answer from another district: "Yes, we introduced that rule 5 years ago and we are now having problems with reduced amenity values and higher crime rates in what were once garden neighbourhoods."

A "before-after" research design is effectively being applied whenever a policy or rule change is implemented. Unfortunately, the experiment tends not to be well documented because the change is not actually viewed as an experiment. As a result, the appropriate data allowing analysis of consequences are not gathered. "Before-after-before" is essentially impossible, because rule changes arise from a consultative process with political overtones, and are essentially irreversible.

Analysis? I have read dozens of documents containing data and have found just one analysis that used a statistical test. Graphical analysis of frequencies, means or medians is standard and any notion of variance rarely arises. Use of second-hand data (originally gathered for other purposes) is the norm. Despite a statutory requirement to do "monitoring", Planners receive little training in what that means or how to achieve it effectively. Planners are not empiricists, even though they regularly run large scale spatial or social manipulations.

I have yet to decide if this is scary stuff. The scientific method may be the best principle available for learning about our world in objective terms, but despite the notion of adaptive management, it is not procedurally suited to achieving management outcomes. Planners have a primary objective of sustainable management. Can that be achieved with little or no empirical exploration of options?

On the other hand, Planners do frequently attempt to predict the future. Their thought

experiments are conducted using a consultative process involving public meetings, written submissions, descriptive analysis and political agendas. It is a highly anthropocentric balancing act that routinely satisfies nobody, but is actually remarkably robust with respect to protecting human interests in the environment.

Is that enough to protect biodiversity and give us a future-proof world? I doubt it. But let me be clear: Planners are on the front line of environmental protection through their regulatory involvement in land use practice. Conservationists need to open much more effective lines of communication with these people. They will do their job with us or without us, and because they operate within a statutory process with long time frames, we cannot avoid being affected by their decisions.

My experience to date already indicates that Planners are thoughtful, well informed, concerned, and approachable. In the main they are not scientists and have some difficulty understanding how notions such as amenity can be understood using data. Our role is to ensure that they are informed by science, and perhaps even to support their decision approach using properly conceived experiments.

If you want to protect your local environment, then get down to the local council office and meet your Planners. You might be surprised at how much you have to discuss.

Ian G. McLean

Journal Editorship

Ian McLean has resigned as editor of *Pacific Conservation Biology* and Emeritus Professor Harry F. Recher has resumed editorial responsibility for the journal. Dr. McLean has helped guide *Pacific Conservation Biology* into a period of change, which will see *Pacific Conservation Biology* become available electronically. He was also instrumental in broadening the reach of the journal and actively involving more conservation biologists from outside Australia in the journal's management. We wish Ian the best for his new job and new family and thank him for his contribution to *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

Manuscripts and commentary for *Pacific Conservation Biology* should continue to be submitted through the publisher, Surrey Beatty and Sons, at Post Office Box 8159, Baulkham Hill BC, New South Wales, Australia 2153 or via email to >surreybeatty@iform.com.au< or >ivorbeatty@iprimus.com.au<. Correspondence on editorial matters or questions concerning manuscripts should be directed to Professor Recher at >hjrecher@pacific.net.au< or via post to Post Office Box 154, Brooklyn, New South Wales, Australia 2083.

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