

## Good Luck

ON last night's (11 November 2009) ABC Television, I watched Sir David Attenborough being interviewed for the 7.30 Report by Kerry O'Brien. Sir David is a household name throughout the English speaking world, if not universally. Since the beginnings of television, David Attenborough has brought the world of nature into our homes. He has probably seen more of the Earth's wild animals and untamed places than any known traveller in modern history; a compassionate, intelligent, thoughtful and articulate man, Sir David's views on the future of the wild planet merit respect and careful consideration. In this interview, three things stood out.

First, Sir David commented on how humanity has been separated from the world of nature, saying:

*"Oh, there's no doubt that we are becoming increasingly divorced from the natural world. There are lots of people who spend their lives in cities and never see a wild thing unless it's [a] pigeon — or maybe a rat. So you lose touch with the rhythms of the natural world. You lose touch with the realities of a natural world. I don't want to get too pretentious, but you lose touch with both life and death, with both how life is created and how death is inevitable."*<sup>1</sup>

Anyone living in Australia and who is knowledgeable about the Australian environment will know immediately what Sir David meant. Outside of naturalist colleagues, I meet few Australians of any age who have any knowledge of the wild plants and animals they share the continent with. Not only do most Australians no longer come in contact with nature, but natural history is no longer considered a worthy subject for study at any level from kindergarten to post-graduate university. Losing rhythm with the natural world means that nature conservation is not an issue worthy of government consideration. I cannot think of any Australian politician, current or past, who has demonstrated a knowledge and understanding of the rhythms of nature let alone being prepared to protect those rhythms. As a nation, Australia is divorced totally from nature.

Sir David went on to say that:

*"the world's wildlife and the natural world is under such pressure, it will disappear unless we care for it."*

*And if it disappears, humanity will be damaged very substantially. After all, we depend upon the wild world for what we breathe and what we eat. So if that goes and we don't look after it, we're in trouble."*

Of course, conservation biologists know this, but I doubt many outside our profession are truly aware of the current extinction crisis, much less understanding the consequences for the human species, if nature and other species are lost. The ecological consequences for humanity aside, I wonder how many people in Australia or elsewhere really care about other species. When you are so deeply divorced from nature, it is hard to care; there are just so many more important things in life. For most people, a job, the next holiday, the mortgage, and, for billions, the next meal are more important than the survival of some bird, much less some insect, that they have never seen and probably never heard about. That extinction of species could mean "trouble" for humanity is incomprehensible; the idea that causing the extinction of other species is immoral is even less understandable.

I am reminded of the words of Paul Collins, historian, in his book *God's Earth* (p.2) when he refers to contemporary society.

*"We will be hated by the people who come after us because we will have denied them their birthright by destroying so much of the natural world in our selfish and self-engrossed attempt to take everything for ourselves."*

It is not so much that we live in an immoral world, as that we have no morality when it comes to considering the needs of other species, much less other people and future generations.

Continuing with the 7.30 Report, Sir David raised a point I often think about, saying:

*"The fact is nobody particularly gets any pleasure out of being doom laden soothsayers and crying woe, woe, woe and disaster. But that's the fact. The fact is that you see these things going on and you can't keep quiet about it or shouldn't."*

I could not agree more. On every occasion I have sat down to write an editorial for *Pacific Conservation Biology* I have fought with myself about what to say and how to be positive and uplifting — to give hope, even when I see none. Sir David spoke the truth in saying there is no pleasure in delivering bad news, so editorial writing has never been one of my more pleasurable tasks. The real problem is I cannot

<sup>1</sup>I have "lifted" Sir David Attenborough's words from the transcript of the 7.30 Report for 11 November 2009 as it appeared on the ABC's web site on 12 November 2009 (>[www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2740147.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2740147.htm)<).

keep quiet about the loss of the natural world that I cherish for the abundant joy and sustenance it has given me. It is important for humanity to live at more than subsistence level. Yet that is where we are heading as a species; subsistence survival in a resource depleted and obscenely crowded world. A world totally dominated by humans and their artefacts. A world devoid of nature.

Many share these thoughts and conclusions, including James Lovelock of *GAI*A fame. In his 90's, Lovelock has become increasingly outspoken in his concern for the survival of human civilisation. In his most recent words, Lovelock argues that global climate change predictions are too conservative, failing to account for sudden and rapid shifts in global temperatures — shifts that always trend towards higher temperatures, but can include periods when it is much cooler. So severe are these changes that Lovelock foresees the collapse of civilisation and the death of most of the world's human population, with the survivors living a Stone Age existence. Is Lovelock a doomsayer or just a bearer of the truth? I know what I think. I've been telling my daughter for some time now that the most important things she can teach her children, my grandchildren, is how to live from the land and grow their own food — talents few urban Australians possess, but which were common only a generation or two ago.

A day or so before writing this editorial, I had a pleasant lunch entertaining old friends; Paul and Anne Ehrlich, Frank and Sue Talbot, Andy Beattie and Chris Turnbull, with their daughter Keira, and Graham Pyke. We had an abundance of food, almost all of which my wife, Judy, and I had grown in our garden or harvested from the estuary surrounding our island home. The day was sunny, the temperature and breeze delightful. With all that bounty available on the fringe of Australia's largest city, Sydney, it was hard to believe that the world faced environmental collapse or that Australia was already grossly over-populated. Yet we, with our collective 500+ years of scientific training and research experience in biological conservation embracing across all the world's continents land and sea, vertebrate and invertebrate, could find little to be hopeful for with respect to avoiding the worst environmental consequences of humanity's impact on Earth. A lack of hope verified by the failure of APEC leaders at their meeting two days later to set specific targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

At lunch, we did not agree about everything. We never do, but we were not optimistic. This is not to say that we were beyond hope. There was and is hope, but as ever the challenge is how to get people, especially the World's leaders

(government, unions, religious, commercial, health) to accept that humanity is part of a natural world and dependent on that world for its survival. Wherever you look, the Australian government, for example, there is insufficient action on even the most dangerous of environmental threats, such as global climate change and biodiversity loss, and their drivers — human population growth and an unthinking preoccupation with never-ending economic growth in a finite world.

At my age, all I feel like doing is laughing. Then I look around and see my precious world of nature diminishing almost as fast as the bean stalks climbing the trellis in our kitchen garden and all I want to do is cry. Not a cry of tears, but one of anguish and frustration. How do you get people to care? To understand? There is no more time to start with kindergarten, but even as I write this the Australian government contends that Australia still has capacity for more population growth and that ecologists who argue the continent is already over-populated are wrong.

Most view my ideas as extreme. I advocate a one-child policy for Australia and argue that, in the long-term, the continent cannot support even half its present numbers at the material living standards Australians aspire to without extraordinary environmental and moral costs. By mining and exporting Australia's mineral and energy resources, it is possible to increase numbers, but not sustainably. By every environmental indicator available — biodiversity, air and water quality, fisheries, urban congestion, social welfare and equity, education, open space and wild rivers, soil, and agricultural productivity — the ecological sustainability of the Australian continent has already been exceeded. Don't these things mean anything to us?

If we were looking at any species other than ourselves, we would conclude that they had exceeded the carrying capacity of their environment and were doomed to a life of squalor and starvation. I used to say that I would escape the worst and that only my children and grandchildren would be among the losers of our society's "*selfish and self-engrossed*" pursuit of material growth and wealth, but I am swayed by Lovelock's analyses and I may yet live long enough to witness the collapse of planetary life-support systems and with that, human civilization. I will certainly see the end of the natural world as Sir David Attenborough knew it.

Good luck. We will need it.

Harry F. Recher

## *Note from Editor*

THIS issue sees the return of a *News and Views* section that we used to have regularly in *Pacific Conservation Biology*. The section was suspended after it became too difficult to obtain copy on time. The return in this issue is entirely due to the diligence of Graham Fulton, Associate Editor, who sought and then edited the pieces on bottled water and hunting, adding his own vignette on the merits or otherwise of water incarcerated in plastic.

We will continue this section, so long as we obtain copy. I therefore invite persons with interesting and relevant news on conservation in the Pacific or have a viewpoint that they would like to express to submit them for consideration. All views will be considered regardless of what they are, so long as they are well written, polite and avoid personal vilification. There is no censorship at *Pacific Conservation Biology*. For example, as a keen recreational hunter and fisher, I am sympathetic to the views of the Game Council NSW, although not going so far as to endorse hunting (for whatever reason) in national parks (see the *VIEWPOINT* on hunting). Rebuttals are encouraged; debate is healthy.

All that said, the views expressed in this section are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of *Pacific Conservation Biology* nor the publisher.

H. F. Recher, editor  
*Pacific Conservation Biology*

## **Publisher's Note**

### **Change to Management of Editorship**

It is with sadness that we announce the resignation of Harry Recher as managing editor of "Pacific Conservation Biology". Harry's commitment and work as editor of PCB has been outstanding. He accepted the role when only six issues of the journal had been published and this issue is number 60.

As an experienced and very able editor he has been a valuable mentor to the less experienced authors; he has been a co-operative and enthusiastic associate and will remain an appreciated and valuable friend.

Harry's service to science has been acknowledged with the Order of Australia Medal and a Fellowship of the Royal Zoological Society of NSW in recent years. He passes the baton of responsibility for editorial control to Mike Calver, W.A., with whom he has worked closely over recent times and we know he will remain closely associated with the journal's progress, for such is the measure of Harry's commitment to conservation.

Some years ago Longfellow wrote some eloquent and poetical words which I am sure apply to Harry:

*Lives of good men all remind us  
that we can make our lives sublime  
and in departing leave behind us  
footprints on the sands of time.*

Good luck to you, Harry, and good health to you and Judy.

Ivor E. Beatty together with Kayley Morgan

A profile of Mike Calver will appear in the next issue.