

## Speaking out!

ONE of the main motivations for establishing *Pacific Conservation Biology* was to provide a forum where ecologists in government agencies could express their views about environmental issues, including shortcomings of current conservation policies and practices. In this context, it was interesting to read recent coverage of statements by a regular visitor to Australia, Professor Paul Ehrlich, about suppression of ecologists employed by government conservation agencies (e.g., *New Scientist*, 18 November, 1995, pp. 4–5). Needless to say, this interpretation was vigorously disputed by representatives from Federal and State agencies.

Is it a question of a lack of understanding between administration and research sections of these agencies, reluctance of ecologists to speak out, or deliberate suppression of ecologists by political minders? There is no doubt that "editing" of the ecologists' publications and conference papers by senior bureaucrats does occur and that this leads to frustration on both sides. A common situation is that administrators look for a positive slant on the agencies' efforts, whereas the ecologists, who have the more direct experience with the species or habitat concerned, can see how far there is to go. Sometimes senior officials can be so concerned about potential political ramifications that they argue against release of information about the agencies' positive efforts, leaving the door open for misinformed and negative publicity from other parties.

What is to be done? Those of us on the side-lines can agitate and try to persuade the administrators of the long-term benefits of allowing their ecologists (or economists, or whatever) to speak out when they see the need for change. It may also help if ecologists in relatively senior positions work with the administrators to increase their appreciation of the value of increased communication between their scientists and the broader community. Fundamental to this is that government conservation agencies halt and reverse the current trend of reduced in-house research effort and expertise.

Another, related, issue that has arisen is concern over the quality of environmental research in Australia. Prof. Peter Cullen from the University of Canberra

presented a paper at ANZAAS critical of the management of applied environmental research with respect to quality control and funding. This is a broad problem, but is particularly acute in research conducted within or for government agencies that is not subjected to external peer review. Cullen argued that such research is not only a waste of resources, but can also result in poorly justified and potentially misguided management actions.

This should not be seen as a criticism of the quality of ecologists within government agencies — as Ehrlich emphasized, our region is particularly well supplied with world-class conservation biologists. However, the declining emphasis on high quality research within conservation agencies, combined with the problems of communication discussed above, are leading to attrition and reduced morale amongst those ecologists that remain.

A positive suggestion from Cullen, with which I agree, is that peer reviewing should be used to assess proposals for environmental research funded by government agencies, as well as the resulting reports. Further, increased emphasis should be placed on publishing the results in the scientific literature — too much of the information on which conservation decisions are based is buried in unpublished internal reports, the "grey literature". This would increase the quality of environmental research and also bring the applied government research into mainstream ecology and conservation science, with obvious benefits for the ecologists employed by these agencies. It might even help solve the problems faced by government ecologists who speak out!

I hope that *Pacific Conservation Biology* will provide a venue for vigorous discussion of these issues. Responses can be sent to me by E-mail on [cmoritz@zoology.uq.edu.au](mailto:cmoritz@zoology.uq.edu.au)

### A change in editors

After three years as editor of *Pacific Conservation Biology*, I think the time has come to pass the mantle (and work-load) on to a new person. I am delighted to announce that Prof. Harry Recher will be taking over as editor as of March 1996. Harry has a long track record in ecology and conservation, was one of the prime-movers for establishing this journal, and is well known for speaking his mind! His enthusiasm and obvious communication skills will ensure that the journal continues to develop and meet its goals of enhancing conservation biology in the region.

From March 1996, please submit manuscripts and send correspondence to:

Prof. Harry Recher  
Editor, *Pacific Conservation Biology*  
Dept. of Environmental Management  
Edith Cowan University  
Pearson Street, Churchlands  
Western Australia  
Australia 6018  
Fax: 09 300 1257



### ON FRONT COVER

Juvenile Kākerōri (*Pomarea dimidiata*), an endangered flycatcher threatened by rat predation on Rarotonga, Cook Islands. See paper by Sanders *et al.* in this issue. (Photo: Dr J. R. Hay, Department of Conservation, New Zealand).