

## Conservation priorities: myths and realities

JIM Davie's essay on integrating nature conservation with the economic, social and political **realities** of Indonesia is as relevant to Australia as it is to developing nations. Although Davie makes this clear, it is a message that most Australians might overlook or choose to ignore. For too long Western nations have pursued the **myth** of nature conservation through reserves. We know that Australia's system of conservation reserves is neither representative nor viable in the long term. Conserving the continent's biodiversity requires a system of reserves **and** the environmentally sensitive management of the matrix within which the reserve system is embedded. Yet, Landcare and growing efforts by State forestry authorities aside, there is little evidence of environmentally sensitive management directed at conserving biodiversity on the vast expanse of urban, forestry, agricultural and pastoral lands throughout Australia. Moreover, it is by no means clear what the end result of establishing a **comprehensive, adequate, and representative** system of forest reserves throughout Australia will be. One concern is that the relevant authorities will adhere to the message of the myth and decide that with an "adequate" reserve system, management of forest biodiversity outside the reserves is less important or even unnecessary. If this eventuates, then the creation of a reserve system will actually have a negative impact on forest conservation.

I am concerned that this might happen, because I could find little in Davie's essay that distinguished rural Indonesia from rural Australia. This is a point made by Davie in referring to the development of the Brigalow region in Queensland where massive land clearing has occurred in the last decade. While conservation biologists advocate protecting as much of the remnants of the biologically rich Brigalow as possible, land-owners defend their right to use their land to make a living. In all nations, the primary motivation of people is to increase their economic well-being through development and growth. Clearing native vegetation and replacing natural ecosystems with crops, gardens and domestic animals is a consequence of human population growth and an emphasis on material possessions. Throughout the World, growth and development are driven by government policies which measure progress in terms of more people, more jobs, and more wealth, and which simultaneously, if unconsciously, devalue natural landscapes and their associated biota. If there is any difference between the developing nations in the tropics and Australia, it is that Australians profess to protect their reserves from human settlement. However, Australian reserves are not secure from other human activities such as tourist development, mining and fishing, although this varies between States and may be hidden by creative drawing of reserve boundaries so "activities" inappropriate to a conservation reserve appear to be outside the reserve's boundaries. Australia and New Zealand have also initiated recovery programmes to salvage from extinction the highest profile vertebrate species. The extent of these programmes is aptly illustrated by the accounts by Kerry Brown, David Towns and Carol King and their

colleagues of endangered species management in New Zealand and the report on the Lord Howe Island Woodhen by Barry Brook and his co-workers.

Australia and New Zealand are affluent enough to afford such luxuries and fortunate enough to have a system of government that can protect reserves from human settlement and agricultural development. Something that does yet appear easy in Indonesia. Yet Australia lacks the political will and ecological maturity to extend the principles of biodiversity conservation beyond the borders of public land other than to regulate or prohibit the taking of native flora and fauna by law. The end result for Australian biodiversity will not be much different from what happens in developing nations as populations expand and people require or demand more from life than simple survival. That is, there will be massive loss of biodiversity across most of the Australian continent; this has already happened over a large proportion of agricultural lands and the situation in aquatic environments is worse, if anything.

The papers in this issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* illustrate the scale of human endeavour and the impact of humanity on global, regional and local biodiversity. Are there any real differences between the Solomon Islands, Okinawa, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand? The cultures may differ, but it appears that we all behave in pretty much the same way and the other species we share our lands with are the losers.

To conserve biodiversity in Australia, just as in Indonesia, we need to involve local communities. Most importantly we need to help people understand the importance of biodiversity and the benefits it brings to them personally. Hopefully, because of their uniformly high levels of education, many Australians and New Zealanders already understand and accept their moral responsibility towards other species. The majority, urban and rural, however, will need to see the economic and personal benefits of conservation. In this, there is no difference from Davie's message about the need to integrate conservation with development and people in Indonesia.

Biodiversity conservation will only succeed if the landscape is seen and managed as a whole. This means that conservation management, not just laws, will need to extend outside the reserve system to manage the matrix. Freehold and leasehold lands are just as important for nature conservation as the conservation reserve system. They complement each other and neither may survive without the other. Creating this partnership requires those things Jim Davie has called for in conserving Indonesia's reserves: education, communication, participation and a sense of ownership. The existing system is not working. Shouldn't we be working towards something different?

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