

Forestry, cultural ecology and ecological sustainability

FOR the past decade, the world has been told that ecologically sustainable development is the hope for the future: using only what we need without comprising the opportunities and needs of future generations. Across the Pacific, the concept has been embraced by all levels of government, by non-government conservation groups, by industry, by the media, and by conservation biologists. A former Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, even went so far during a re-election campaign as to commit the Australian Government and the Australian people to the ecologically sustainable development of the Australian continent.

The ascension of the concept of ecological sustainability during the 1980s, and its public promotion by government and industry, was a tacit admission that things were not going well with the world's environment — that somehow humanity and its endeavours were responsible for rising extinction rates, global warming, increasing levels of poverty, cultural extinction, thinning of the ozone layer, acid rain, and the collapse of the world's fisheries. The list is endless and a compelling indictment of the greed and selfishness that has dominated human society since we first took up tools and began our war on the rest of the world's species more than a million years ago.

Has the world changed in the decade and more since our commitment to ecologically sustainable development? Do Pacific nations now temper their development and use of resources with a view towards the needs and aspirations of the future, or of the requirements of the countless other species with which we share this planet? Of course not! The notion of ecologically sustainable development is a placebo — a pill to assuage our guilt, to make us feel a bit better, but which allows us to eat, drink and make merry as if nothing is wrong with the world's environment.

Every contribution to this issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* makes a lie of humanities' embracing of ecological sustainability. Lindenmayer and Recher in their essay on Australia's

timber industry point out the contradiction between the allocation of forest lands to either wood production or conservation without recognition that forest ecosystems are continuous in space and time. Ecologically sustainable forest management requires more than a system of conservation reserves. The entire forest estate needs to be managed as a single ecosystem on the understanding that it is dynamic and changes over time in response to global events beyond the control of either the timber products industry or conservationists. The agreements now being reached in Australia between the Commonwealth Government and the states on the exploitation of eucalypt forests are political efforts to placate public concern over forest management without reducing the exploitation of Australia's forests. For Australia, ecologically sustainable development means "business as usual".

There is little that is different in Sean Weaver's account of ecocolonialism and environmental disharmony in the contemporary Pacific. Western efforts to conserve the Pacific's natural environments and its highly endangered biota, like Australia's efforts to protect its forests, fail to acknowledge the fundamental conflict that exists between modern human social systems and the rest of the world. Until humankind can recognize its dependency on natural ecosystems and accept that we are part of nature, ecological sustainability will remain elusive: as Weaver explains, indigenous Pacific cultures did not "live on the land" — "they were the land". Colonialism of the Pacific brought with it the definition of land that dominates modern global economic and political systems; a definition that views land as a commodity and something to be used, to exploit and to provide profits. As long as such views dominate our social, economic and political systems, achieving ecological sustainability is impossible.

Our reluctance to change social paradigms and our failure to see ourselves as "the land" will continue to bring terrible consequences to our world. In her paper, Alison Stattersfield

¹Smith, F., May, R., Pellew, T., Hohnson, T. and Walter, K. 1993. Estimating extinction rates. *Nature* 364: 494-96.

presents an analysis of global trends indicating that half of the world's bird species could be extinct as a direct result of human endeavours within the next 800 years; 17 % of the avifauna of the Indo-Pacific is threatened. This is an improvement over earlier predictions of half the world's birds becoming extinct in the next 200–300 years¹, but hardly a testimony to the application of the principles of ecological sustainability by the world's governments. Chris Nadolny's account of declining pastoral production on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, Rod Fensham's analysis of the loss of boggomosses and their unique biodiversity that will accompany the damming of the Dawson River for irrigation farming in Queensland, the impact of powerline clearings on forest birds reported by Jack Baker and his colleagues, Chris Marshall's story of the loss and discovery of Queensland's frogs, and the problems created by habitat fragmentation and Noisy Miners described by Marilyn Grey and her colleagues are simply more examples of our failure to manage natural ecosystems sustainably and our refusal to change established patterns of behaviour.

The world will not achieve ecological sustainability until we begin to address the root causes of global environmental problems: there are too many people. We use too much of the world's wealth wastefully and without thought to the needs of future generations of people or of the other species we share the planet with. As Sean Weaver has described it, we do not accommodate nature nor do we see ourselves as part of nature. Instead, we impose a common denominator of greed and exploitation on all the world's cultures without asking what we might learn from them before we set out to destroy their very fabric: the destruction is premeditated. Conserving global biodiversity and providing for our children, as well as our own needs, means we must do more than address the symptoms of our past and present mis-management of the planet. We must also limit our population growth and stop viewing the rest of the world's resources as commodities to be used for our immediate gratification and then discarded without thought to the consequences.

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