

Conservation Biology and "Rights" to Resources

THE paper by Nonie Sharp on the "right to fish" generated some interesting comments among the referees. As is now journal policy, the paper was sent to three referees for review. In the case of Nonie's paper, it went to a biologist who has commented on a range of conservation and cultural issues, and to two social anthropologists. All referees endorsed publication, the two anthropologists did so with enthusiasm, while the biologist, whose opinion I greatly respect, thought the paper was inappropriate for the readership of *Pacific Conservation Biology*. The biologist's opinion was more or less along the lines that biologists were the primary readers of the journal and that they would not be particularly interested in the issues discussed in Nonie's paper. There were also some concerns about a different writing style and the use of jargon that most biologists might not be comfortable with. These were all points that I agreed with, but I did not think they were grounds for not publishing the paper. The problem of style and jargon was largely corrected by the author's revision, but the issue of interest among readers cannot, of course, be dictated or even easily changed.

The rights of indigenous people to the ownership, use and management control of their traditional lands and waters, and of the biological resources of those lands and waters throughout the Pacific region is as much a conservation issue as it is a cultural and equity issue. Europeans who have only recently colonized much of this region should not expect to be able to dictate terms of land use and management or the conservation of resources to traditional owners. Nor should Europeans and others have the expectation of being able to exploit those resources for their own commercial gain or livelihood without the agreement of traditional owners and users. Exploitation includes a range of uses extending from the dedication of conservation reserves and eco-tourism to the taking and marketing of flora and fauna. Having said that, there is no certainty that traditional owners will conserve, manage and use their resources wisely. Overpopulation coupled with the advent of modern technology and the decline of traditional values and identity with the land can lead to poor management and the loss

of biodiversity as rapidly as the advent of commercial fishers and loggers from Southeast Asia, Australia or North America.

Such issues, as well as the opinions and traditional values of indigenous people, need to be understood and respected by everyone concerned with biological conservation. *Pacific Conservation Biology* will continue to publish papers dealing with social and cultural issues where they relate to conservation biology. The paper on the "right to fish" illustrates how conflicts between cultures can arise and shows that conflict does not need to persist, nor does it lead inevitably to resource imperialism and the loss of biological diversity. It may be that greater attention to the merging of cultures and the accommodation of different value systems in relation to resource use and management could better achieve the elusive goal of ecological sustainability than simply allowing market forces to dominate decision making.

Northern Australia faces other problems besides conflicts over fishing rights. Australian authorities have targeted the north as "needing to be developed". Public comments from a wide range of business leaders and politicians on the need to expand Australia's population have identified northern Australia as underpopulated and capable of sustaining a human population equal to that occupying the southern half of the continent. Accompanying plans to expand the population are proposals to intensify agricultural development by damming northern rivers and diverting their waters to irrigation. Dams not only impact the aquatic environment; they have significant effects on terrestrial biodiversity. Ultimately, as shown by the effects of land clearing and farming in northeastern Australia on the Great Barrier Reef, dams and agriculture affect the marine environment. Expansion of the cattle industry, a new mine for uranium in Kakadu National Park, and an exploding tourist industry place new and greater stresses on northern environments that have already suffered significantly from land clearing, over-grazing, and changed fire regimes. The interactions of these practices on the native biota is described in the paper on Cape York grasslands by Garnett and Crawley.

For many Australians who are concerned about the environment and the loss of continental biodiversity, the most disturbing events during the first part of 1998 has been something that has not happened. In an election year for the state of Queensland and probably for the Federal government, politicians have been conspicuously silent about the environment and conservation. Conservation is not seen as a vote winner. To the extent that conservation initiatives and sound environmental management may prevent or slow development and hence cost jobs, conservation is seen as a vote loser. For whatever reasons, science and those of us concerned about the conservation of biological

resources have failed to impress on decision makers the need for a healthy environment. A healthy environment includes sustaining biological diversity. If we do not want the papers published in *Pacific Conservation Biology*, or in *Conservation Biology*, *Environmental Conservation*, or *Biological Conservation* or in any of a number of similar journals around the world to be little more than a historical documentation of the loss of Pacific and global biodiversity, we need to become more involved and involved more effectively in community education and the political process. Publishing papers like "the right to fish" is part of that process.

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