

Musings of a Frustrated Scientist

RESEARCH that is directed towards conservation in Australia is largely carried out by staff in State or Commonwealth departments, in CSIRO and in universities. The findings are generally put into practice by other branches of the same government departments, by bushcare and landcare groups, by non-government organization (NGO) community groups, and by consultants. The latter often provide contractual services to the practitioners of conservation.

The progressive erosion of the Commonwealth recurrent budget to universities has now reached a point where it is becoming extremely difficult for academics to involve themselves in conservation research: the recurrent budget of many university departments is now less than the annual salary bill. Unfortunately, this has resulted in many academics spending what was formerly their research time with revenue-raising pursuits, such as attracting and supervising overseas students, commercialization of their research and running short courses. Many attempt to continue with their research, often in their own spare time. Some of this research is funded by industry or special interest grants. The main research source, the Australian Research Council (ARC) grants, remains available, but the chances of success are less than 25 per cent and conservation related or applied ecological research does not appear to be a priority. This means that academics interested in conservation research need to find alternative sources of funding. Often this means working with, or as, consultants to industry or non-government organizations which have access to funds from which academics are excluded; this includes very large sums of money made available by the Commonwealth and States to environmental organizations for conservation projects under such programmes as the National Heritage Trust (NHT).

It is here that I have noticed a recent trend. The trend towards involvement of academics in applied conservation research has brought them into more direct interaction with the consulting industry. I have encountered several instances in recent times where sound and practical research plans have been rejected or left unfunded by organizations that would have benefited from the outcomes. How many NHT grants went towards projects that would have led to more informed decisions on how best to conserve our landscape and its immense biodiversity? Not many; most were directed towards un-researched

revegetation projects. Why is this so? It is hard to say, but feedback suggests that territoriality by individuals outside of academia is involved. Comments I hear from the practitioners and their advisers include the belief that they know what to do, so why support more research when one could be directing resources towards conservation operations. I also detect a totally naïve viewpoint among outsiders that universities have plenty of resources, so they do not need funding from non-traditional sources.

Meanwhile, university based conservation research, and indeed Australian universities themselves, is slowly dying. It is nonsense to believe that we have all the answers and that we simply need the funds to implement our conservation plans. There is mounting evidence that many of the activities that were carried out with NHT funding have not resolved the problems that they were intended to solve, nor could they, as they lacked a sound scientific basis. A consequence is that much of the billion dollars plus spent by the NHT has no long-term benefit to conservation. For example, large sums were given to revegetation projects, but were the correct plant species used? Did they encourage biodiversity? Were the plantings appropriately placed across the landscape and configured to meet the requirements of wildlife? Conservation practitioners, and the consultants who work with and advise them, need a constant flow of new ideas on how to overcome these issues. This is where academics can contribute, but they have been excluded from the process.

The problems that we have in Australia are massive, but not insurmountable. With reduced funding to most parties who are involved in conservation, there is pressure to obtain the most productivity from all parties who are involved. A move towards more effective incorporation and encouragement of university research by practitioners of conservation is essential in this regard!

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