

Conservation Biology in the Pacific

MANY readers will have received emails asking for support to form an Australasian branch of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB). The idea is a good one and I do not discourage anyone from participating in the branch and joining its activities. Nonetheless, it makes me reflect on why a conservation biology society never formed in Australia and New Zealand. At the 1993 Brisbane meeting, "Conservation Biology in Australia and Oceania", which saw the launch of *Pacific Conservation Biology*, there was enthusiastic support for forming an Australasian conservation biology society with nearly all 300 participants at the meeting indicating they would join. So vigorous was the support, that representatives of the Ecological Society of Australia (ESA) and the *Australian Institute of Biology* (AIB) requested a meeting of key individuals to discuss the proposal. At that meeting, they argued that there was no need for a separate society for conservation biology and that a new society could adversely affect established professional societies, such as the ESA and AIB. They also argued that their societies were or could be strong and effective voices for conservation biology in Australia and Oceania. The ESA and AIB were persuasive in their assurances that they would be strong voices for conservation biology and that there was no need to form a separate conservation biology society. In the end, their arguments prevailed and the new society did not proceed.

Looking back on that meeting, I regret we did not form an Australasian conservation biology society and use the enthusiasm of the conference to initiate regular annual or biannual conservation biology meetings in Australasia. I think conservation biology as a science would now be much better developed in the Pacific region and we would have had a strong voice promoting the conservation of biological diversity in Australia and Oceania.

Hindsight is always easy, but, apart from a few bright sparks struck by individuals, neither the ESA nor the AIB has lived up to the promises made at that meeting in 1993. With the demise of the National Biodiversity Council, there is no independent, professional scientific organization representing the needs of conservation biology in Australasia. By represent, I really mean "advocating". However, there are strong views among scientists concerning the merits of being an advocate and even stronger views, that professional societies with their diverse member-

ships, have no right to act as advocates. Thus, the best that can be expected from established professional societies are carefully polished and sanitized statements akin to the "position statements" produced by the ESA. These statements are useful for individuals who then act as advocates, but the absence of public support from the professional societies greatly weakens what individuals do and say. Had a conservation biology society been formed in Brisbane, it would have acted differently, or so was the majority view at that time.

While I regret the failure to form an Australasian conservation biology society, there is no reason not to proceed with one now. The question that must be asked is "is it better to form an independent body, or will an Australasian branch of the SCB fill the advocacy void left empty in 1993?"

SCB has been a remarkably successful society. Although American in origin, it is an international body. Its journal, *Conservation Biology*, is the world's premier scientific conservation journal and its annual meetings meet all measures of excellence. The pages of *Conservation Biology* openly debate all sides of conservation issues, while the Society itself has been a strong advocate of biological conservation. In recent times, SCB has employed a paid secretariat to strengthen the society's ability to lobby on behalf of the science of conservation biology and for the conservation of biodiversity. However, it is also true that, regardless of the strengths of the journal and annual meetings, membership in SCB has been static for some years. The push for branches outside North America is an effort to extend the society's reach and increase its membership. With a greater international presence and a truly international membership, SCB should be more influential, not only in Washington, but on the world conservation stage.

There are costs in SCB's initiatives. Membership in SCB now reflects not only the price of producing the journal, but of paying a secretariat. Subsidies are available to members in developing countries, but given the strong US\$, for Australians and New Zealanders who do not qualify for a subsidy whatever our dollars are worth, the price of membership is high. Presumably, an Australasian branch of SCB will stage regional annual or biannual conservation biology conferences, and this alone may be

worth the cost of supporting an Australasian branch. However, conferences by themselves, will not fill the advocacy void for conservation biology in Canberra, Port Moresby or Auckland. When deciding whether to join an Australasian branch of SCB or form an Australasian conservation biology society, the level of support from North America which will be received for regional advocacy is a core consideration. I would also like to see an agenda for conferences and clear evidence that a regional branch of SCB will do more than either the ESA or AIB since 1993 in promoting both the science and practice of conservation biology in Australia and Oceania. If nothing more is planned, then it may be better to form the Australasian society of conservation biology that we should have formed in Brisbane a decade ago.

Harry F. Recher, editor

Postscript: I would again like to remind readers, including (especially) students, that letters commenting on editorials or any issue of interest to conservation biologists are welcome and speedy publication is assured. *Pacific Conservation Biology* also encourages publication of essays and opinion pieces and the editor, in particular, welcomes guest editorials. *Pacific Conservation Biology* is your journal and it needs your support, not only through subscriptions and acting as referees, but in using it as forum for your ideas.

Reference

- ¹Moritz, C. and Kikkawa, J. (eds). 1994. *Conservation Biology in Australia and Oceania*. Surrey Beatty & Sons, Chipping Norton.