Editorial

State of Australia's environment

THE *Australia: State of the Environment 1996* (SOE) report was released late last year. The preparation of the SOE was overdue and expensive in terms of financial and human resources. On these grounds alone, I expected a report that achieved excellence. I also expected excellence because Australia confronts an uncertain environmental future.

I use the word "uncertain" not to imply a grim future, but a future on which there is considerable disagreement. Some argue that Australia's capacity to achieve ecological sustainability has been compromised and that action is needed to moderate human demands on the continent. This includes policies to reduce the size of the human population. Others with equal passion disagree and put faith in the market place and human ingenuity. For these people, there is no environmental crisis and no need to limit population growth or to regulate the movement of people within Australia.

The view of the Western Australia Government is typical. In that state, the policy is to plan for growth, not to question it. Population growth is accepted as inevitable and not something that can be constrained in a democratic society. If experience had not already demonstrated that even the best planning is rendered ineffectual by rapid and excessive growth, the Western Australian Government might be applauded for its vision.

I expected the SOE report to analyse the state of the Australian environment and provide an impartial perspective on these disagreements. I did not expect the SOE to have all the answers, but I anticipated some. If there are environmental problems, I expected to see them identified and the consequences for the future made clear. Where the environment is healthy, I expected to see that noted and an advice given of how best to keep it healthy. After all, many of the nation's best minds were put to work on the report and provided with what I consider to be lavish resources. Now that I have a copy of the SOE, I can judge how well it met my expectations. In respect to biodiversity conservation, it fails.

The SOE report conceals the full extent of the loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation from the Australian public. It does this by taking a narrow view of biodiversity (equating it to species) and by using extinction as the most important (final) event instead of weighting status by the loss and decline of regional populations. In an assessment of the status of species, the SOE tells us that 5% of Australia's 20 000 species of flowering plants are extinct, endangered or vulnerable. This compares to 9% of freshwater fish, none for marine fish (an amazing conclusion or a most courageous admission of ignorance), 21% of amphibians, 7% of reptiles, 9% of birds, and 23% of mammals. Appalling figures to be sure, but they are misleading.

The actual losses are much higher. By presenting assessments only in terms of species, the report conceals the huge local and regional extinctions of species that have occurred over the past two centuries. Over much of southern Australia, significant declines in the abundance and distribution of species affect more than half of all species. Over entire landscapes, such as the box-ironbark woodlands of eastern Australia, the entire ecosystem along with all its populations of all its species is endangered — probably irreversibly so.

The emphasis on species extinctions allows people associated with the timber industry, for example, to assert that "no species of animal has ever become extinct as a result of forestry practices". To the best of current knowledge, this may be true for the high profile vertebrates, but it ignores the probability that non-vertebrate species, by virtue of narrower ecological requirements and/or smaller populations, have been more seriously affected. We will never know, because the non-vertebrate biota of forests is poorly documented. Emphasis on species extinctions allows the advocates of unsustainable exploitation to ignore the considerable losses of biodiversity and genetic variability accompanying the extinctions of populations throughout Australia's forests.

Lacking in the report is a critical scientific assessment of the state of the continent's biota and of the efforts to correct the problems of biodiversity conservation. There are no predictions or explanations of what the failure to reverse the loss of biodiversity will mean to the future.

One colleague has rebuked me for expecting scientists to make predictions or to go beyond "the data". His view of the SOE is that it is a great source of information for students. I agree, but Australia needed more. We do not have time to wait for the proof that will satisfy the traditional scientist. An evaluation of environmental problems, such as those confronting biodiversity conservation, requires consideration not only of biological and ecological data, but of human cultural values, politics, economics, history, and ethics. Perhaps this is too much to expect from panels of scientists, regardless of their credentials. But, after the detailed documentation of resource degradation across Australia, more than the conclusions in the chapter on Land Resources that *"there is no clear answer to whether our current use of the forests is sustainable"*, or *"until we know more . . ., we should not draw firm conclusions about the sustainability of agriculture"*, or in respect to rangelands that *". . . it is difficult to make broad generalizations about . . ."* [the condition of rangelands or trends] was required.

Whether or not we conserve or lose Australia's unique and irreplaceable biota depends on how well we manage our fisheries, forests and farms. Asking for more data may be the only political choice available, but it is not what a State of Environment report should conclude. To resolve the disagreements on the State of the Australian Environment, the SOE needed to distinguish between the state of knowledge and the actual state of the environment. This required interpretation and prediction, as well as explaining the consequences for the future of failing to adequately address Australia's environmental problems and the alternatives available to Australia. The report needed to provide clear conclusions and management guidelines for *all* land uses, irrespective of tenure.

I understand that a decision has been made to repeat the State of Environment reporting process in four years. Conservation biologists need to make their views known on what this process should be and what standards should be achieved. I'd like to know what your views are and your assessment of *Australia: State of Environment 1996* report. Instead of reviewing the report in the normal way (one report, one reviewer), I propose to compile a consensus review. All contributors will be acknowledged and no views will be excluded (unless defamatory). I accept that my opinion is only one of many possible. The process of reporting the state of Australia's environment is too important to leave it to politicians or the faceless many in Canberra. Make your views known in writing or by email (h.recher@cowan.edu.au). I'll accept contributions through June 1997.

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