



On Borrowed Time

Australia's Environmental Crisis and What We Must Do About It

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THE HERO

Fighting back against inadequate action

At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done – then it is done and all of the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.

– FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT, 1911

All good Westerns have a happy ending, and the great news is that there is hope for our environment. Australia has some of the best environmental science minds in the world, and we are a wealthy nation with the ability to contribute much more to resolving our environmental problems. Many government sectors, industry lobby groups and businesses now real-

ise that we are facing a huge environmental and biodiversity crisis, and altered methods of forest and farm management are now producing more sustainable resource management solutions. We have developed a reasonable reserve system in the past twenty years, a State of the Environment Report is produced every five years and environmental grants through bodies

such as the Natural Heritage Trust have made some useful contributions. But much more *real* action and significantly higher levels of investment are needed to match the seriousness of our challenges.

If we implement ecologically sustainable solutions to our problems, the following benefits will result:

- the productive capacity of farmland and other areas will be maintained – or even improved
- the social and economic fabric of Australia's rural sector will be maintained
- the costs of future environmental remediation and biodiversity recovery will be significantly reduced
- international market advantage in key natural resource-based industries that are truly ecologically sustainable will be developed
- our vibrant ecotourism industries will be maintained
- our environmental resilience in the face of climate change will be increased
- our unique biodiversity and environmental heritage will be maintained.

It is going to take much more than research dollars to solve our environmental problems. The science behind ecologically sustainable resource

use is complex and ongoing, and more research is undeniably necessary, but what is needed right now is *action*, and lots of it. We need to:

- actually implement management actions rather than commissioning yet more reports and consultation papers
- provide landowners with financial and technical assistance to help them introduce ecologically sustainable practices
- implement major communication and field extension programs to ensure that existing significant environmental knowledge is more widely adopted in management
- establish and maintain well-targeted monitoring programs to gauge progress on management actions.

This chapter focuses on biodiversity conservation and environmental management, but there are strong links with other topics such as finance, economics and public policy that are well outside my expertise. My aim is to provide a general introduction and discussion of the key problems and possible solutions, leaving people with more expertise to join in the discussion and focus on the specifics. If there are better solutions out there, we'd all love to hear about them. The main point to remember is that the solutions have to be effective, resulting in the resolution of our environmental problems.

Problem	Potential solutions	Aims of the solutions
3. Overcommitment of natural resources in landscapes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Landscape accounting linked with management practices. Network of targeted long-term ecological research sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make longer-term and deeper assessments of the sustainability of industries. Limit the need for future remedial actions that are often costly and sometimes impossible to implement. Develop proactive vision and management actions for resource management. Close or scale down demonstrably unsustainable industries. Create market and other advantages for industries that embrace sustainable practices. Widely publicise the few existing sustainable industries.
4. Lack of benchmarks and indicators to track environmental change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop the mechanisms to assess environmental change, identify causes of problems and address them before they become serious. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit the need for future remedial actions that are often costly and sometimes impossible to implement. Develop proactive vision and management actions for resource management.
5. Limited institutional capacity to deal with the complexities of resource and environmental management and biodiversity conservation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional reform. More staff and support for on-ground management activities in environmental management agencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create new cultures within existing and/or new institutions that can better deal with the multi-disciplinary facets of environmental problems and the increased needs for environmental monitoring.
6. Repeating past mistakes in environmental management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better application of existing knowledge and experience, from one part of Australia to another. Better and wider programs of environmental education on sustainable resource use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit the need for future remedial actions that are often costly and sometimes impossible to implement. Create market and other advantages for industries that embrace sustainable practices. Widely publicise the few existing sustainable industries.

Problem	Potential solutions	Aims of the solutions
7. Limited understanding of environmental management and biodiversity conservation issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greatly enhanced environmental education programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase involvement of the whole Australian community in the ownership and resolution of environmental problems. Increase acceptability of financial mechanisms to generate greater investments in environmental management and biodiversity conservation.
8. Unbounded and unsustainable economic growth, population growth and resource consumption.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think-tank on Australian population growth and resource consumption. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stimulate broader debate on Australia's future population and its environmental trajectory, in which ecological sustainability is not a trivial afterthought. Create market and other advantages for industries that embrace sustainable practices. Widely publicise the few existing sustainable industries.
9. Need for new economic models.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerated development of new economic models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informed and costed business planning of future remedial measures. Rigorous auditing of the benefits but also the environmental costs of land and farming practices.
10. Future climate change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-planning conservation and land management responses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help the nation adapt and prepare for climate change and increase the chances of successful conservation and resource management. Limit crisis management in response to climate change.