

Musings and Elections

IN this issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology*, Bob Fox responds to the conservation and animal welfare policies of environmentalists and animal rights activists. It would be easy to dismiss his reaction as those of a frustrated public servant and a person who enjoys hunting. I have sympathy with Bob's ideas and not just because I also enjoy hunting and have had my share of frustrations in working for scientifically based environmental management. I have long felt that too many environmentalists and environmental organizations not only had a narrow agenda, but failed to understand the simplest ecological principles necessary for conserving and managing Australia's biodiversity. Too often the actions and policies of environmental organizations were not only counterproductive, but created an environment within which politicians could grandstand as being environmentally sensitive and concerned, while implementing policies inimical to the long-term needs of biodiversity conservation and ecological sustainability. As for animal rights groups, their actions frustrate the conservation of Australia's native flora and fauna and lead to more animals suffering than are ever saved. They also fail to recognize the simplest of ecological principles, such as the well-known ability of herbivores to increase beyond the carrying capacity of their food supply; the plight of koalas on Kangaroo Island is just one of many examples that could be cited where animal rights and welfare activists prevent essential conservation management causing needless suffering of animals and environmental degradation.

Thankfully some of this is changing, at least within the environmental movement. With WildCountry, the Wilderness Society is showing how environmental activism can work alongside and with the ecological sciences for the long-term conservation of continental biodiversity. Other peak environmental groups are turning their attention away from backyard issues and focusing national attention on the threats to economic, social and ecological sustainability of poor land and water management, the loss of biodiversity, global warming, and the mis-use of resources from fish to people. The efforts of environmental groups to bring an end to broad area land clearing in Queensland is a case in point, although Peter Valentine's note about the skipper butterfly, the Brown Awl, in this issue shows how much has already been lost and how the losses are not just of species, but of ecological phenomena. There is a long way to go, but environmental groups look to be in front of the politicians when it comes to understanding why Australia's economic and social system is unsustainable.

Nowhere is the failure of politicians to understand the ecological limits of the Australian continent more evident than in the current furor within the Australian Labor Party over purported efforts to impose Peter Garrett, a respected and high profile environmentalist, as the candidate for the safe

Federal Labor seat of Kingsford Smith in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. While I personally believe Garrett would be a welcome addition to the national Parliament, I doubt that the efforts to anoint him in Kingsford Smith is anything more than an attempt to grab the green vote by a party that otherwise appears to have no more interest in or understanding of sound environmental management than its Parliamentary opposition. Instead, Labor appears to be persisting with the shallow belief that environmental management and the green vote can be "bought" with a few more parks and wilderness declarations, instead of sound policies on land and water management that would actually be implemented. Of course, this approach has been a success in New South Wales throughout the tenure of the current State Labor Government, so why do anything different? Peter Garrett risks becoming Mark Latham's wilderness declaration, with no more prospect of enhancing the conservation of the continent's biodiversity or achieving ecological sustainability than if John Howard's Liberal/National Party Coalition was re-elected.

In the run up to national elections within the next 12 months, I have listened vainly for evidence that any of the political parties even remotely understand the long-term consequences of the loss of continental biodiversity, global warming or the absence of population planning. At best there have been some platitudes about saving the forests of Tasmania or "new" initiatives (i.e., advertising campaigns) to promote ecotourism and portray Australia as "clean and green" (without having a clue what that means), but in all other respects we can expect a national election as devoid of scientifically based environmental policies as those of the environmentalists and animal activists that Bob Fox found frustrating.

Even the Green's leader, Bob Brown, appears more concerned about the fact that Garrett elected to join Labor and not the Greens than being pleased about the real chance of putting an articulate spokesperson for the environment in Parliament. Does it really matter which party supports environmental sanity in Parliament? Shouldn't all the parties be seeking to implement policies for biodiversity conservation and ecological sustainability, not just the Greens? Maybe we need to hear more from the scientific community about the real threats to Australia and the Pacific from escalating environmental degradation than the now strangely muted voices of the Wentworth Group. Otherwise, how can we expect the electorate to transfer its concern for the environment to the ballot box or for the politicians to do anything more than grandstand on conservation and environmental management?

HARRY F. RECHER
Editor