

Forum on Conservation

When Malcolm Jones and I taught first year students in Resource Management at the University of New England early in the 1990s, we set a major project based on an analysis of media coverage of environmental issues. I particularly remember a report on water pollution on Sydney's beaches. Using column inches, size of headlines, location in the newspapers, and frequency of reporting, the report showed with considerable statistical certainty that Sydney's ocean waters were pristine prior to the start of the swimming season (no or few reports in the papers), became increasingly polluted as summer progressed (more column inches, bigger headlines), reached its highest levels at the height of summer (front page coverage) and then returned to purity as the summer waned and people returned to work and school (no or few reports in the papers). Total nonsense of course. In those days, before the deep water outfalls, beach pollution was a year round problem for Sydney, but the media reported the pollution only in summer when the maximum number of people were likely to be at the beaches and therefore interested in beach conditions and more likely to buy papers highlighting water quality issues. The media report events, whether they are politics, conflict, carnage, sex or the environment, which sell newspapers or attract viewers and listeners to television and radio. Our term project at UNE was designed not only as an exercise in data gathering, analysis and reporting, but was part of our programme of producing media savvy graduates.

Not much has changed in the past decade or so. The media still highlight stories that titillate, alarm, anger, amuse and sell. This helps explain the annual coverage of Japan's harvesting of a small number of non-threatened Minke Whales, but the almost total lack of media interest in the cascading loss of small, brown bush birds across Australia as the effects of agriculture and drought bite deeper into the continent's native flora and fauna. Not enough people care or know about small, brown birds relative to the numbers alarmed and angered by the bloody pictures of a whale being harpooned. The same can be said for the current heightened concern for and media coverage of global warming, an environmental issue of justifiable concern, but which was largely ignored in Australia until the current drought began to brown urban lawns and led to water restrictions and weekly reports of water levels in urban reservoirs.

An attempt to focus attention on the likely environmental consequences of human-induced global warming had been made in the 1980s, including a series of public lectures and forums on the subject, but without the drought and with a significant number of climate scientists still calling for more data, the public never really became concerned. Without public concern, media, government and industry were hardly likely to act. As a result, the opportunity to act in time to significantly moderate the long-term effects of global warming was lost.

Do not misunderstand me! Human-induced global warming is possibly the second greatest threat to the world that humanity has ever had to deal with, out ranked only by the risk of nuclear conflict. It requires considerably more attention and action by world governments than it is presently getting, but its dominance in the media threatens far more than people, including the scientific community, might imagine. The drought, water shortages for farms and cities, much higher temperatures, more frequent and more intense tropical storms, sea level rises and the predictions that these will become the norm, not the exception, for the world in the 21st Century risks attention and resources being diverted from other critically important environmental and social issues, including the mass loss of continental and global biodiversity and disruption to essential ecosystem services. Yes, global warming is a threat to both biodiversity and ecosystem services, but so are many other human-initiated environmental changes. The many should not be put aside to pursue the one.

My concern about the limited resources available for environmental management was heightened in my capacity as a member of the Bell Miner Associated Dieback (BMAD) Scientific Reference Group (SRG) as I witnessed the difficulty in obtaining funds to maintain research and management programmes for a problem potentially affecting hundreds of thousands of hectares of biodiverse eucalypt forest in eastern Australia. In his contribution to the following Conservation Forum, Paul Meek describes BMAD and the frustration experienced in finding funding to continue existing research and management trials. We are all aware that resources are limited in the best of times, but we may not always be aware of how this affects critical environmental management programmes. Contributions on the Coorong and the Murray-Darling Basin from Richard

Kingsford and David Paton and his colleagues, which will appear in the first issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology* in 2009, show that BMAD is not alone in suffering from a lack of funds for managing and restoring the natural environment. The problems of BMAD and the Murray-Darling are as much human-induced as global warming and as Ross Florence, a colleague on the BMAD SRG, is fond of pointing out, government has a special responsibility to correct problems created by government policy. In the case of the Murray-Darling, a major failure of government was the over-allocation of water to irrigators, while BMAD reflects the legacy of diverting forest management funds from native hardwood forests to softwood plantations. Government must deal with myriad competing demands for tax payer dollars, but we should not tolerate a system which seemingly can tackle only one problem at a time nor one which does not assume full responsibility for past decisions.

To illustrate some of the unintended consequences of diverting environmental resources on to the issues attracting the greatest media attention, no matter how critical those issues are, I circulated a request for short contributions on environmental problems that fellow conservation biologists considered important for the long-term sustainability of global ecosystems and biodiversity conservation. Others have sought to do this far more systematically, with surveys of the wider scientific community, but the response I obtained justified my concerns. I received eleven short essays or opinion pieces, to which I added one from Joanne Ocock that had been submitted before my request was circulated. These form the Editor's Forum in this and the following issue of *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

The forum is not comprehensive, but it is diverse and illustrates the scale of environmental problems confronting humanity and the Pacific in the 21st century. Contributions came from senior scientists, including the President of the Geological Society of Australia, who makes a case for taking a long-term perspective on environmental management, to students who may see things very differently from those of us near the end of our careers. BMAD is explained, as are the impacts of introduced ants on tropical islands, two environmental threats with different origins, but similar outcomes. A contribution from New Zealand argues for returning fisheries management back to local, indigenous people, not as some land rights issue, but as a means of better and time tested management than current, European derived, approaches. James Watson and his colleagues put the case for a new approach to conservation reserve systems, while other contributions

consider the role and management of threatened species lists, managing the water resources and biodiversity of Australia's Murray-Darling System, and the impact of Tilapia fish on native aquatic faunas.

The forum starts with an extract from Hugh Finn's ecological novel in progress on a world after global warming.

Hugh's fictional work should cause reflection. We need to ask ourselves, what kind of world do we want for our children and grandchildren and is it wise to put all our resources on trying to stop whaling and global warming if the end result is a planet devoid of all other life bar humans and our commensals and creations? We can do both, but we need to use our resources better.

Most importantly, the media have a responsibility to broaden their coverage of environmental events. For a majority of the population, what they see and hear in the media is what they know. Equally important, scientists need to make more effort to involve the community and to assist the media in reporting less frightening, but no less important environmental problems. There is more at risk in the global biodiversity crisis than the Great Barrier Reef, tropical rainforests, whales, koalas and pandas. Presentations in this and the following forum describe a few of the threats that receive less attention than they deserve, while others suggest the way forward.

Sascha Feary's contribution on Nauru concludes with the following words:

Akin to Easter Island/Rapanui, Nauru provides a warning about the societal effects of unmitigated environmental degradation. However, Nauru also provides an opportunity to rectify environmental abuse, to develop skills and knowledge of how to reconfigure the relationship between humanity and the environment in a manner that is sustainable and conserves the biological and cultural values of our world.

The world is full of places like Nauru and we need national and international policies in place and being acted on to fix them as much as we need global co-operation to mitigate the effects of global warming. But when was the last time you read about the environmental conditions on Nauru?

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