

The Precautionary Principle

THE *Precautionary Principle* is one of those ideas which is easy for governments, industry and individuals to endorse, but which is seldom applied. As the exchange by David Goodall and Mike Calver and his colleagues in this issue indicate, at least part of the problem with implementation is the difficulty in really defining what the principle means and how its application might be monitored. My own opinion is that the precautionary principle is a little like the *Ten Commandments* — an excellent idea, but something few people actually follow and which is not yet a significant factor in government and industry environmental policies.

Despite these shortcomings, discussions about the precautionary principle have value — just like being reminded about the Ten Commandments has value. They tell society how people should behave and provide a standard on which we can gauge progress in the moral and environmental development of human political, economic and social systems. In terms of the environment and biological conservation, there is no question that substantial progress has been made in the last few decades. Most of the progress has been in raising the awareness of people about environmental issues and creating a social system where government and industry feel the need to profess their environmental responsibility. Unfortunately, professing environmental responsibility can be very different from being environmentally responsible.

As an Australian, I do not need to look very far to find examples of the contradiction between protests of being environmentally responsible and actions which are environmentally irresponsible, and which violate the core precepts of the precautionary principle. In Western Australia, the State Government has endorsed a Regional Forest Agreement which does nothing to foster the conservation of Western Australia's unique and limited forests, despite this being a core objective of the process. Yet, considerable sums of money were spent on an advertising campaign to convince Australians that the government was acting in an environmentally responsible manner. Part of this campaign emphasized the role of science in RFA process and repeatedly mentioned the involvement of "500 scientists and technical experts". At this writing, a list of these scientific experts has not been released, despite requests, and many scientists in this part of the world fear that they and their expertise has been used to mislead a gullible public. Fortunately, many Western Australians are anything but environmentally

gullible and their protests may yet achieve a better result for the forests and biological conservation.

It is unlikely that protests will quickly achieve a better outcome for either the World Heritage Kakadu National Park where a new uranium mine is being developed or for Australia's contribution to global warming. Land clearing continues across the continent at unacceptable levels and is possibly the most significant contribution to greenhouse gases made by Australia. Despite strong protests from environmental groups and the best scientific advice, Australian governments give no indication that they are ready to take effective action to either end land clearing or to embark on effective revegetation programmes. They do justify the uranium mine by pointing out that nuclear power does not contribute greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. This is fair evidence that Australia has a way to go before the precautionary principle really becomes part of government and industrial policy.

Australians are not alone in failing to follow the environmental commandments embedded in the precautionary principle. Reports of unsustainable exploitation of fisheries in Antarctic waters, illegal whaling and fishing for Southern Bluefin Tuna by Pacific nations, and a thriving trade in CITES protected flora and fauna are evidence of the continuing chasm between heightened environmental awareness and a sense of environmental responsibility by very large numbers of people throughout the Pacific and the actions of governments and business. As conservation biologists, I doubt we will find the answers on the pages of scientific journals. I have said this before, and I will say it again, the scientific community needs to be more involved in environmental matters at a social and political level and not just leave promoting sustainable environmental policies to a concerned environmental lobby. Some of those 500 scientists and technical staff who have been mis-represented in Western Australia's RFA process need to publicly correct the record. If governments are embarrassed, so be it. My judgement is that, at least in Australia, governments which fail to act in an environmentally responsible manner or to adopt the precautionary principle when making economic, as well as environmental decisions, are going against public opinion and will see this expressed as votes against them in elections. We have made progress in recent decades and are on the verge of seeing that progress translated to action. A politically active scientific community should be part of that action.

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