

## Should there be efforts to establish two Australasian conservation biology societies?

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IN a recent editorial<sup>2</sup>, H. Recher presents some history on why there is not currently an Australasian conservation biology society. He asserts that a motion to create such a society was abandoned because the Ecological Society of Australia (ESA) and the Australian Institute of Biology (AIB) promised to assume greater roles in conservation biology and obviated the need for a separate society, but that these organizations have not fulfilled this promise. The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) has initiated a drive to develop a regional Australasian chapter and Recher raises the question: "is it better to form an independent body, or will an Australasian branch of the SCB fill the advocacy void left empty in 1993?" This is a fair question.

The editorial first acknowledges that SCB is an international body, produces the world's premier scientific conservation journal and conducts excellent meetings (including one in Sydney in 1998 that featured sessions dedicated to conservation in our region). Establishing a local chapter that builds on such strength would seem a more prudent strategy than starting from scratch.

He then goes on to cite cost as a consideration, claiming that the strength of the US dollar against the Australian and New Zealand dollar poses a disadvantage. However, this is somewhat misleading. A subscription to *Pacific Conservation Biology* is roughly half the price of SCB's *Conservation Biology*. But the SCB price includes a journal that produces over 1 500 pages per year. More than four times as many pages per year as *Pacific Conservation Biology*. One could argue that many of these articles are based on studies outside the Pacific Region. But in most years the number of pages from Pacific studies included in *Conservation Biology* is not too far below that

of *Pacific Conservation Biology*. For example in 2000, SCB published 183 pages of papers from the Pacific, 44 of these were from Australia and there were an additional 98 pages in a special section devoted to koala conservation. If a new society was formed, it would presumably require additional subscription fees on top of the charge for *Pacific Conservation Biology*. The financial argument for a new organization is weak.

The editorial implies that the reason for SCB creating a chapter in the region is to boost subscriptions. This is misleading. We understand the effort to be a sincere effort to utilize the strengths of the SCB more effectively in the region and to make the organization more international than it already is. We commend them for their efforts to break away from the image of being a North America-centric organization. Many conservation issues are truly global in scope and even seemingly local issues, like mining practices, are tied to global commodity prices and international trade and environmental treaties. An established international conservation or scientific organization with regional chapters will have greater clout when dealing with global issues at the local level.

Dr. Recher goes on to say he would like to see "clear evidence that a regional branch of the SCB will do more than either the ESA or the AIB since 1993 in promoting both the science and practice of conservation biology in Australia and Oceania" before he would embrace the proposal. Since apparently there never was any effort on the part of ESA or AIB to establish such a branch, we would say there is already clear evidence. Furthermore, these organizations seem to be less focused on the broader Pacific area than the SCB initiative. We believe SCB is exhibiting a clear intent to make a broadly inclusive and effective regional branch. The success of that

effort will rely upon how it is received.

The ability of such a branch to be effective will ultimately depend on the enthusiasm and energy we conservation biologists put into the effort. We urge anyone concerned with conservation in the region to offer their support to the SCB endeavour. It will be counter-productive to simultaneously launch a parallel effort in Australasia. Such an attempt would only dilute the effectiveness of both branches and be a disservice to conservation. Rather than disengaging until we see what is being planned, we should volunteer to join the effort and help establish a strong and effective regional body to promote conservation biology.

We agree there is a place for a regional conservation biology programme. *Pacific Conservation Biology* highlights important issues and research that would not fit well in the international journal *Conservation Biology*. We believe that this regional journal should be supported and expanded to reflect work being conducted throughout the region rather than its present focus on Western Australia. Now that SCB has begun an initiative, we feel the timing is poor to initiate a potentially competing organization. Both journals/organizations should build on their strengths and collaborate to promote common objectives, we do not see these as mutually exclusive. Certainly there are issues of cost, objectives and methods that the proposed SCB branch must address. The best way to do this is to engage and participate in the process of forming the new branch.

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<sup>2</sup>H. F. Recher. 2002. Conservation Biology in the Pacific. *Pac. Cons. Biol.* 7: 221–22.