

COMMONWEALTH INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC GOOD CONSERVATION AND THE IMPACT ON LANDHOLDERS

Submission by David Marsh landholder from Boorowa NSW

Principles

Development of infrastructure in Australia has its origin in the native fertility of Australian soils. The capital gained from the export of primary produce was, and is, used to develop our nation.

The soils in Australia are derived from some of the oldest, most chemically weathered rocks on earth. Due to our geographical position and the fact that our country has been geologically stable for up to 300 million years, our soils, with notable small exceptions, are infertile.

Our exploitation of the native vegetation through extensive clearing, coupled with our continual export of poorly supplied soil nutrients, have been identified as two factors that have contributed to a worrying pattern of gradual species extinction, threat, and associated ecosystem breakdown.

The unforeseen consequences of landuse change in an arid environment seem to indicate that we have seriously overestimated the capacity of our soils to sustain production and also support natural ecosystem processes.

Education of the wider community to the long term consequences of unsustainable landuse practices (climate change, water resource overuse and degradation, soil loss, native vegetation clearance, land salinisation etc), has seen pressure exerted on Governments to legislate to reflect changing public perceptions of the values of natural resources.

What value systems allowed the current state of affairs to happen?

In the past we viewed the use of the landscape as something we owned and could use however we liked for our own economic self interest. This way of thinking (unconscious mostly) valued the environment at nil. If we had had a way of objectively valuing the environment some of our landuse practices would be different than those currently the norm.

How does current legislation impact on landowners?

In NSW the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997 has increasingly made it difficult for landowners to get approval for further clearing. They see this as impinging on their capacity to operate a viable business. In some of the more marginal areas where clearing applications are originating, it could be argued that growing cereals in those drier areas may not be viable in the long term. The main reason for clearing applications in those areas is due to poor livestock profitability.

When legislation (such as NVC Act1997) is introduced to more adequately reflect changing public values, meaningful transition payments should be in place for a limited time to assist those genuinely caught in the middle. This should be concurrent with legislation change, not an afterthought. The lack of this mechanism in NSW is the source of a lot of anger and negativity, not to mention financial hardship.

The recent MDBC salinity audit and the report released in the last few days by the NFF and ACF give an indication of what we face in regard to natural resources management in Australia.

Who should pay?

To effect landscape wide change will require huge investment. It will also require creative minds prepared to think outside the confines of the past. Innovation will be critical and institutional thinking will not have the capacity to be creative enough to give us the solutions we need. We will need a partnership approach with properly reimbursed members of the wider community having a major input with government, science, business and ecology at every step.

Society at large, as the recipients and beneficiaries of a secure source of cheap food, has a very close link to land degradation. The prices received for agricultural commodities, have never reflected the environmental costs of production. These costs are real and are manifest in the incremental diminishment of our natural resources. It is therefore entirely appropriate that all Australians should help to pay for land reclamation.

How do we determine how much we should pay?

I am sure you would be aware of a four year project being undertaken by CSIRO wildlife and ecology and funded by the Sidney Myer Foundation that is looking at the issue of objectively valuing our natural resources. This process involves science, ecology and economists. The outcomes are awaited with eager anticipation.

Some details of works done on the land we manage at Boorowa.

Our property is in the SW slopes of NSW. The area was extensively cleared about 150 years ago. The remnant vegetation is about 3% of the original. Over the last 20 years we have raised the level of native trees and shrubs to about 11%. There is now approximately 90 hectares that we have revegetated and now manage for conservation values. We have done this voluntarily. The considerable capital cost has been borne by us except for 14ha of direct seeded trees that were 33% funded by NHT and approximately 2km of fencing funded by Greening Australia. Capital costs are in excess of \$150,000. This does not account for any income foregone on the land taken out of production, nor is there any allowance for the public conservation service the

90 ha gives to the catchment in which we live. Already we have noticed large numbers of declining species of woodland birds returning. Our value system based on economics does not place a value on these wonderful creatures, but they are a vital part of the functioning of natural ecosystems.

We do not have a way of separating private benefits and costs from public benefits and costs. The rectification of this situation will be the way forward for a more enlightened way of natural resources management.

Comments on market based solutions

Carbon, salinity and biodiversity credits are currently being touted as the way to solve NR management problems.

I would caution that schemes focussing on single issues could have unforeseen consequences. The complexity of the natural world is what makes it resilient to disturbance, simplification diminishes this capacity. Carbon trading gives a polluter the opportunity to offset carbon emissions but without any obligation to amend the practices causing the emissions.

I do not know quite how salinity credits will work, but I suspect they may have similar shortcomings to carbon trading.

Biodiversity credits may have the capacity to address the issues of carbon sequestration and if properly targeted could also help solve salinity problems. Loss of biodiversity is the most serious problem facing humanity, as it impacts on every part of the natural world including water.

Without real leadership by governments and a very long term approach and a willingness to take some very hard decisions in regard of our use of the landscape, we will continue to have incremental decline in the resource base that sustains all living things including humanity.

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