

From the Editor

Ours is a compassionate society, but is our compassion being well directed?

As individuals and groups, Australians are extraordinarily willing to help others in need with cash and kind.

Nothing shows this more than the response to the Asian tsunami, with around \$300 million donated by individual Australians and corporations, and over \$1 billion pledged on their behalf by governments. It is estimated that, in 1997, 8.6 million Australians donated \$2.8 billion to non-profit organizations, and in 2000–01, Australia's business sector provided \$1.4 billion to non-profit organizations through gifts and sponsorships.

This is all fine and good. Indeed it is an important underpinning of a free society.

We are a very affluent society with expectations that companies and individuals will lend a helping hand. We have rightly become less enamoured of government solutions. Moreover, many have satisfied their life's goals and are looking to give something back to society.

Increasingly, however, some of this compassion is being misdirected with unintended consequences. In short, compassion can be sent awry and not all philanthropy goes towards a good end.

One example is the Waterkeepers Australia, whose recent activities are discussed in this issue (page 12). This group has a seductive name, an appealing purpose, an apparently kosher board, and a very impassioned, slick spiel. They claim to be mobilizing community groups to protect our waterways. This appeal, and the seemingly good purpose, has allowed it to procure funds from serious and sensible foundations.

The reality is different. The Alliance is a derivative of a US group of the same name which specializes in joining NIMBY's and tort lawyers against



Mike Nahan

large agricultural business. Waterkeepers Australia's link with the community is weak and it is, for the most part, composed of a small network of deep Green activists working behind a new façade. It focuses on political and legal action rather than directly helping the environment. It conducts a polished but essentially dishonest campaign that takes the oxygen from the many groups and volunteers already working to improve our rivers. Moreover, it seeds fear and paranoia where neither are appropriate or helpful.

In short, philanthropic funding of the Waterkeepers Australia is destructive of civil society, economic growth and the environment.

Misdirected philanthropy also lies behind the plethora of campaigns against farming and other traditional resource-based businesses. Farmers currently face campaigns to stop the raising of sheep, the milking of cows, the growing of rice and cotton, the use of feedlots, the intensive raising of pigs and chickens, the export of livestock, the use of biotechnology, the use of water, the clearing of re-growth vegetation, the culling of kangaroos and other wildlife, the use of pesticides, and the employment of

their own children.

Activists are also lobbying to eliminate trout from Victorian streams, to exclude beekeepers, firewood collectors, horse-riders, power boats, 4-wheel drive vehicles and motorcycles from our national parks; to stop the harvesting of native timbers, and to restrict the growth of pine and native timber plantations.

Jennifer Marohasy (page 14) and Michael Thompson (page 16) discuss some of these campaigns.

These campaigns, which together constitute an attempt to shut down rural Australia, are being waged by wealthy, unduly influential, urban-based groups. Few of these groups have more than a handful of members. The lion's share of their funding comes from governments seeking to buy 'the green vote' and from gullible urban elites.

Unfortunately, they are being successful and in the process are sowing the seeds for a return of One Nation.

Of course, people should be able to do with their money what they wish, even if it is poorly informed and potentially destructive. But should we subsidize their destructive indulgence with tax breaks?

There are things that can be done. We can revisit the definition of charity and ensure that charity status and its financial benefits go only to groups that directly address their chosen area. That is, we should give only to groups that get their hands dirty or undertake real research. Groups that are little more than lobbyists should not be treated as charities.

And we can also start taking on these groups and their financiers in the halls of public opinion. Few philanthropists wish to do bad things or receive a bad press.