

Rethinking what it means to be an environmentalist

An address by Dr Jennifer Marohasy at a lunch sponsored by Mannkall and the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) at The Celtic Club, West Perth. Wednesday 2nd February, 2005.

Good afternoon,

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today my thoughts on environmentalism. This is a huge topic and I have about 30 minutes to give you an overview of why I think it is time we rethink what it means to be an environmentalist.

I will start by considering the modern environmentalist's approach to: genetically modified foods, saving the Murray River and Tassie forests, and also bushfires and controlled burning. This will give us some feel for what it currently means to be an environmentalist.

I will then propose five new principles that could guide an alternative new approach to environmental issues – an approach that is more evidence, as opposed to belief, based. These principles are very much a work in progress.

I will conclude with reference to the importance of having a clear vision for the future.

1. Environmentalism

Margaret Fulton, a great cook, Australian icon and now grandmother, is also a part-time Greenpeace campaigner. Still working in the food area, she is now working against the introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods, to do her bit for the environment.

Cotton is an Australian grown GM food crop. It is a little known fact that about 35 per cent of the vegetable oil we consume in Australia is from GM cottonseed.

So while Margaret Fulton announced last year, at the launch of the successful anti-GM canola campaign in Sydney, that she wanted to keep Australian “GM free”, the takeaway down the road from the launch in Sydney had been selling fish and chips cooked in GM cottonseed oil for about 6 years. In fact you could say GM fish and chips are already an Australian staple. Yet there was Margaret Fulton reading from a Greenpeace script about the need to keep Australia completely GM free.

There are now bans in place to prevent the planting of GM ‘food crops’ in Australia – a consequence of this Greenpeace campaign. Cotton is exempt from the bans in NSW because, according to the relevant legislation, cotton is grown primarily for fibre; never-mind the tonnes of cottonseed oil consumed locally.

Greenpeace is not going to ‘out’ cotton seed oil as a GM derived vegetable oil because a central plank of their successful campaign against GM canola oil was the perception/the myth that vegetable oil derived from GM canola would be a first, a first GM food crop for

Australia. Indeed Greenpeace very deceptively invoked the precautionary principle as part of the campaign knowing full well that GM canola, if it were approved for commercial production, would be sold alongside GM cotton seed oil.

The cotton industry isn't saying anything – they don't want the wrath of the environment movement to descend on them. Greenpeace are very vitriolic when they vilify.

In March last year Premier Gallop declared the entire state of WA 'GM free' and banned GM canola purported on the basis he didn't want to risk WA's 'clean green image'. In doing this Premier Gallop well and truly restricted WA canola growers to the continued production of triazine-tolerant canola which is dependent on the use of atrazine for weed control – a chemical being phased out in Europe because it poses an unacceptable risk to ground water.

The commercialization of GM canola would have enabled WA canola growers to move from a dependence on the herbicide atrazine, to use of the softer chemical glyphosate/roundup. The reality is that GM canola is 'cleaner and greener' than the canola currently grown in WA in terms of potential environmental impacts.

Over 90 per cent of cotton growers in Queensland and NSW now plant GM and as a consequence use 75 per cent less pesticide than they did when they grew conventional cotton varieties. New GM wheat varieties promise tremendous water savings. But this research is not being progressed because there is no path for commercialization because of the anti-GM environmental campaigning.

GM food is called Frankenstein food by hardcore environmentalists. This gives an insight into why environmentalists don't want it and won't tolerate it. 'Frankenstein' was a work of fiction written by Mary Shelley in 1816 about a gifted scientist who created a monster. Shelley gave the book the subtitle the 'Modern Prometheus'. This is a reference to ancient Greek mythology and the dangers of knowledge/technology – the dangers of man playing God. In the context of modern environmentalism GM foods represent a fear of knowledge and technology, a fear of change and the future.

Let us consider another recent high profile environment campaign: The Save the Murray River Campaign. The policy document endorsed and launched by 3 of the 4 biggest environmental organizations, the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace and the Australian Conservation Foundation in the led up to the recent federal election stated: "The once mighty Murray River is dying. On current trends, Adelaide's drinking water from the Murray River will be too salty to drink two days out of five by 2020."

Yet the official statistics from the Murray Darling Basin Commission for the key site of Morgan – a site just upstream from the offshoots for Adelaide's water supply – show salt levels have in fact more than halved over the last 20 years. The situation is clearly one of improvement, not deterioration. The improvements are due in part to technological innovation including the construction of salt interceptions schemes as well as improvements in on-farm practice in response to a situation of rising salt levels in the 1970s.

I became somewhat infamous in eastern Australia late in 2003 when I exposed the blatant inconsistencies between what was then on the CSIRO website the statement, "that salt levels were rising in almost all of the basins rivers" with the reality that salt levels were falling in almost all the basins rivers. The head of the CSIRO Division of Land and Water has since

resigned. The CSIRO and MDBC have acknowledged salt levels are falling. Yet in the context of the recent federal election, the three large Environmental Organizations reiterated the whopping lie. And the metropolitan media let them get away with it.

The Howard government's approach to reporting weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, and the contention that children were thrown overboard by refugees on the eve of the previous federal election, outraged many environmentalists. They claim to be driven by a concern not just about the environment but for honesty, justice and truth generally. Yet, paradoxically, their policy platform in the lead up to the last election was fundamentally dishonest on this key issue.

Let me give you another Murray River example and this time directly involving scientists. The most widely quoted source of information on native fish status in the Murray-Darling Basin is a survey undertaken in 1995–96 by NSW Fisheries.

The report's principal conclusions include the statement that: "A telling indication of the condition of rivers in the Murray region was the fact that, despite intensive fishing with the most efficient types of sampling gear for a total of 220 person-days over a two-year period in 20 randomly chosen Murray-region sites, not a single Murray cod was caught."

A local Murray River fisherman's retort to the scientist's declaration that they didn't catch any fish goes something along the lines, "The scientists, although having letters behind their name, spending some \$2million on gear, and 2 years trying, evidently still can't fish."

Most remarkably, in the same years, in the same regions that the scientists were undertaking their now much-quoted survey that found not a single Murray cod, commercial fishermen harvested 26 tonnes of Murray cod!

Perhaps a dilemma for the environmental establishment is that if the truth were honestly told about the state of the Murray River environment – water quality and fish stock – it might be difficult to justify taking any more water from irrigators. It would be difficult to justify closing down the irrigation industry in the Murray Darling Basin.

Saving old growth forest in Tasmania became a defining election issue. The impression was that last wilderness areas were being destroyed. Never-mind that in accordance with the 1992 National Forest Policy Statement there has been an increase of 1.2 million hectares in the area of old growth forest in reserves nationally – this area is now 71 per cent of the total 5.2 million hectares of old growth forest covered by Regional Forest Agreements.

And why pick on Tasmania when 40 per cent of its total land and its forests are already protected in reserves, with 67 per cent of its rainforest and 97 per cent of its high quality wilderness fully protected. A much, much higher percentage of Tasmania is protected than mainland Australia.

In Queensland the aggressive campaign to close down broad-scale tree clearing and limit the potential for cattleman to control re-growth, using the slogan "tree clearing, turning Queensland into waste land", occurred over a period when there was actually a 5 million hectare increase in forest cover in that state.

Environmental organizations are generally against the commercial exploitation of the environment. Indeed organizations like Greenpeace have their origins in the protest movement of the 1960s. Their origin and their continued existence in many ways revolves around closing industry down and locking up land.

The 1960s and 1970s was a period when there was very little respect for the environment. The US was testing hydrogen bombs in the Pacific, salinity levels were rising in the Murray River, and my parents (then farming in the Northern Territory) were being told that they had to clear a minimum number of trees, run a minimum number of cattle, and despite protests that they had adequate surface water, their grazing lease was conditional on them developing the groundwater resource.

The modern environment movement has played an important role in turning things around, to quote Greg Easterbrook, “the Western World today is on the verge of the greatest ecological renewal that humankind has known; perhaps the greatest that the Earth has known. Environmentalists deserve the credit for this remarkable turn of events. Yet our political and cultural institutions continue to read from a script of instant doomsday. Environmentalists, who are surely on the right side of history, are increasingly on the wrong side of the present, risking their credibility by proclaiming emergencies that do not exist.”

I would go much further. They are now not only risking their credibility, but the health of our environment. Environmental fundamentalists know how to lock land up, but not how to manage it.

In early 2003, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace mounted a campaign to definitively close down broad-scale tree clearing in NSW with a focus on 14,000 hectares of native vegetation. At the same time three million hectares, including three-quarters of Kosciusko National Park, were incinerated in the January 2003 bush fires. Parliamentary inquiries have concluded that the scale and intensity of the bushfires was at least in part a consequence of the environmental establishment's opposition to controlled burning – to active management of the landscape. Fuel loads were too high.

The bushfires were an environmental catastrophe of enormous proportions. The firestorms left the earth so bare in the upper Cotter Catchment, an area that normally supplied 60 per cent of Canberra's water, that a water treatment plant has needed to be built. The water coming from the upper catchment after the fires was too turbid, too muddy for drinking.

Environmentalists believe in the balance of nature. If ‘nature is in balance’ then it perhaps follows that it does not need managing – just take man out of it. They appear to believe that chasing foresters, then bee keepers and now horse riders out of forests will make the real land management issues go away. Indeed Environmentalists sit on authorities and commissions and councils and draw up management plans that specify ‘no management’.

To summarize this section:

1. Environmental crusaders are generally anti-technology. They fear technology more than they love nature. They are anti-GM food on principle.
2. Environmental crusaders are generally anti-industry and will promote misinformation as a means of denying industry access to resources.

3. Environmental crusaders believe in the 'balance of nature' and suggest this is best achieved when we take a hands-off leave it to nature approach.

The 'balance of nature' concept accords with what was the understanding of nature before the writings of Charles Darwin. That is the idea that species are immutable: that there is no change, no evolution. This concept of nature is 150 years out of date.

A friend emailed me some weeks ago, he wrote "It seems to me that environmentalism has been taken over by a bunch of sentimental romantic nihilists who regard man as the biggest problem the world faces: who ignore facts and brutalize opponents in their desire to assert their fantasy over reality."

Not a bad summary I thought. But how do we move forward?

2. The way forward

I said that in the second part of this presentation I would propose 5 principles as a way forward. I have come to these principles following much discussion and tortured thought. Now they seem rather basic and obvious.

1. Working from the basis of evidence

There is a need to work from the basis of evidence. Evidence from geology and natural history tells us that the earth is dynamic, that competition, adaptation and natural selection, sometimes against a backdrop of catastrophic climate change has driven the evolution of life on earth.

2. Accept evolutionary history

When I see people with the stop climate change placards I think, what planet do they live on? This is not the same as arguing that we can not or should not do anything about reducing carbon dioxide emissions. I believe we should. But let us accept that climate change is a real and natural phenomenon.

We are currently enjoying an interglacial warm period that has lasted about 10,000 years. This is about as long as most interglacial warm periods last. Indeed we are about due for another ice age.

Over the last 1,000 years it has been warmer than it is now. During the Medieval period Vikings made their way to Greenland where crops were grown and cattle grazed. In about 1280 AD a volcanic eruption on Iceland started a period of cooling that lasted until the end of the 1800s.

As a consequence of climate change and evolution the majority of the world's species (plant and animal) are naturally rare. They are relics of former times with different environments. It also follows that if environmentalists acknowledged that change is both real and natural, 'preservation' will in some situations require active management rather than the "hands off leave it to nature approach" so often advocated by the environmental establishment.

3. Value healthy and biologically diverse, rather than pristine

If we accept that there never was any original pristine state, then 'pristine' or 'pre-European' becomes a redundant objective. A new, solution focused environment movement could have as its vision the dual goals of 'healthy' and 'biologically diverse'.

Yet governments at the moment are compiling environmental indicators with a focus on the fanciful notion of pristine rather than healthy with some strange conclusions. For example, a Murray Darling Basin Commission study found that insect populations on the bottom of the Murray River were healthy in the 1980s, but in a poor state in 2001. Yet the 2001 assessment also concluded that there had been an improvement since 1980. The contradiction arose because environmental scientists in 2001 made their comparisons relative to a purportedly completely natural, pristine environment defined as pre-European – but well watered. The 1980s study accepted that in the Murray there would be a dominance of insect species that favored slow water because the River is highly regulated. The choice of comparison for the 2001 study ensured the river would fail the 'pristine test' even if large healthy insect populations were found, because it did not acknowledge the changed flow regime.

Bjorn Lomborg in The Skeptical Environmentalist – Measuring the Real State of the World suggests we should focus on trends, in particular the goal of an 'improving trend'. The problem, however, with this approach is that there is actually such a thing as too many kangaroos and dingos, too much water, and too many trees. In fact too many trees are threatening the golden shouldered parrot on Cape York – it is losing its safe 'grassy' nesting sites because of too many trees.

4. Value technological innovation

I have often wondered why it is that the current environmental establishment is so anti-modern high yield agriculture. They generally promote organics. Yet you need to cultivate a lot more land to achieve the same yield if you grow organics.

In 1968 when the world's population was about 3 billion renowned environmentalist Paul Ehrlich wrote, "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines – hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death." Ehrlich's predictions did not come true. Instead, as a consequence of modern high yielding agriculture – including the use of fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and new crop varieties – farmers now feed twice the number of people from essentially the same land area, 1.5 billion hectares.

The world's population is predicted to increase by another three billion people before stabilizing at around 9 billion in 2100. This represents a lot more people to feed and clothe. Given this global outlook, people who really care about the environment should be looking to back efficient farmers – farmers who can produce a lot of food and fibre from the smallest area of land and with the least amount of water so that more land does not need to be brought under cultivation, and minimal extra water infrastructure developed.

In short, if environmentalists were serious about mankind reducing our ecological footprint globally, then we would embrace technological innovation including biotechnology.

Furthermore, if we accept climate change then technology including a good transport and storage infrastructure are likely to greatly reduce the risk of famine when the next ice age hits. Biotechnology could enable us to very quickly develop GM plant varieties that were cold and drought tolerant.

5. Prioritize on the basis of environmental need

Finally there is also a need to properly prioritize environmental issues. There is only ever going to be so much time and money to address environmental issues.

While the environment establishment has spent much time and money over recent years trying to close down the Tasmanian forestry sector, take water from Murray River irrigators, ban cattlemen in Queensland from clearing re-growth, a new more outcome and solution focused, and caring environment movement, might focus on better management of fuel loads, weeds and feral animals particularly in established national parks.

In summary, the five principles are:

1. Value evidence;
2. Accept evolutionary theory: accept that competition, adaptation and natural selection, sometimes against a backdrop of catastrophic climate change, has driven the evolution of life on Earth;
3. Subscribe to the dual goals of healthy and biologically diverse environments, rather than pristine ones;
4. Value technological innovation as a mechanism for reducing our ecological footprint;
5. Recognize that environmental issues need to be prioritized and cost/benefit analysis be a part of policy development.

These principles are not radical in the context of mainstream Australia. But these principles are radically different from the principles that underpin the strategies of the current environmental establishment.

There is indeed a desperate need for a new environmental movement: one that is optimistic, forward thinking and evidence based. And that smiles rather than always frowning.

3. Having your own vision

It is a fact of life that if you don't have your own plan, your own vision, you will likely be recruited into implementing someone else's plan. Over recent decades the Australian public and Australian governments have been recruited into implementing the vision of environmental activists – romantic nihilists as my friend described them.

In its report, "Taming the Panda: The Relationship between WWF Australia and the Howard Government", The Australia Institute shows how the federal government had pandered to the environmental establishment over the last 11 years. Revenue to WWF has increased by 500 per cent. WWF Australia received over \$15 million in government grants in the period 1996-2003; money to help WWF and others to spread their vision.

And at the same time that these organizations receive government funding to promote their vision for the environment, they work very closely with the Australian Greens – who are

essentially led by a Brown. And in the recent federal election, at least one WWF employee stood for election as an Australian Green's candidate.

Let us be clear, organizations like WWF and Greenpeace don't undertake much tree planting or grow any organic food themselves. These organizations exist to recruit others to implement their plans, their vision of what is best for the environment including a future free of genetically modified foods, free of forestry (at least a local industry), free of a commercial fishery and definitely free of cotton and rice growers. Never-mind that rice growers in the Murray Darling Basin currently produce enough rice to feed 40 million people a meal a day every day of the year.

While bankrolling this vision, there has been much self congratulation amongst those on the Right of Australian politics because the Australian Greens failed to capitalize on the implosion of the Democrats and the Coalition will soon hold the balance of power in the Senate.

But the Australian Greens and environmentalism is not going to just go away. Their House of Representative's primary vote has slowly climbed from 1 to 7 per cent since 1990. And the Coalition may not always be successful in its strategy of seeking to alternatively pay-off, placate and out smart the Australian Greens and the environment establishment.

A more honest approach is surely to rethink environmentalism – rethink what it means to do the right thing by the environment. I have proposed five principles as a starting point:

- 1.the need to work from the basis of evidence,
- 2.accept evolutionary history,
- 3.value healthy and biologically diverse environments rather than the mythical concept of a pristine environment,
- 4.value technological innovation, and
- 5.prioritize on the basis of environmental need –

Working from these principles is likely to result in some radical outcomes. For example, if we value evidence, and if we are about reducing our ecological footprint – then it would follow that it is actually better to buy GM than organic. It might logically follow that trying to convert a healthy working river system, the Murray River, into a pristine system is not only going to be impossible but may deliver something of limited environmental benefit locally while, thinking globally, necessitating the developing of new water infrastructure somewhere else. Working from first principles it may become evident that it is better to harvest a senescing forest than let it rot. Indeed communities of forest animals, like communities of the liberal minded, sometimes flourish when there is a sweeping away of obstacles to free growth.

I will finish with a quote from evolutionary biologist Michael Ghiselin, “Change is real. Our purposes and our values are not things that have always existed, and will always exist, somewhere beyond space and time. They have come into existence as a consequence of our own activities, and those of our ancestors. They have been and are being evolved”.

We can rethink what it means to be an environmentalist.

Thank you.