

A CONSERVATION OVERVIEW

By Murray Wilcox*

This article briefly outlines the history of conservation organisations and the growing involvement of government in conservation programmes. The major forces and motives behind these organisations are considered. The author also argues that conservationists must not only pursue the aim of conservation of nature but also the conservation of energy and other natural resources.

Environmental controversy is, in Australia, a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1960s there had been the occasional local battle, such as the campaigns to preserve and protect the Blue Gum Forest in the Grose Valley during the 1930s and to ban grazing on the Kosciusko main range during the 1950s. But for the most part, there was a general acceptance of the inevitability, indeed the desirability, of the destruction of natural areas and the built environment in the interests of economic development or "progress". During the last two decades, and particularly during the 1970s, this position has changed markedly. In each State there has been a series of major land use controversies each attracting widespread media and public attention.

The New South Wales list includes mining proposals, such as the special Clutha coal mining legislation, limestone mining at Colong Caves and at Bungonia Gorge, and mineral sand mining along the high dunes of Myall and Tuggerah Lakes; forestry activities such as the pine planting programme at Boyd Plateau and rain forest logging on the North Coast; urban re-development schemes such as for the Rocks, Woolloomooloo and Darlinghurst and the inner city expressway programme. All these controversies have one important common feature which needs to be emphasized in every case, — and the same is true of the comparable list in each of the other States — the project was either proposed or strongly supported by the relevant agency of the State Government. Citizens have found themselves fighting their own governments.

There are a number of reasons for the blaze of environmental controversy, three of which should be noted. First, the public had become used to the notion that private development should, by use of town planning controls, be subject to scrutiny and even veto. It was a short step to seek to influence decisions relating to public development. Secondly, the authoritarian tradition was breaking down. A better educated, more articulate, community was less ready to assume that government officials knew best.¹ Thirdly, technological advances increased the scale and pace of change. Comprehensive urban re-development threatened totally to eliminate known and loved buildings and townscapes. A modern freeway was thought different in kind, not merely in degree, to a suburban road; open cut coal mining to underground mining; clear felling of forests to selective

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1 Census returns show the proportion of persons aged 16 attending school as:
1961 — 30.50%; 1966 — 42.45%; 1971 — 53.69%; 1976 — 59.13%.
In 1955 Australian universities conferred 3,435 degrees; in 1975 they conferred 24,216.

logging. The seemingly abundant wilderness began to disappear. Even remote areas such as South West Tasmania were significantly modified by government decisions. For many people such decisions were simply intolerable, particularly when those decisions were seen as resulting from the limited outlook or institutional ambitions of specialist construction authorities.

In such a situation it is understandable that non-government conservation organisations came into existence. The first major organizations were the various State Divisions of the National Trust of Australia. They were formed in the early 1960s and, reflecting a major issue of the time, were at first concerned almost exclusively with the protection of particular buildings of architectural and historical merit. Only gradually did the various Divisions extend their interest to the conservation of townscapes then to urban landscapes and, in very recent times, to rural landscapes and natural areas.

The scope of activities of nature conservation organisations followed a similar development. Many early groups were formed to protect particular species from exploitation. It was soon realised that this was in vain unless there was protection of the habitat of such species. Other groups were formed to preserve particular wilderness areas. Those groups were numerous but generally small with scant resources. Within each State, these groups came together to form State conservation councils, pooling information and skills and providing an organisation better able to communicate with politicians and the public.

The Australian Conservation Foundation was formed in 1965. The idea behind the Foundation was to have a national organisation concerned with the natural environment throughout the whole of Australia and its territories which would, over time, acquire the experience and stature to negotiate with governments, both Federal and State, to lead campaigns on issues of national importance and to assist the smaller conservation organisations with issues of a lesser scale. In aid of those objectives successive Commonwealth governments have provided financial support for the Foundation, now sadly reduced to only 31%, in real terms, of the amount made available five years ago.

Even more significantly, the Foundation has built up a wealth of contacts: people in a variety of vocations who are willing to give their expertise to assist in relation to particular matters. This expertise is especially valuable in what is an unspectacular but major function of the Foundation: the analysis of development proposals and the making of submissions thereon to decision makers. A large part of the Foundation's work is directed towards suggesting improvements and alternatives.

During the late 1970s a new development occurred. Members of conservation organisations began to appreciate that the battles for specific wilderness areas would continue to occur, and would often be lost, whilst consumption patterns continued to rise. If there is an increasing demand for electricity, for example, it is inevitable that steps will be taken to satisfy that demand. At first there may be some choice in the means of satisfying that demand but, as it continues to increase, alternatives must diminish. Inevitably, the stage will be reached where the choice is between solutions each of which is environmentally unacceptable.

In these circumstances conservationists have, over the last two or three years, emphasised the alternative to increasing demand. It is now clear that it is possible to reduce the rate of consumption of basis resources. Ten years ago, even five years ago, it would have been thought fanciful to predict a drop in the Australian consumption of oil. Yet in 1979-1980 that phenomenon occurred under the influence of active conservation measures stemming from the dramatic rise in price since 1973.

The reduction in oil consumption has been caused in part by conversion to other

energy sources: especially electricity and natural gas. We have some distance to go before we reach the stage of steady total energy demand. However, there is increasing evidence that this can be achieved. The financial benefit to manufacturing industry of an active energy conservation programme is now spectacular.² It seems reasonable to believe that there will be a potential saving in the range of 30% to 50% of the energy consumed by the manufacturing industry. This will mean a major saving to the whole of the community as the manufacturing industry represents 30% of the total energy consumption.³ Conservation in the domestic sphere will be more difficult to achieve but one recent study indicates that the energy required for the major space heating load in houses can be reduced by 60% by full insulation and improved design.⁴

A number of countries are approaching zero energy growth, without a reduction of living standards.⁵ In Australia few energy conservation initiatives have been taken. Instead the emphasis has been upon expanding supply,⁶ with all of the environmental problems this now entails. A major task of the Australian conservation movement in the eighties will be to persuade people and governments to actively pursue the conservation alternative. The task will have to be followed by similar campaigns for the conservation of other non-renewable or scarce resources, especially metal and forest products. There will be serious and increasing environmental problems until we learn to live within our means.

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- 2 On 2 October, 1980 the Federal Department of National Development and Energy held a conference on national industrial energy in Canberra. Speakers gave examples of energy savings already achieved by some major industrialists. They included a report on the CSR Chemicals Energywatch programme which had reduced the company's energy consumption by 22.5%. For a cost of \$650,000 during the five years 1976-1980 the company expected to save \$2,522,000 in energy costs.
 - 3 J. V. Monaghan, Director of the National Energy Office, in a paper delivered to the South Australian Department of Mines and Energy Conference, 16 March, 1981.
 - 4 Harwood and Hartley, "An Energy Efficient Future for Tasmania", (Tasmania Conservation Trust).
 - 5 In 1975, Sweden adopted an energy policy with the aim of limiting growth in energy demand to 2% a year for the period 1975-85 and no growth after 1990. In the period since 1975, growth has been less than the 2% target. Perhaps the most significant success is in the United States of America – easily the heaviest per capita energy consumer in the world. Between 1976 and 1978 the annual consumption growth rate was always between 2% and 5%. In 1978-1979, as a result of federal initiatives, growth was only 0.8%. The rate of importation of oil has fallen from an average of 8.5 million barrels per day in 1979 to 6.5 million per day during the first three months in 1981; that three month period coincided with a growth in the Gross National Product of 6.5% after inflation.
 - 6 The Acting Chairman of the N.S.W. Electricity Commission recently pointed out that financial factors limited the Commission to an increase of "only" 7% per annum. At this rate power output would *double* each ten years.