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The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Natural Resource Management
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
3rd July 2003

Dear Sir,

Submission on Sustainable Management of Natural Resources

My brief CV: Forest management with Forestry Commission of NSW from 1996 to 1988

Forest management on private lands current since 1989.

Member of Nyah to South Australian Border Salinity Management Planning Committee from 1990 till the plan was adopted. (This was a Victorian Government sponsored committee)

Member of Lower Murray-Darling Catchment Management Committee (NSW), as a land user representative, from 1996 till this Committee was replaced by a Government appointed Board.

Current member of the Western Riverina Regional Vegetation Committee since 1999, as a representative of rural interests.

Note: while my current address is Victorian my involvement is almost entirely NSW.

My comments are directed toward the community, through its Government, wanting to influence or control the management of natural resources associated with utilisation on freehold land.

What do you want to achieve?

Do you want more employment in natural resource law enforcement?

If so, continue to develop policies, prescriptions, and laws that turn natural resource assets into property liabilities. Land manager resistance ensures compliance officers and the Land and Environment Court are kept busy. Without land manager support, any approach has limited ability to conserve what we have now, and no potential for net gain! If I no longer see my natural resource as an asset, what incentive is there for me to look after that resource, let alone allow it to expand.

Do you want a better natural resource environment?

If so, your challenge is to ensure that natural resources are valued as an asset, not a liability. Then you will have a social climate where the flora and fauna flourish and the soil and water resource is protected.

It is not enough to just say natives are better than exotics. Land managers need sound evidence in order to be convinced.

What advantage is there for me to have an intensive plantation, with high input cost and minimal biodiversity, rather than a much less intensive natural forest with high biodiversity?

The difference is that I am free to harvest the plantation but experience considerable restriction with my natural forest. The natural forest is considerably more environmentally friendly, but is rapidly becoming economically unviable due to harvesting restrictions.

Until we get a change in mind-set of the planners and prescribers I fear we are locked into the first of those two options.

It is relatively easy write a law that will have positive results in court, based on dos and don'ts.

It is quite another matter to write a law that has positive affects in the field.

It is elementary child psychology that you get better results with praise than punishment. But on the spur of the moment it is much easier to punish. A lot of us find it hard to admit that basically our behaviour does not change with age, it just gets more sophisticated.

We are all pretty good at saving that which belongs to someone else.

We are also pretty good at rationalising our own situation to show it is different, and can be justified. I have seen many planners change their attitude dramatically when they realise how a new prescription will impact on their own management.

Land managers and Conservation Management

(i) There are land managers who retain substantial resources of native flora and fauna because they want to, but more importantly because they can afford to.

(ii) There are land managers who manage their resource of flora and fauna because it has a role as an integral part of the property's productive assets. The level of care tends to be directly linked to current financial pressures. It should be noted that financial institutions, despite public displays of environmental concern, have very little environmental integrity when it comes to loan management.

(iii) Then there are land managers who see little or no value in native flora and fauna on their land.

It is the management of a property's flora and fauna resource, regardless of whether it is native or exotic, that most significantly influences the care of the soil and water resource. Stress on one creates stress on another. An environmental constraint on one action can cause an unforeseen adverse impact on another.

From my experience as a forester in the public arena, there appears to be three broad types in group (iii) above. There are those who comply with the law because they are basically honest and cooperative. There are those who comply through fear of being caught, and finally there are those who set out to beat the system. Many of this final group are sufficiently ingenious to devise strategies whereby they do what they want with minimal risk of being found out and penalised.

If a regulation is aimed at group (iii), will it achieve sufficient benefit to balance losses from groups (i) and (ii) as they drift into group (iii) due to resentment aroused by the regulation? Why should anyone have to prove to people, they don't respect, that their future sustainable management is what they have been doing for years?

In many cases, new prescriptions are framed in such a way that utilisation becomes subordinate to any potential conservation issue. Thus the new prescription endeavours to supersede any 'right of existing use' conferred by the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act of 1979.

High Conservation Value

'High conservation value' is a term that a land manager may once have been proud to have had conferred on part of a property. It recognised that past management had nurtured something of real environmental importance. Unfortunately today this term has a perception that any piece of land so described will be severely restricted, if not totally restricted, from future utilisation. Hence a property containing a site of high conservation value (hcv) is expected to attract a lesser sale price than to one with no hcv.

We have a situation in NSW, where landowners who know they have something of significant environmental value, such as threatened species, heritage sites, or hcv, keep very quiet about it. They are proud of what they have, but are too frightened of public interference in their activities, should what they have become public knowledge. Their fear will not be easy to dispel, as it will take time to provide the necessary reassurance that they will not be disadvantaged if they tell.

There is no way of knowing to what extent this fear has manifested itself in something being destroyed or eliminated to avoid the risk of its presence being discovered. It only needs one manager to be punished in a district for a flurry of subtle destruction to occur in the locality.

Equity

A major part of the acceptance and adoption of sustainable resource management practices depends on equity.

It is necessary at the outset to have a clear equity structure.

Many practices are the direct result of government advice or direction based on the best available knowledge at the time. Subsequently better advice comes to hand. If change based on new knowledge is to be obligatory at the community's direction then the community must bear the cost.

If a change is to the economic benefit of a property, it bears the cost.

If a change is to the mutual benefit of two or more properties, they share the cost.

If a change benefits both the community and a property, the cost is shared equitably.

If a change is for community benefit, the community bears the cost.

The community may rationalise that land, water, licences and allocations were originally given to the recipient. In the first instance the recipient was expected to meet the cost of development of the resource and take all risks to prove an enterprise and make it profitable. By so doing the recipient built equity into the asset. Those who did not themselves develop the asset, sold it on at a price and thus built equity in to it. Today, owners have a substantial equity, through purchase or development, in what may once have been regarded as a gift. Hence if the community wants to retrieve part, or all, of that asset it should be purchased on the open market. Compulsory resumption by the government should only occur when there is no alternative, and then full compensation should be made.

Owners and managers who have conserved natural resources often feel that their expertise is largely ignored. The voting majority are seen as coming from an urban, totally modified environment, with a theoretical understanding of environmental management, yet they have the temerity to demand that their directions are followed. The successful land manager can no longer be trusted.

“You will do it how I tell you, but at your own expense. Not only that, you will also document what you are doing or want to do, at your own expense, so that I can be satisfied that it is, or will be, all right.”

“In some cases you may also be required to obtain qualifications to satisfy me that you are fit and capable of doing what you want. The necessary training and examination will be at your expense and, if nothing else, this will provide additional employment.”

If owners of natural resources, such as native vegetation, are to forgo or modify their use of that resource, at their own cost, then there should be a requirement for other landowners with no such resources, to reinstate an appropriate proportion on their property.

Subsidies and the like rarely encourage efficiency but can foster dependence.

Compensation is not fair if it cannot be used to generate the same income as that foregone. For example: I am irrigating permanent plantings based on my current water allocation. Part of my water allocation is compulsorily resumed for environmental purposes. Compensation is paid at a deemed market rate for the water, but will compensation be paid for the developed area that is now non-productive? Does my property still have the capacity to provide my family with a living?

We have the National Parks and Wildlife Service preparing ‘recovery plans’ for threatened species, we have ‘vegetation management plans’ and ‘water management plans’ prepared by Regional Committees. These plans depend on the cooperation of landowners and land managers for their successful implementation. While ever owners and managers believe these plans subordinate production to conservation, rather than integrating conservation with utilisation, acceptance will be limited. The very best that these plans can hope for is to hold the resource at the current level. There will be no recovery. Demand for no net loss in the short term virtually guarantees net loss in the long term.

We need to nurture wise use of our natural resources and it is actually happening more than we are given to believe.

The environmental scare mongering practiced by extremist groups in the media (because it makes good copy) is not working.

If the vocal majority do not soon realise that our influence on the environment has been such that if we do not manage for what we want, species and resources will be lost even faster. Lock up conservation is not going to save species such as the “Plains Wanderer”, both the “Regent and Superb Parrots” and many more. And this management should not exclude ‘wise use’.

