

Redefining Environmentalism

**Rethinking what it means to be an
environmentalist**

Dr Jennifer Marohasy



Keynote Address: Inaugural Eureka Environment Forum,
Ballarat, 3 December 2004

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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.

— Michael Ghiselin.

Friends and Colleagues,

It was exactly 150 years ago today that there was a clash of cultures here at Ballarat at the Eureka diggings. Tired of over-regulation and its heavy-handed enforcement, a rag-tag band of miners took a stand against the establishment. They lost the battle but won the war.

At that time, there was limited sympathy for the miners among the general Australian community. Many saw the 'stockade episode' as the result of the extreme actions of a few. But history now remembers the event as the birthplace of Australian democracy, as well as being about freedom, enterprise and multiculturalism, standing by your mates and 'a fair go'. The miners took an oath under the Eureka flag: 'We swear by the Southern Cross to fight to defend our rights and liberties.'

One hundred and fifty years later, the time has come for another reckoning. As the Eureka Stockade of 150 years ago saw Irishmen fight alongside newly arrived migrants from many different nations, now is the time for academics, practical environmentalists and resource users from across Australia—miners, foresters, cattlemen, irrigators, bee-keepers, horse-riders, fishers—to take a stand against environmental fundamentalism.

Most Australians are completely unaware of what is going on in this country in the name of 'saving the environment'. Most Australians think that they are part of a secular nation that determines its public policies—including policies on environmental issues—largely on the basis of evidence.

It is assumed that if restrictions are being imposed on resource users—from fishermen losing their licences, to cattlemen being told to stop clearing re-growth—it is because our environment is being over-exploited and degraded.

To be sure, mistakes have been made in the past.

But the hard data, the official statistics, suggest that over-exploitation is now very much the exception rather than the rule in Australia. The areas able to be mined, logged, fished, grazed and farmed have been reducing, not increasing, over recent decades.

There are now caps on how much water can be extracted from rivers, and irrigators have been giving back allocations since at least 1993. As a nation, we have invested billions of dollars in everything from tertiary treatment of sewerage, to fish restocking, the phasing out of leaded petrol, adoption of minimum tillage cultivation, phasing out of organo-chlorine insecticides, and the list goes on. So much new legislation has been introduced. In most States, farmers now need a permit if they want to cut down a tree.

The hard data show that forest cover is generally increasing and that air and water quality are generally improving—at least up to the time of the January 2003 bushfires. This should not be surprising given the magnitude of the national investment in the environment.

What is depressing, though, is that it seems that the more resource users give up, the more

effort they invested in doing the right thing by the environment, the greater the subsequent demand by environmental activists. It is as though their ultimate objective is the phasing out of resource use altogether in Australia.

Environmental fundamentalists are indeed experts at closing things down. Then again, organizations such as Greenpeace have their origin in the protest movements of the 1960s.

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, that 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.

Environmental fundamentalists know how to lock up land, but not how to manage it. In early 2003, while the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace mounted a campaign to definitively close down broad-scale tree clearing in NSW focusing on perhaps 20,000 hectares of native vegetation, three million hectares burnt in the January 2003 bushfires. The scale and intensity of the bushfires was at least in part a consequence of their opposition to controlled burning. They are chasing bee-keepers out of forests full of weeds and feral animals—as

though this will make real land management issues go away.

It is time to take a stand.

But, too often, groups flounder, especially resource user groups who take on environmental activists. Too often, resource user groups don't really know what they represent in the context of the environment and they are portrayed as simply pro-industry and anti-environment.

If the Eureka Environment Forum is about the environment, then it must be underpinned by principles that have relevance and that can deliver real environmental benefits and real environmental protection. The bottom line is that we must know what we stand for.

In short, there is a need to rethink what it means to be an environmentalist.

The following five principles could guide a new approach to environmental protection and environmental management. The new approach would be optimistic and forward thinking. We could be environmentalists who smiled, instead of frowned. We would:

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 that cost/benefit analysis be a part of policy development.

These principles are not radical, at least not in the context of mainstream Australia, but they are radically different to the principles that underpin the strategies of organizations such as WWF, ACF and Greenpeace. It is these organizations that have come to dictate environment policy in Australia. These organizations have come to define what it means to be an environmentalist.

New concepts and social movements are rarely just accepted. They evolve—usually through a period of polarization and confront-

ation—during which time a minority struggles to convince society that its cause is true and just. So, be prepared to be called a ‘redneck’ and a reactionary. But also be prepared to fight the good fight for the environment.

I will spend most of the rest of this address expanding on, and explaining, the five principles that could underpin a new environmental movement. This is obviously a work in progress. I hope that the issues I raise are enthusiastically debated at this forum and into the future.

1. We value evidence

The first principle that I suggest the Eureka Environment Forum consider is a respect for evidence—that we value evidence. Environmental activists will tell you that they respect evidence, that their beliefs are science-based, that they are evidence-based. But there is much evidence to suggest that they simply ‘appeal’ to science to lend authority to their beliefs.

As I said, official government statistics shows that, across Australia, water quality in our rivers and streams is generally improving and that forest cover is actually increasing. Yet most people believe that water quality is deteriorating and forest cover reducing.

A major reason for the discrepancy between the evidence and the perception is that those setting the environmental agenda nationally have their eyes wide closed to the evidence—and they have tremendous budgets for the promotion of their beliefs.

By way of example, the policy document endorsed and launched by the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace and the ACF on 3 August 2004 in the lead-up to the 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 that salt levels have in fact more than halved over the last 20 years. The situation is clearly one of improvement, not deterioration. The three large environmental organizations who set the

environment agenda nationally have clearly used the term ‘current trends’ deceptively—in fact, they have told a big lie.

The prediction that Murray River water would be too salty to drink in 2020 was a forecast from a computer model made in 1988 that has since been proven wrong. This prediction does not, and never did, represent any ‘current trend’.

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 last Federal election, have outraged many environmentalists. They claim to be driven by a concern not only about the environment but for honesty, justice and truth generally. Yet, paradoxically, the policy platform of key environmentalists is fundamentally dishonest—at least when it comes to issues as important as the health of the Murray River. And one could, of course, add Tasmanian forests, fishing on the Great Barrier Reef—the list goes on.

I once thought that the answer lay in getting a crowbar under the eyelids of key environmentalists and pushing them open—so that they could see the evidence. But for the hardcore environmental fundamentalists it seems that their beliefs will never be troubled by the facts, because they have nothing whatsoever to do with facts.

If the problem were limited to the environmental industry, it might be tolerable. But the reality is that environmental science is a degree course at many Universities. And it has been my experience that many academics at these universities take up the blind moral crusading and, for example, join the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. This group essentially does the bidding for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The WWF has been described as essentially a new church complete with charity status and tax exemptions.

We have a situation where the beliefs taught to students in science faculties also form the basis for moral crusading in the broader community. The bottom line is that our universities are confusing an education in the new theology—naïve environmentalism—with an education in science, and the inherent conflict is by and large going unnoticed.

By way of a Murray River fishing example, the most widely quoted source of information on native fish status in the Murray–Darling Basin is a survey undertaken in 1995–96 by the NSW Department of Fisheries’ Scientists.

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 or freshwater catfish 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!

In material, standard-of-living terms, Western democracies have progressed and benefited enormously from the secularization of society and the power of independent science. At stake is the quality of our knowledge base—not to mention the protection of our environment.

2. We accept evolutionary theory and acknowledge that change is the only constant

I suggest that the second principle be an acceptance of evolutionary theory—an acceptance that competition, adaptation and natural selection (sometimes against a backdrop of catastrophic climate change) has driven the evolution of life on Earth.

While naïve environmentalists, for example the Australian Greens, give the impression that their policies are based on science, their ideological foundation could be a remapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths, including the concept of an original Eden. But

unlike early conservationists who saw Man as having an important management role in tending and looking after the landscape (remember Noah built the ark to save the animals from the flood), the Greens generally advocate a ‘hands off, leave it to Nature’ approach. Within this framework Man is in a state of sin wherever he attempts to modify or control the landscape, and technology is inherently bad.

The views of the Australian Greens accord somewhat with what was the accepted paradigm preceding the writings of Charles Darwin. Indeed Darwin began *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* with the comment that ‘Until recently the great majority of naturalists believed that species were immutable productions, and had been separately created’. Darwin then went on to present a powerful evidence-based case for the concept of evolution through natural selection.

It is now generally accepted by scientists that there was no original Eden—no original ‘pristine state’.

As I said, competition, adaptation and natural selection, sometimes against a backdrop of catastrophic climate change, have driven the evolution of life on Earth. In his paper ‘Perspective: Darwin, progress and economic principles’, biologist Michael Ghiselin makes the point that evolution is a form of progress with progress defined as the accumulation of useful innovations. He also makes the point that progress has no connotations of good or evil—what is ‘good, bad, or indifferent is not progress itself, but its consequences’.

It follows that if we place a premium on evidence, then we must embrace evolutionary theory and acknowledge the dynamic nature of landscapes and ecosystems.

Working from this principle, this premise, it becomes possible to understand the Australian landscape—especially our vast rangeland areas. These vast areas were actively managed as grassland and open woodland by the Aborigines through the use of fire. Beautiful biologically diverse productive grasslands support a unique flora and fauna.

With European settlement many of these landscapes were kept open through broad-scale tree clearing.

Remove fire and the capacity for broad-scale clearing from this landscape and the species assemblages—the ecology—naturally change. Whether this change is good or bad constitutes a value judgement, but to deny the change is to close one's eyes to the reality of the situation.

Denying the dynamic nature of landscapes is what the Queensland and Federal Governments did earlier this year when they banned broad-scale tree clearing in Queensland. A likely outcome will be a doubling of tree cover over an area of 50 million hectares and a significantly reduced livestock carrying capacity. No consideration has been given to the likely impact of a doubling of tree cover on surface water and groundwater supplies, potentially as far south as Adelaide.

In the USA and South Africa, increased tree cover has been shown to seriously affect stream flows and urban water supplies.

In advance of the legislation, the Queensland Government went to great trouble to suppress the findings of a report prepared by its own officers that detailed detrimental impacts of uncontrolled woodland thickening on a range of environmental and economic values, consequent to the clearing bans.

If we were to embrace a new environmentalism that acknowledged that landscapes are dynamic—that they evolve—then the need for active management of Australia's vast rangeland areas could be acknowledged. Research could focus on understanding the triggers for environmental change. Active management is often most critical and cost-effective during short periods of climate change. For example, widespread woody weed establishment occurs when there are above-average autumn rains in western Queensland.

Furthermore, by acknowledging that change is natural, it may become more evident that 'preservation', for example of grasslands and their unique bird fauna, will require active management.

This may seem counter-intuitive, but given that change is the only constant in the natural world, the protection of particular environments with particular species assemblages is likely to necessitate a high level of active management. Indeed, a new environmentalism based on the

notion of a dynamic landscape, may provide increased opportunities for activism where, in the past, for example, policies have virtually promoted neglect in some National Parks.

3. We subscribe to the dual goals of healthy and biologically diverse, rather than pristine, environments

By way of introduction to the third principle, let me tell you about some of the work I did with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries Fisheries Group when I worked for the Queensland Sugar Industry.

During the late 1990s, there were about 5,500 sugar cane farmers in Queensland with about 10 per cent, or 550, of these farms adjacent to estuarine areas. I struck a deal with officers from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries Fisheries Group in the development of a new system and philosophy for the maintenance of drains on these cane farms which recognized that these artificial on-farm waterways were potentially valuable fishery habitat.

We determined that long-term benefits could accrue from the active management of these areas, including the periodic removal of mangroves and sediment (practices that had been prohibited under the *Fisheries Act 1994*) as well as through the incorporation of artificial wetlands, retention and sediment ponds. A critical issue was timing the on-farm management works in accordance with the flowering/fruiting cycle of marine plants and the migration patterns of local fish species.

Paradoxically, at the same time that we were advocating healthy, biologically diverse waterways, including the removal of floodgates and a freer water exchange between on-farm drains and adjacent rivers and streams, the Federal Government was drawing up legislation to isolate sugarcane farms within coastal catchments and insist that there be a single point of water discharge. This was consequent to overarching policies developed at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA).

The GBRMPA officers could not see any habitat value in better on-farm drainage management—to them, farms were unnatural

and thus a sore on the landscape; something to be isolated, contained and eventually removed. But if we subscribe to the dual goals of healthy and biologically diverse environments, as opposed to pristine ones, it is possible to recognize the inherent value and beauty of managed environments—even waterways on cane farms.

What is natural anyway? How does one accurately define ‘pristine’? If pristine means in its ‘original condition’, then the condition how long ago? Government policy, legislation and regulation often nominate pre-European settlement with the date 1750 or 1850 as the benchmark. But would it not be as theoretically relevant to nominate a period when dinosaurs trotted across Australia and carbon dioxide levels were about twice what they are today?

As a nation, we have not thought through how we want our landscape—forests, waterways, grasslands and rangelands—to be managed, or the consequences of not managing them. In addition, we have not thought through the implications of ‘healthy’ as opposed to ‘pristine’. In the context of the Murray River, ‘pristine’ or ‘natural’ during drought may equal dead fish and stressed red gums as surface water recedes and groundwater levels drop.

Many government officers are currently compiling environmental indicators with a focus on the fanciful concept of ‘pristine’ rather than ‘healthy’ with some very illogical results. 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 in 2001 environmental scientists made their comparisons relative to a purportedly completely natural, pristine environment defined as pre-European settlement—but well-watered. In contrast, the 1980s’ study accepted that in the Murray there would be a dominance of insect species that favoured slow water because the River is highly regulated. The choice of comparison was different and that is why the 2001 study ensured that the river would fail the ‘pristine’ test—even if large healthy insect populations were found—because the 2001

study did not acknowledge the changed flow regime.

In *The Skeptical Environmentalist—Measuring the Real State of the World*, Bjørn Lomborg suggests that we should focus on trends, in particular the goal of an ‘improving trend’. The problem with this approach, however, is that there is actually such a thing as too many kangaroos and dingoes, 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 there are too many trees. A better approach might be the dual goals of ‘healthy’ and ‘biologically diverse’.

4. We value technological innovation

In 1968, when the world’s population was about 3 billion, renowned environmentalist Professor 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 support 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 this regard, Australian producers are extremely competitive, able to produce, on average, for example, significantly more rice, sugar and cotton per hectare of land and megalitre of water, than farmers in any other region of the world. The next big efficiency gains in terms of reducing water use and also reducing

pesticide inputs—that is, in terms of reducing our ecological footprint—will potentially come from genetically modified (GM) crops. Yet the Australian environment establishment is anti-GM because it is essentially anti-innovation, anti-technology, anti-change. The tangible environmental benefits of GM are being ignored because it seems that the environmental establishment hates technology more than it cares about the environment.

Given the global situation and the reality that there will always be climate change, the opposition of the Australian Greens, and naïve environmentalists more generally, to GM crops is untenable and a clear illustration of their narrow and backward-looking approach to environmental protection. If we redefined our approach to environmentalism as progressive, optimistic and evidence-based, GM crops could be seen as a ‘useful innovation’, an example of how technology can facilitate the production of more from less and in this way reduce our ecological footprint and our need to cultivate more land.

5. Issues need to be prioritized

In the context of the recent Federal election, Greenpeace, the ACF and the Wilderness Society nominated saving the Murray River (basically taking water from irrigators), ending logging of old-growth forests in Tasmania (closing down forestry in Tasmania) and ‘tackling’ climate change as the three key environmental issues for Australia. This was not the outcome of a process of selecting priorities based on environmental need or rigorous cost-to-benefit assessment.

If we were to properly prioritize issues, then better management of weeds and feral animals and bushfires would no doubt be high on the list.

In terms of outright destruction to wilderness areas, including old growth forest and rare and endangered species, the 2003 bushfires were an environmental catastrophe. As I have said, more than three million hectares were incinerated, including three-quarters of Kosciusko National Park. Compare this with annual clearing rates of native vegetation by farmers in NSW and Victoria amounting to fewer than 20,000 hectares.

Naïve environmentalists seem surprisingly uninterested in bushfires as an environmental issue and, at the same time, are reluctant to endorse an acceptable level of controlled burning for hazard reduction. The many reports published since last year’s Canberra fires suggest that advances in fire science and fire-fighting technology are being negated by a political reluctance to reduce massive fuel build-ups, with the problem only exacerbated as more land is declared National Park.

In conclusion

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, Australian governments have been recruited into implementing the vision of environmental activists—essentially the visions of organizations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation. These organizations don’t undertake much tree planting or grow any organic food. 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 and where resource use is heavily regulated or prohibited.

In its report, ‘Taming the Panda: The Relationship between WWF Australia and the Howard Government’, the Australia Institute shows that, over the last 11 years, funding to WWF has increased by more than 500 per cent and is now around \$11 million. A significant proportion of WWF Australia’s growth over the past 11 years can be attributed to revenues from Federal Government sources, rising from around \$740,000 in 1995–96 to a high of almost \$3.7 million in 2001–02. In total, WWF Australia has received over \$15 million in government grants in the period 1996–2003, with almost \$13.5 million of this having been awarded between 1998–99 and 2002–03!

There is an urgent need for a new vision, a practical vision so that time and money can be prioritized and spent addressing real environmental issues in a solution-focused way. But this will require us to go back to first

principles and rethink what it means to be an environmentalist.

I will conclude where I began—with the suggestion that we begin with the following five principles. We would:

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.

If we are to form a new movement, and if the foregoing five principles are to underpin our actions,¹ and if we are to call ourselves environmentalists, then we would be in the process of redefining what it is to be an environmentalist. Outcomes might be as radical as suggesting that

if environmentalism respects evidence and is about reducing one's ecological footprint, then it is better to buy GM than organic. It could be about determining that it is better to harvest a senescing forest than letting it rot. Indeed, communities of forest animals, like communities of the liberal minded, often flourish after a sweeping away of obstacles to free growth.

Rethinking what it means to be an environmentalist, both in accordance with how natural systems actually operate and in terms of promoting technologies and systems that will tangibly reduce our ecological footprint, would indeed be an ambitious undertaking. It would involve a belief in the long-range power of ideas and a preparedness to let change run its course, even if we cannot predict where, exactly, it will lead. It would involve reconsidering the evidence from ecology and evolutionary biology, but also making value judgements based on a very different vision for the future.

It would also involve taking a bold stand, as the small miners did here in Ballarat exactly 150 years ago.

Thank you.

Note

1 On the 21 December 2004, the Interim Board of the newly formed Australian Environment Foundation (AEF) endorsed the following six principles:

- *Evidence*: We believe the environment is best served when policies and decisions are made on the basis of science and evidence.
- *Choice*: We recognize the need for prioritization based on risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis.
- *Technology*: We value technological innovation and its contribution to environmental protection.
- *Management*: We accept the dynamic nature of landscapes and that active management of the environment is often necessary.
- *Healthy and Biologically Diverse*: Our dual goals are for a healthy and biologically diverse environment.
- *People*: We believe that the needs and aspirations of people should receive due consideration. The AEF will be a non-profit, membership-based Australian environmental group that will take an evidence-based, solution-focused approach to environmental issues.