



EIANZ CONFERENCE

29 October 2015

Opening remarks

Ladies and gentlemen - colleagues from the environment profession

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Noongar People, their elders past and present; the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, the people who are its contemporary custodians.

On behalf of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand welcome to the 2015 conference.

It is no coincidence that this conference is being held in Western Australia, for this part of Australia has been at the forefront of environmental protection and management in Australia.

A diverse and ancient landscape with a rich indigenous culture, industries that exploit its mineral wealth, primary production from its soils and waters, expanding tourism activities, and the major western urban centre in Australia.

The southwest of Western Australia is not only a popular tourist destination, it is an internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot.

A similarly extensive biodiversity hotspot is spread across 270,197 km² of the islands of the New Zealand archipelago.

'Biodiversity hotspot' is a term coined by British environmentalist Norman Myers, to describe an area of landscape where the endemic speciation exceeds 0.5% or 1500 vascular plants, and 30% or less of its original vegetation cover remains.

Areas that are significant refugia for the world's biodiversity and under threat.

There are 34 such areas around the world, supporting nearly 60% of the world's plant, bird, mammal, reptile, and amphibian species, with a very high share of endemic species.

This is but one of the reasons why there is much to observe that is good practice environmental management in Western Australia.

There are reminders here of the challenges that communities still face in finding public support for environmental policies that build resilience, facilitate adaptation, and assure the ecological sustainability of the planet.

I am going to preface this conference with some brief remarks to set the scene and start us thinking about challenging the 'status quo' and what that might mean for good practice environmental management and environmental practitioners.

Challenging the 'status quo'

The 'status quo' is the norm.

It is doing things the way that we have always done them.

It is the safe, comfortable, predictable, cozy, habitual reality that people have worked hard to create, and are attached to for many reasons.

The impact of not challenging the 'status quo' is a lack of innovation and adaptation in environmental management practice.

How do we know whether we are applying good practice environmental management, if we do not test and challenge the 'status quo'?

Challenging the 'status quo' must be founded in good science, not rhetoric.

Challenging the 'status quo' is fundamentally about leadership.

Leaders look forward, question, wonder, suppose, read, research, investigate, and create better practices.

Leaders connect with others over the future that is desired and possible.

Challenging the 'status quo' involves many skills.

- The ability to see trends that are developing and their potential impacts
- Forecasting based on imaginative thinking and intuition
- Pattern recognition, and the deliberate study of how others are addressing similar problems
- Knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of the 'status quo'
- Timeliness of action to innovate and change before the obsolescence of the 'status quo' becomes a crisis.

As environmental practitioners we all need to cultivate the courage and conviction to innovate, persuade and act – we all need to challenge the 'status quo' if we are to achieve excellence in environmental practice.

Environmental practitioners need to be leaders.

An international context

At a global level we have just seen the conclusion of the seventieth session of the United Nations general assembly which adopted "transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development".

The agenda ambitiously focuses on five key aspects of building a sustainable future – people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships.

Reporting of this global agenda and its challenges and opportunities, has been overtaken by the critically important international debate

around a new universal climate change agreement - an agreement that will be finalised when governments meet at the Paris climate change summit from 30 November to 11 December 2015.

Nevertheless, "transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development", is the context within which global action will be pursued to achieve a sustainable future for the planet.

It focuses on the eradication of poverty so that people can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality, and in a healthy environment.

It focuses on protecting the planet from degradation so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.

It is the context in which environmental management practice will be challenged and shaped, and our scientific understanding of the global environment tested.

That having been said, it is interesting to note the emphasis that is given to this wide ranging and influential agreement on the Australian department of foreign affairs website:

- *"The 2030 agenda is non-binding but has unprecedented buy-in as a result of consultation and negotiations involving all 193 un member states, the private sector and civil society."*
(we can do what we like)
- *"The 2030 agenda helps Australia in advocating for a strong focus on economic growth and development in the indo-pacific region, and in promoting investment priorities including gender equality, governance and strengthening tax systems."*
(growth and development is what counts not social wellbeing and the sustainable management of the environment)

Could I suggest that this characterises the 'status quo' in Australia and New Zealand.

Swiss think tank, humanistic management centre, has this to say on the 'status quo':

"The success story of market economies has produced negative side effects that have become too grave to be ignored by simply claiming that the pro's outweigh the con's."

"We are consuming substantially more natural resources than the earth can replenish which has led us to a situation where we, speaking in financial terms, live off our planetary capital, rather than consuming within the limits of the interest it generates."

"..... Ongoing business success is contingent upon the public license to operate, upon the organization having and maintaining public legitimacy."¹

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development sets out 169 targets that Australia and New Zealand have supported. They include:

- *"Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change,, and that progressively improve land and soil quality" (2.4)*
- *"Improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials," (6.3)*
- *"Protect and restore water-related ecosystems" (6.6)*
- *"Achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources" (12.2)*
- *"Achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle,, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil" (12.4)*
- *"Substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse" (12.5)*
- *"Sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience," (14.2)*

¹ *"Challenges to the status quo of the Global Economy"*, Humanistic Management Centre, http://www.humanisticmanagement.org/cgi-bin/adframe/about_humanistic_management/challenges_to_the_status_quo_of_the_global_economy/index.html (Accessed 20 October 2015)

- *“Conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas,” (14.5)*
- *“Ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services,” (15.1)*
- *15.5 take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species*

These are the aspirations of the global community for ‘spaceship earth’. In many respects they constitute the ‘status quo’. When you strip away the nuances of international diplomacy, the goals and targets of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development are all good things that we know already will improve the health of the planet.

The key challenge is what needs to change about current environmental management practice in Australia and New Zealand that will allow us to look back in 2030, and see what we have achieved that significantly contributes to the more sustainable management of the planet.

Environmental problems and issues continue to be firmly on business, community and political agendas across Australia and New Zealand.

Changes in political agendas disrupt our focus on finding and investing in long term good practice environmental management. In this cycle of swings and roundabouts, there is little evidence of the bipartisan approach needed for long term investment in the conservation and sustainable management of ecological resources.

Do we really care enough to take the action necessary to ensure a sustainable future for ourselves and the planet?

How can we, as environmental practitioners, use this international agenda to drive change in environmental management practice?

Few, at the time, foresaw that the passage of *The National Environmental Policy Act (1969)* (NEPA) in the USA would have such a profound impact on the practice of environmental management around the world.

With thousands of environmental assessments prepared annually around the globe, the influence of NEPA, and the environmental assessment process that it mandated, has been all pervasive.

Environmental impact assessment has become a mandatory box that must be ticked off, just like financial due diligence, for a project to proceed.

But what has this process really achieved?

It has brought us complex procedural rules that often trip us up in their execution.

It has seen the investment of billions of dollars in the compilation of information about environmental conditions associated with particular projects.

Information that is often poorly analysed and synthesised.

Information that is relatively inaccessible for other purposes associated with the management of the environment.

Information that ministers in governments and other decision makers often described as too uncertain to allow action to change the 'status quo'.²

We invest everything in the assessment of proposals and very little in determining whether:

- Projects had the environmental effects predicted

² *"Strengthening the Role of Science in the Environmental Decision-Making Processes of Executive Government"*, Briony M Lalor and Gordon M Hickey, *Organisation and Environment* 2014 Vol 27(2), pgs 161 – 180.

- The conditions of approvals granted are being complied with
- Whether the conditions of approval were efficacious in achieving the desired environmental outcomes

In an ABC interview, professor Richie Howitt from the department of environment and geography at Macquarie University said – “once you’ve got a project approval, there’s a very poor history of going back and checking whether the impacts that were predicted have occurred or haven’t occurred, and whether the impact management processes proposed have been adequate or need to be reviewed.”³

While the practice of environmental assessment has moved on to embrace more strategic levels of assessment, it remains focussed on assessment.

It is time to shift the paradigm to one that involves the regular review of performance rather than aspiration.

The issue for environmental practitioners is that such a paradigm shift involves challenging the ‘status quo’ around which we have built our expertise and employment.

Are we as professional environmental practitioners prepared to advise governments, industry the community that environmental assessments should be better scoped to focus on the critical environmental issues associated with a project?

Are we as professional environmental practitioners prepared to advocate to governments, industry and the community that scarce financial resources would be better spent in regularly monitoring and periodically reviewing the environmental consequences of projects?

‘State of the environment reporting’, whether that be at a jurisdiction level, or on an ecosystem basis, is recognised as a valuable tool in raising awareness and reporting progress in managing the environment.

³ “Do environmental assessments protect the environment?”, Bianca Nogrady, ABC, 6 March 2013 - <http://www.abc.net.au/environment/articles/2013/03/06/3703819.htm> (Accessed 20 October 2015)

Why then do we place so much emphasis on project assessment, and eschew the opportunity to embed environmental performance monitoring, reporting and review into project operations.

Would we as professional environmental practitioners achieve better environmental outcomes through the advocacy of a regulatory framework that placed less emphasis on environmental assessment and more on the implementation of environmental management systems and their independent third party review?

The collapse of the extractive resources boom has been a salutary reminder to environmental practitioners in Australia that employment in their chosen profession that is focussed on an approval process can be fragile.

Would we as environmental professionals build a more stable employment environment if the roles of environmental practitioners were better embedded, not just at the preliminaries for projects, but throughout their life cycle?

Environmental practitioners, whether working for governments, industry or the community, are an essential component of the regulatory systems that assure the community of environmental performance and outcomes.

Requirements for documentation relied on in other professional spheres to be certified is common place.

Why then should the documentation relied on in environmental assessment, approvals, monitoring and compliance not also be certified by 'suitably qualified' persons for consistency with legislative requirements and good practice environmental management standards?

Would such an approach not go a long way towards lifting the standard of environmental performance, and improving environmental outcomes?

Do we as environmental practitioners care enough to accept the professional discipline of assuring the community about the relevance and quality of the work that we do?

Conclusion

Caring about things however is not enough, we need to translate our concern into action to ensure that the ecological resources of the world are protected and sustainably managed for the benefit of humanity.

Now is the time for environmental practitioners working in government, industry and the community, to insist on the role of good science and good practice environmental management as the foundation of governance and action, in the same way that we accept the professional counsel of engineers, architects, lawyers and accountants in decision making.

Over the next two days we will hear from leading environmental scholars and practitioners about the challenges we face, and the things that we can do, to tread more lightly on the face of this planet.

We will hear from Indigenous Australians about how the knowledge of their forebears, passed down through the ages in the landscape itself, can inform good practice environmental management.

Through the interactive sessions we will have an opportunity to frame a conference declaration – a statement of issues and solutions that challenges the 'status quo'

The Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand welcomes you all to this opportunity for discourse, and the forging of new partnerships in the professional pursuit of sound environmental policy and good practice environmental management.

Thank you.