

The Productivity Commission

A response to your draft report on the impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations

Introduction:

My name is Wally Peart and I have been involved in practical conservation and sustainable farming for 40 years. During that time I have served on the national boards of Greening Australia and Landcare Australia and was the inaugural chairman of Landcare Queensland. I have also served as chairman of the N.F.F. conservation committee.

At present the people who own and work the land are so disenfranchised in the conservation debate that I feel your report is the only forum where our voice is likely to be heard.

Landcare:

When the Landcare movement started there was enormous good will and determination to farm sustainably and leave enough habitat areas for wild life to thrive. Hundreds of branches were formed throughout Australia and great progress was made. We felt that through education and understanding and demonstration we could achieve 90% of what needed to be done and perhaps some regulation would eventually be required to bring the remaining 10% into line. With the latest "jack boot" approach by government with many regulations that only impact on the people who have done the correct thing and left some trees, etc., we feel deceived and betrayed. The good will we nurtured has disappeared and the government dangles titbits of "impossible funny money" in front of us to try and get us to comply with somebody's idea of conservation.

Meanwhile the people who have cleared from fence to fence have no imposition on them at all.

Contrary effect of regulation:

I find it amazing how often Government regulation has exactly the opposite effect of that required. No doubt there was panic clearing and people cleared country would not have and intensified their clearing programmes. Yesterday I was ploughing a paddock to thin the regrowth. I cell graze and wanted shade in each paddock for 2000 cattle so many trees were left. This country has farming potential but by leaving so many trees I've made it permanent grazing country and devalued its worth. The neighbour has cleared from fence to fence and has all options open to him and can sell it as a farming block. The incentive to clear all the trees is there.

Dishonesty:

The dishonesty of some of the people involved in the debate is breathtaking. Even Professor Possingham and his 420 signatories to the Brigalow declaration claimed there was large scale destruction of wetlands and grasslands". If farmers have done anything they have increased the area of wetlands and grasslands dramatically. On my home farm alone there is now 180 hectares of wetlands where previously there was none. What these academics don't understand is that you can have a virtual desert covered in trees. When I took up this block, "Sunnyholt", 40 years ago, it had 600 trees per acre on it, no water for many miles and the dingoes had not been controlled for 100 years. Bird life was very scarce because of the distance to water and the dingoes had eaten themselves into starvation ; they were so poorly they could hardly get out of your way. Now, birds abound on the property with over 200 species identified and the wildlife is abundant.

When the land was covered in trees there were breakaway gullies everywhere; now there is good grass cover and the gullies have mostly disappeared. It is a myth that trees stop water erosion: it is grass that stops water erosion.

Trust:

Another casualty in the present debate is trust. There was a time when I would proudly show my property and its development to anyone who was interested. One man came to visit and was very interested in softwood scrub and I hosted him and showed around two properties. Subsequently, he

nominated one property as a national park and I eventually lost it and two thirds of the other property was nominated and listed on the Register of the National Estate with the Australian Heritage Commission. Now I have to be very careful whom I invite onto the place; especially the Catchment Management people, many of whom have aims totally contrary to the interests of the producer. They have been educated to believe that trees will save the planet but it is primarily grass that will keep the planet healthy. They believe diversity above the soil is everything but it is biodiversity under the soil that is most important.

Heritage Commission:

I wish, also, to comment on the activities of the Australian Heritage Commission. As stated earlier, two thirds of my freehold land was listed on the National Estate in 1980. I wasn't informed of the listing or given a chance to object. I discovered it had been listed, quite by chance, in 1996. I tried to have it removed from the register. The Act states that I should be consulted and informed and given a chance to object; however at the end of the act is a catch - all phrase that says that if none of the above is done it does not alter the listing. I presume that I was deliberately not informed and kept in the dark to prevent me objecting. When I eventually learned of the listing and asked why it was listed I was informed it was in natural condition and contained attractive sandstone cliff faces. I informed them that, within a radius of 80km from this area there was approximately 3000km of sandstone cliffs in State National Parks and therefore preserved. The commission was not impressed or moved. I discovered there was absolute duplication between the Heritage Commission and the State National Parks and rather than co-operation there seemed to be animosity between the two. It seems to me most of the work of the Heritage Commission is duplicated elsewhere and a strong case could be put for it to be decommissioned. It should certainly withdraw from the listing of rural land.

At present the Heritage Commission has no power over listed areas. However, in 1996 they commissioned the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (now known as the World Conservation Union) to produce the "Australian Natural Heritage Charter". This charter suggests all kinds of controls and sits alongside the act waiting for Government to incorporate it into the act.

Grass vs. Trees:

Contrary to the belief of many environmentalists grass is designed to be eaten and thrives under a regime of periodic grazing. Most wildlife rely on grass for their existence; very few browse trees. If trees are allowed to get too thick, none will reach their potential size.

Three years ago I went on a five - day horseback ride through the wilderness areas of the Snowy River. In five days I saw two kangaroos, two rabbits, two snakes and we heard quite a few dingoes. These areas were overgrown and moribund and nothing wanted to live there. The trash on the ground was so thick; a disaster waiting to happen that did happen. How often does this occur before people realise that locking country up makes it unhealthy and eventually leads to wildfires.

Kangaroos:

During the recent drought I supported approximately 250 000 kangaroos at an estimated cost of \$1 000 000. I applied to the relevant department for permission to shoot some of them and they gave me permission to shoot 400. This is an area that would have been totally dry and supported nothing prior to European settlement. No one wants to pay for the environmental aspirations of the city - based masses resulting in the farmers shouldering the costs.

Government:

State and Federal Government argue about responsibilities and costs. Queensland State Government even formatted a compensation scheme for people who were not allowed to clear land but it is an assistance package; if you can afford to give your uncleared land away that is what happens. The right to develop which many people bought will be taken without compensation.

Conclusions:

1. Environmental outcomes required by Government should be paid for by Government.
2. Farmers should be rewarded for achieving good environmental outcomes.
3. Farmers with desirable environmental records should be given a licence to farm and not be subject to regulations.
4. If the ultimate aim of many regulations is to allow the Federal Government to sign the Kyoto Agreement we should be informed and the costs be borne by the public.
5. Most environmental outcomes have to be delivered by farmers so they should have a majority in the decision making process.
6. Many environmentalists operate on the basis that "if you say it often enough it becomes a fact". Much more scientific rigour should be put into environmental decisions.
7. To achieve some environmental outcomes it will require giving direct benefit to the farmers; this should be done rather than always emphasising community benefit.
8. If the public thinks a farmer has over cleared he should be fully compensated to replant part of his farm.
9. More emphasis should be put on biodiversity under the soil. The world has lost many animals and plants and survived but if the soil dies we all die.
10. More work should be done on the role of grass and grazing in the carbon cycle.
11. It should be recognised that farmers are a minority group that needs protection. The Queensland political division, for example, is dangerous.
12. Government should move quickly to counter misinformation that affects our trade such as the threatened species misinformation that wrecked the kangaroo trade with the U.K.
13. The Heritage Commission's role in listing rural land should cease and be left entirely to the State National Parks.
14. Landcare and Greening Australia should be amalgamated to stop duplication and save money.
15. Total bans on tree clearing should be lifted and replaced with targeted developmental schemes with lots of trade offs and incentives to achieve required outcomes.
16. I wish to thank the commission for the opportunity to present this petition.

Yours faithfully

Wally Peart
Queensland