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A PRESENTATION BY
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EARTH'S FUTURE – RIDING CHANGE IN A POPULATED WORLD

By Don Burke, Chairman, Australian Environment Foundation

INTRODUCTION

When I became Chair of the AEF I called for a new approach to environmental issues.

I explained that the established environment groups are too preoccupied with headlines and publicity stunts rather than the hard work of finding enduring solutions.

They are poor at following through, and often seem unreasonably prejudiced against people and industry.

The Australian Environment Foundation wants to promote honest debate and discussion and a more evidence-based approach.

In my first interview I explained that it is not good to just keep declaring new National Park and then, as the old conservation movement too often does, decamped without asking whether the resources or the will were there to properly maintain these areas.

A result has been National Parks full of feral weeds and prone to destructive wild fires.

The AEF is potentially the beginnings of a whole new environment movement.

On behalf of the organisation and its growing list of members – I would like to welcome you here today to our first conference.

RIDING CHANGE

The greatest threat is us: myself, all of you here today and everyone else. We are all aware that animal and plant species are becoming extinct at a cataclysmically rapid rate. We are aware that vast areas of our planet are being damaged. We know that we are not managing our planet well at all.

Some say that there is a real possibility that severe climate change could happen very soon. They say the world's ability to buffer climatic change to minimise rapid temperature fluctuations, could collapse leading to horrific consequences.

At this stage the AEF has not developed a policy on this but I believe that we simply cannot afford to ignore the issue.

We remain as the greatest threat because we, the citizens of planet earth are not acting together to sort things out. These must not be allowed to be political issues. These can't be issues of conservationists versus farmers or of any group fighting with others. We must act co-operatively as a united group.

The conservation movement has done a superb job of alerting the world to the problems caused by our modern civilisation. At first, conservation warriors fighting government, industries and even progress were critically important in alerting the world to what was happening.

That time has passed.

It's now the time to come together to get the job of saving the planet done.

I believe that we need to adopt radically different thinking to cope with our second phase of saving the world.

I have been a part of a few different environment groups. I was a National Director of Landcare. Landcare has achieved a lot in the context in which it operates, but there is a need for a group that is also concerned with the big global issues. A group that recognises change is the only constant and that is prepared to ride change.

Even if we close our eyes and hold our breath and squeeze really tight, the world will not stand still.

It is changing very rapidly now due to man's interference. There is a need to put a saddle on and ride the change, and ride it hard for the best outcomes for the environment and also for people.

THE AEF OVER THE LAST YEAR

Since I became Chair of the AEF we have made public comment on two key issues: the need to start recycling water and also the need to think about global warming and our energy future.

On behalf of the AEF I recently called for a significant expansion of the federal government's inquiry into nuclear energy, as the current review will not produce a sufficiently accurate or useful comparison between the various energy generating options.

We need to know:

1. What is the 'start to finish' likely cost of all current forms of electricity generation?
2. What is the 'start to finish' likely cost of emerging electricity generation technologies, including alternative forms of nuclear power generation, as well as coal, gas, hydro, solar, tidal, wind, and biomass?
3. What is the 'start to finish' likely carbon balance from each of the current and emerging viable electricity generation technologies?

We are an environment group not frightened of nuclear energy, but we want it considered relative to other options.

Thinking about water; waste water recycling is inevitable:

I supported a 'Yes' for Toowoomba. Toowoomba could have been the first Australian city to recycle sewage as drinking water.

Major cities have so far failed to address the issues of water recycling.

The best studies indicate that 40 percent of Brisbane's water needs can be met through recycling. So why procrastinate? Why not just get on with the job of providing people with first grade water from a recycling plant?

POPULATION

Current projections suggest that Australia's population will peak at between 25 and 27 million around 2050 before beginning to slowly decline.

The implications of a slowing of Australia's population growth rate needs to be fully understood by the broader community.

But between now and 2050 where do we put the additional people? How do we provide them with water?

Why don't we have a national population policy? Everyone knows population is a key issue, but no one wants to talk about it.

We humans represent an awful threat to plants and animals. There are too many of us living the wrong way in the wrong places. Population policy has a huge impact on environments. The concept of decentralisation in Australia has failed spectacularly. After all, who wants to go into the wilderness for no reason? Ask Moses.

People want to live in fun areas where good jobs, good shops, good food, good roads and, above all, good people are close at hand. Today, so many farming lads are trying to stay on the land when most of the young girls have left for the city. The parties aren't parties any more.

Sydney is a classic example of city planning and population distribution gone mad. Sydney just creeps out and out, spreading like a melanoma. Around one million people are moving into Sydney's northwest sector (around Rouse Hill and beyond). Sydney has long since outgrown its water supply. While a piddling amount of water is recycled in the northwest sector, overall, Sydney can't supply the water to another million people.

And who sells the misplaced million their land? The state government via Landcom. The state government earns vast sums of money by misdirecting our population growth.

Surely we need better committees controlling population distribution. We need to look for sexy areas for people to live where they can get a job, have fun, and get water without destroying the local environment. This is not happening at the moment. Population policy at all levels has a huge impact on our environment, and most of the impact is far more negative than it could be.

Then there are global population issues. What is the role for Australia in feeding, clothing and providing energy to the rapidly growing Asian economies? How do we cope with legitimate human aspirations in a world of limited resources?

THE NEW ERA

Change is now sweeping the world at an incredibly rapid rate. Far too fast for the world to cope. Over the last 200 years, 17 mammal species are thought to have become extinct in Australia. Less than 25 species have become extinct in the rest of the world during that period. That is, Australian mammalian extinctions represent 40% of the world total since 1800.

Around 100 species of vascular plants have also become extinct in Australia over that period as against a total of 140 in continental USA, Europe and Southern Africa.

It is thought that around 7,723 animal species are endangered worldwide and around 639 are endangered in Australia. Approximately 8390 plant species are endangered worldwide and about 56 are endangered in Australia.

We need to throw a saddle on this wild beast of change and ride it hard for the best outcomes.

Less than 5% of Australia lies within National Parks. Most of the rest is privately owned. The National Parks are too small, too separated and too poorly run to play the necessary part in saving Australia. If we are to save Australia, we must do it mostly on private property.

For this to happen, all groups of citizens need to work together. Only a successful farmer can afford to preserve or even manage the key environmental parts of his or her land. You need money and expertise to sustainably manage Australia.

The days of conservationists being at war with governments, farmers, developers, the fishing industry, etc must end. The battle to save the world will be won by co-operation and collaboration, not by protests. You could well argue that the older conservation groups are now obsolete. They have created their own obsolescence by winning stage one of the fight to save the world. They must now change to continue to be effective.

WOODY WEEDS

Vast areas of western NSW and also Queensland are being degraded by woody weeds.

This is a classic example of futile behaviour by conservationists. They have championed the case against tree clearing without distinguishing between good and bad trees.

Just last week I saw vast areas of Western NSW where grasslands that were once fire managed by the aboriginal people have changed into scrublands. Native shrubs and trees have spread into these grasslands and changed the whole ecosystem. “So what?” you might say. “Aren’t native plants the rightful heirs to our land?”

This is the whole point of my presentation: we need to take ownership of our country. We need to actively manage our land much as the aboriginal people did. Vast areas that were once grassy plains dotted with trees were maintained that way for over 40,000 years. Species of lizards, snakes, marsupials and birds adapted to suit that land.

The huge areas now dominated by shrubs and trees (the so-called woody weeds) are not examples of best practice environmental management. The trees are spindly and short of water. In their quest for enough water, their roots have created desert-like zones under the trees which in turn leads to almost no grass growth. This leads to serious erosion issues during periods of rain.

On top of that, these areas support far less native animals, especially bird species. Often the growth of shrubs is near monoculture. Just a handful of species dominating the land. This is quite unsuited to supporting a balanced range of animal species.

Bloody farmers you might say. Well, not so. I checked out the area around Nyngan. Here the farmers have worked with scientists, government department land experts and conservationists to come up with a land plan that works for the environment and farms. Whenever reasonable compromises are achieved, the conservationists and the government are shifting the goal posts. The farmers are prepared to allocate 15% of their land to purely random native plant growth. On top of

that, much of the rest for most of the time will be filled with native grassland pastures ideal for both sheep and much of the original wildlife.

This leads to an average cover of 34% of native scrubland in the area. Remember that the farmers are not using 15% of their land at all. Would you be prepared to surrender 15% of your block of land to the government?

The government wants at least 30% of the land, thus rendering the farms almost unprofitable. If the farms don't make a profit, how can the farmers afford to help the environment?

And if farmers walk off their land, who manages it? National Parks groups are unable to properly manage their existing lands that they have. Governments could not afford to allocate huge amounts of extra money to National Parks.

This sort of conflict has one significant outcome: large areas of our land are becoming more degraded year by year. The lack of co-operation and pro-active land management represents a huge threat to our country.

TOWARDS A MORE HUMBLE FUTURE

Our future may well be an entirely different thing than we envisage. Nature thinks laterally, we tend to think paternally. We often assume that nature is dumb, that it just can't cope and dies out and that we know best. We don't. In so many areas nature is adapting, coping, inventing and moving on. Conservationists, by and large, can't cope with this and seem to be in denial.

Inside my house, geckoes colonise areas on walls and eat house insects, as do huntsman spiders. Perron's tree frogs colonise our bathroom and live beside the vanity cupboard. Outside spiders have adapted to web across our windows to catch insects attracted by our lights. Small insectivorous birds including pardalotes have learnt to hunt insects in the dead of night around our dichroic garden lights.

We have finches eating our (intentionally planted) garden weeds. Double-bars and redheads eat panic veldt grass and guinea grass seeds. We have countless frogs in our fishponds.

When I visited the town of Theodore in Queensland I found large areas of cotton farms. Conservationists would hate these monocultures, yet vast clouds of zebra and other finches were living there. They were feeding on the weed guinea grass and doing very well.

I have seen red rumped grass parrots in the grounds of the Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney eating bread scraps and competing well against feral sparrows and pigeons.

What a superb future Australia could have if our wildlife adapts to our cities, suburbs and farms. Yet, when we help the wildlife to hang on while they learn the new landscape, some environmental groups say you should never put seed out for wild finches. How else can the poor little buggers have enough time to cope? How else can they hang on to their traditional territory if we have removed their food plants or mowed off their seed heads?

Conservation groups can't cope with all of this. With rainbow lorikeets existing in vast numbers now due to our nectar-laden gardens. There are far more of these beautiful birds now than when Captain Cook arrived. I would urge you all to read Tim Lowe's excellent book "Feral Future" to get a better grip on these issues.

A LEAST WORST OUTCOME

Sometimes the best you can do is to achieve a less worse outcome. When I realised that agricultural and veterinary chemicals were creating serious environmental (and human health) issues in Australia, I approached Simon Crean the then Minister for Primary Industries, to set up a national group to better manage chemicals in Australia.

Simon did manage to get the group established (now the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority). We did manage to get rid of the organochlorines (DDT & its relatives). But we also recognise a role for chemicals in modern agriculture to ensure high yields and also for disease prevention.

I live in hope of a new era where environmental groups see themselves as part of a co-operative community operation to save the planet.

The key to all of it is compromise and goodwill.

This is the role that the Australian Environment Foundation wishes to play.

We are concerned that scare tactics around nuclear energy, genetic engineering and cloning are used to befuddle the public. Sweeping statements such as “we are fishing out our oceans” cloud the real issue of the management of our oceans, both in terms of the eco-system and also of sustainable fish harvest.

All of these emotionally charged approaches tend to force environmentalists into camps at war with industries and governments. Then no one wins.

We wish to assemble environmentalists, scientists, farmers, developers, miners, government representatives, and all stake-holders (including members of the public) into a collaborative group to address issues rationally. We wish to use accurate data, research information, economic aspects and human issues to create a truly sustainable future for our planet.

Above and beyond everything else, we will not have any beliefs or agendas beyond that of achieving the best possible collaborative outcome for our planet.

Care to join us?

DON BURKE

Don attended St Aloysius College Milsons Point and then went on to the University of Sydney initially undertaking studies in Dentistry, then moving across to Agricultural Science and then to Ryde College of Horticulture obtaining Honours and Distinction Certificates in Horticulture and Tree Surgery. He subsequently worked for and managed a number of nurseries in the Sydney area. He was also a TAFE lecturer in horticultural science, horticultural marketing and genetics. He has been a guest lecturer in genetics at the University of Sydney's Veterinary School.

During his time lecturing at TAFE, he was a founding member of: Year of the Tree, Greening Australia, Decade of the Tree & Sustainable Development Australia. He was also President of the Australian Institute of Horticulture (NSW) during which time he initiated the first ever environmental weed legislation in NSW.

Don later became a board member of Landcare Australia. With Simon Crean, he initiated the National Registration Authority for Agricultural & Veterinary Chemicals (now called the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority) for which his primary objective & achievement was to rid Australia of dangerous chemicals such as the DDT.

Don Burke's media career began in the early 80s when he did a regular radio segment on 2WS in Sydney. He later moved to 2UE and Burke's Backyard on radio was heard every Saturday & Sunday morning for nine years. The radio program won a Pater Radio Award at the end of its first year. At the same time Don started regular segments on Today, the Mike Walsh Show (& later Midday), and various other programs.

Burke's Backyard on television began in 1987 and after 17 and a half years on air, the final program, "The Last Hooroo", went to air on November 26, 2004.

CTC Productions Pty. Ltd. was formed in 1990. It is owned and run by Don & Marea Burke. It produced Burke's Backyard & continues to produce Backyard Blitz and has a number of other programs in development. It also produces the Burke's Backyard magazine in partnership with ACP. Burke's Backyard during its time on air received 6 Logies & 2 People's Choice Awards. Backyard Blitz has received 5 Logies.

Don received the Variety Club's Award for TV performer of the year for 1990. He also received the Banksia Award for media contribution to the environment in 1996

Don is Patron of Retina Australia (NSW) and Foundation Patron of the Australian Children's Literary Board. He has been an annual Australia Day Ambassador since 1990.

Don and Marea have two children Chris & Sean.