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Rational Environmentalism: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

By Michael Duffy

On the radio recently we held a competition for the most unnecessary warning sign. This was very popular with listeners, and we had a lot of examples sent to us. I'd been prompted by the increasing number of these signs appearing in recent years. The one that finally made me act was at the underground carpark at Sydney Hospital. I'd left my car there, gone up to visit someone, and when I came back to where I was parked I was confronted with a big notice saying: BEWARE, MOVING VEHICLES.

So we had this competition on air. One of my favorite entries was the sign attached to the soft drink dispensing machine at the IKEA store in Perth. It reads: WARNING, DRINKS MAY BE FIZZY. OPEN WITH CARE. Another example came to us from Victoria, where apparently they have these big black signs by the roadside where they can change the pattern of illuminated dots to make different letters. You might have seen these signs in other parts of Australia, I know we have them in NSW. The problem with them is they can be quite hard to read. Well, a Victorian listener told us she'd been driving along one day in the rain and seen one of these signs, and she'd changed lanes in order to read it better. Unfortunately, as she changed lanes she almost hit a motor cyclist traveling in her black spot. Anyway, she finally gets close enough to read the sign, and it says, "LOOK OUT FOR MOTORBIKES!"

It was a good competition. The winner was a sign found on Sydney government buses. Now these buses, like all buses, have a window on the driver's side. Underneath these windows you find this warning: DO NOT ENTER BUS THROUGH WINDOW.

The reason these signs upset me is because they imply that the reader needs them. At first, most of us just laugh them off. But it's my belief that over time we come to accept that such warnings are necessary, partly because the world is a more dangerous place than we thought, and partly because we're not as capable of looking out for ourselves as we thought. And I think this reflects a big change in our attitude to life in general that's led to changes in behaviour, in many areas including the environmental. One of those changes is a great expansion of the application of the precautionary principle. When in doubt, don't. But doubt of course is highly subjective.

Yesterday we talked about the environment specifically. This morning I want to talk about how the great shift in attitude to the environment we've seen in the past 30 years is part of a bigger cultural shift. I've worked as a publisher and author, a broadcaster and journalist, and I have a great interest in how ideas spread and gain acceptance, and I want to draw on that. At the end, I'll also make a few suggestions, as a working journalist, about how people such as yourselves might respond to these changes.

These changes are incredibly pervasive, and sometimes you do despair. Last week I came home from work and my seven-year-old daughter proudly showed me this new rubber wristband she'd got. I had a look at it and it said, saveourwhales.gov.au. There's a government website, run by the federal department of the environment, where kids can go and order these bands for free, limit of five per person. I find that an extraordinary misuse of public money. It raises questions of the sort Jennifer Marohasy's excellent blog has canvassed, about just how endangered whales are. And the last thing I want is for my daughter to be inculcated into the culture of conspicuous compassion represented by caring wristbands.

I suppose those bands do have a purpose for older kids, they assist with assortive mating, they tell members of the opposite sex if you share their politics. It'd be dreadful to go to bed with someone and wake up the next morning and find they don't want to end global poverty. But I do object to seven year olds been introduced into the world of intellectual fashion quite so early. We have porn filters on our computers, maybe it's time for Ian Campbell filters too.

Anyway, let's go back a bit. As we all know, the world changed for many people in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. We stopped believing in God but we didn't lose our sense of religiosity, our need to believe in something. I think this is part of our nature, something acquired during evolution because in the Pleistocene era religious belief had adaptive value. We also, of course, acquired a great affinity with nature back then, so I guess it's not surprising that many people deprived by changing knowledge or circumstances of the belief in God should focus their need to believe on nature.

Like all evolutionary psychology, this is only speculation. But I was interested to discover recently that the man known as the "father of sustainable development", the concept that now rules international environmentalism, was Steven Rockefeller. He was professor of religion, and I repeat that, religion, not science, at Middlebury College in Vermont in America. According to an article by Doctor Michael Coffman, who has a degree in forest sciences, in Range magazine, Rockefeller is the son of Nelson Rockefeller and now chairs the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and for many years the immense Rockefeller fortune has been used to fund the spread of conservation biology, which has come to underpin much of what we today in Australia know as environmental science. According to Coffman, one of the things Rockefeller-aligned Foundations did in the 1970s was to provide endowed chairs and grants to the natural resource colleges that provide the graduates who work in government agencies such as the US Forest Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. That particular aspect of tertiary culture, like many others, of course spread to Australia.

Now I mention that story not because it explains the way many people view the environment today. Obviously there were many other things happening at the time, and they happened because many people wanted them to happen. This is not a conspiracy theory. But I do think the story of Stephen Rockefeller nicely encapsulates something about just how things changed. You could summarise the change by saying that most university-educated people in Australia today think of nature as something separate from human beings and as something to be worshipped from a distance.

A related attitude is a disapproval of those who refuse to keep this distance, a contempt in some cases for anyone who actually gets their hands dirty by working with nature. People such as miners and farmers and fishermen and hunters.

I think one of the reasons for this is fear. The religious attitude to nature is largely theoretical: I live in the city and in the past 20 years would have been part of dozens of conversations about the environment in which many people asserted things with absolutely no first-hand knowledge at all. I'm often struck by the arrogance of university educated people who are prepared to advocate extreme views on the environment based on nothing more than something they've read. They wouldn't be prepared to do this in many other areas.

And I think this is one reason they fear people who work in the landscape, because they realise deep down that such people actually know what they're talking about, and therefore pose a threat to the theoretical view of nature that holds such sway in the cities.

If you want to see an example this contempt for country people, you should see a recent Australian film called *Jindabyne*. It's about four men who live in the town of that name in southern NSW and go on a fishing trip.

Jindabyne is the most judgemental Australian movie I can recall. It's amazingly politically correct: Aborigines are victims; white people who live in the country are generally bad: the men are violent or alcoholics; the women are not so bad, but they're usually depressives.

In the film, the four men find the body of a murdered Aboriginal woman and leave her in the river for several days while they catch trout. It's a strange decision taken with almost no discussion, as if the men are brutes.

It struck me as a film made by urban coast dwellers in fear of the Australian landscape and those who inhabit it. Its ignorance of country life is considerable. The photography is urban: nature's generally shown from a long distance, as if it's a picture rather than a place to be in. The photographic views of the bush are backed by sinister woo-woo music.

Everything in nature is rotten. The lake is not a nice place to swim on a hot day, it's a sinister location where dead men dwell and children almost drown. The power lines through the bush hum with menace. In *Jindabyne*, country life is reduced to little more than a backdrop for a story that by implication proclaims the superiority of the values of enlightened urban dwellers over those of other Australians.

Sadly, this is typical of a growing divide between most Australians and nature. It's kind of ironic: the more people proclaim a love for nature, the more they're separating themselves from it. I think this separation is encouraged by many environmental groups, such as Greenpeace. I think this suits them. To put it bluntly: the less people know about nature, the more lies you can tell them, the more you can distort nature so it serves as nothing more than a setting for the crude morality plays that are actually what groups like Greenpeace deal in.

Why do they do this? Well, they do it partly to make money, to keep themselves in jobs. To understand what's going on here, you need to understand what I call the green business model. It can be summarized in the slogan: no crisis, no cash. Basically, green groups manufacture fear the same way General Motors manufactures motor cars. Just like GM needs new models to stay in business, so the green groups need new fears to keep the donations flowing, to scare people into becoming members and paying membership fees to keep the officials of the groups in paid employment. The only difference between this and businesses is that the green groups don't make profits. That's true, although many officials eventually leave and set up successful consultancies advising corporations how to deal with the laws the consultants themselves persuaded government to introduce. And of course we shouldn't just think of money here. When a green group claims a great victory for the environment, there's no financial dividend for its shareholders, its members, but there's a huge emotional dividend.

Now that might sound cynical but I don't mean it that way. It's no more cynical than to point out that churches need to keep people afraid of evil to maintain their congregations. There is an economic element to nominally idealistic organizations, just as there is also, I believe, often a strong idealistic element in companies. The gulf between the two isn't as great as we often think.

Let's assume for the moment that this view of the world, and of the environmental movement, is correct. What then can people like yourselves do to counter that view? I'm not talking about going back

to the 1950s. I'm talking about what, as I understand it, we were discussing yesterday, which is putting people back into the landscape.

Basically, I think the AEF is on the right track. I think it's great you exist. As I said earlier, an important part of the problem we're confronting is the theoretical nature of mainstream environmentalism. By theory here I don't mean conceptual, I'm just talking about written material. People who've been to university are actually quite gullible, they're too ready to believe what they read about the environment, because they have nothing else, no practical experience of nature, to compare it with. That's a problem but it's also an opportunity for people such as yourselves. If you could come up with an alternative theory, by which I mean an alternative body of accessible science, and present it in an accessible manner, I believe this would be a huge challenge to the mainstream environment movement. I believe that movement is actually extremely vulnerable to a sustained attack by an alternative body of facts, because it bases its credibility on science. Once the general public was aware there was a cohesive alternative argument, they'd expect the deep greens to respond to it. For most university educated people, although they do have traces of religious feeling, reason is dominant these days. If it can be made clear something can't be supported by reason, they'll abandon it. The interesting thing is no one has yet tried to respond to the green argument in a serious and sustained manner. I know there have been campaigns from time to time on various issues, such as mining or logging. But no group in Australia has pulled all this together and set itself up as a permanent source of continual and consistent, high-quality information that cumulatively supports an alternative view of the environment. I believe if the AEF could do this, it could have an effect on people in the media and opinion-formers over five years, and then gradually affect views in the wider community.

You need to start with the media. Let me tell you two things about journalists. The first is that most of us are lazy. We like to know where to go to get a comment quickly on a certain subject. The reason environmental groups are always quoted in the newspapers is not always because journalists are greens: it's because the green groups, from years of hard work, are familiar and accessible. They're also a familiar brand: if you get a Greenpeace spokesperson everyone knows the area of life they're allegedly expert in and their position. As far as a journalist is concerned, that's a problem solved. If the AEF achieved a similar level of accessibility, you'd be quoted all the time too.

Another important thing about journalists is we don't like to be shown to be wrong among our peers. If the AEF website had, for example, a continual stream of comments and papers on issues of the day that confronted the stuff appearing on the Greenpeace and ACF and federal Environment Department websites, the media would feel obliged to pay attention. If you were showing, week in and week out, that the facts being presented by other green groups were simply wrong, the media could not ignore that. They might ignore it for a while, but eventually they, and the other green groups, would pay attention, and they would change their behaviour.

There is a model for how this sort of cultural change can be achieved by a relatively small group of people, even without great public support. I'm thinking of the way a few think tanks, such as the CIS and the IPA, helped deregulate Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. Whether you agree with their ideas or not, there's no doubt they played a huge role in changing this country.

Of course, they had relatively lots of money because they were supported by business. And as I understand it, you don't. But they had to start somewhere. Greg Lindsay started the CIS from a shed in his mother's garden in 1976. Today I believe his annual budget is over a million dollars. He got there by a lot of hard work and by advocacy. Fortunately he turned out to be someone who was excellent at

persuading rich people to support him. Maybe that's the sort of person the AEF needs now. I don't know, and it's not my business to tell you how to do things.

But I can say, as a supporter, that Australia needs you. And as a professional broadcaster and journalist I can assure you that if you produce good and regular information, the media will use it, and you will eventually change the culture.

I'd like to conclude with one observation, which is another ground for hope. On roads around inner Sydney now you see these yellow signs on telegraph poles saying: LAND CLEARING: IT'S UNAUSTRALIAN. Outside parliament house members of the Wilderness Society dressed in pioneer costume hand out postcards like this [SHOW CARD], saying "Now a jolly swagman can't find his billabong, 'cos they have bulldozed the coolabah trees." This is extreme nonsense. Australia of course was created by land clearing. Land had to be cleared to make the roads in which these telegraph poles stand. The poles themselves were once trees. So the message is absurd. It is ridiculous. To anyone with a sense of national identity it is insulting. It's also typical of the increasing extremism of the green movement, driven in part by the fact all the easy battles have been won, and it's increasingly difficult to find new causes to excite people...

Why do I see this as a ground for hope? I believe the mainstream environmental groups have had so little intellectual opposition they've grown lazy and gone too far. This makes them vulnerable to attack with rational argument, of the sort we've heard during this conference. I thank you for that, and I look forward to hearing a lot more from the AEF in the next year.

Thank you.

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After graduating from Macquarie University in 1978 (BA, English), Duffy worked as a manual labourer and played in punk rock bands in Australia and England. He then worked in the public service for six years, in the Department of Social Security and the NSW Premier's Department. He has been a delegate in two trade unions.