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A PRESENTATION BY
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Why Australia Needs the Australian Environment Foundation

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Introduction

According to market research by Sydney-based author, psychologist and social researcher Hugh Mackay on the attitudes and values of Australians, “The current mood [in Australia] is characterized by self-absorption and escapism, nurtured by disengagement from political and social issues. Consumers are looking to brand advertising for some light relief and for some distraction from a troubled world.”

So right now, in Australia who needs another environment group? If you want to do the right thing by the environment it is surely OK to just turn on the Discovery Channel and watch the Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin, wrestle with a real animal in a real environment all from the comfort of the lounge chair.

For more intellectual stimulation there is always ‘An Inconvenient Truth’. Again, from the comfort of a padded chair, you can be both frightened and consoled as you watch the man who was once “the next president of the United States” get on and off airplanes.

Al Gore says global warming is a moral issue. I guess this means that if we are all good it will go away. In making global warming a moral issue Gore takes away the potential for dissent. He turns it into an issue of faith. After-all, and to quote Thomas Huxley, we have religion for morality. The scientific method is very different. Science has no respect for authority or the consensus. If it can be demonstrated to be wrong, it is wrong.

Science, to again quote Thomas Huxley, is for factuality and the best scientists are usually ardent skeptics. Yet according to the world’s leading environmentalists including Al Gore, it is not OK to be skeptical. Skeptics, according to many environment crusaders, confuse the issue, muddy the waters, and delay progress.

We all accept that carbon dioxide has the potential to warm the earth and like Al Gore I am concerned about elevated levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels. But even if Kyoto were fully implemented, with Australia and the USA signing up, there would be virtually no potential impact on climate because about 70 percent of carbon dioxide emissions are from countries not subject to Kyoto restrictions.

I am going to suggest today that turning global warming into a moral issue is unhelpful. If we are to begin to address the many environment issues that are confronting us in a cost effective and meaningful way, then we need to work from a basis of evidence. We need science, not religion. We need dissent, discussion and leadership not pious hope.

In short there is no ‘truth’, however ‘inconvenient’, that should not be exposed to the blow torch of healthy skepticism – there should be no claim, however morally appealing, that we are not prepared to test against the available evidence.

This doesn’t mean that we can not appreciate the beauty of the world around us – that we need to be militant rationalists all the time. But it does mean as Dick Taverne explains in ‘The March of Unreason:

Science, Democracy, and the New Fundamentalism' that where reason is applicable and things can be judged by the evidence, that we cannot discard reason and evidence.

I will apply some reason and evidence to four current Australian environment issues – the Murray River, the forests of the Pilliga-Goonoo, GM food crops and anthropogenic global warming – to expose and explain the value of reason over emotion.

The Murray River

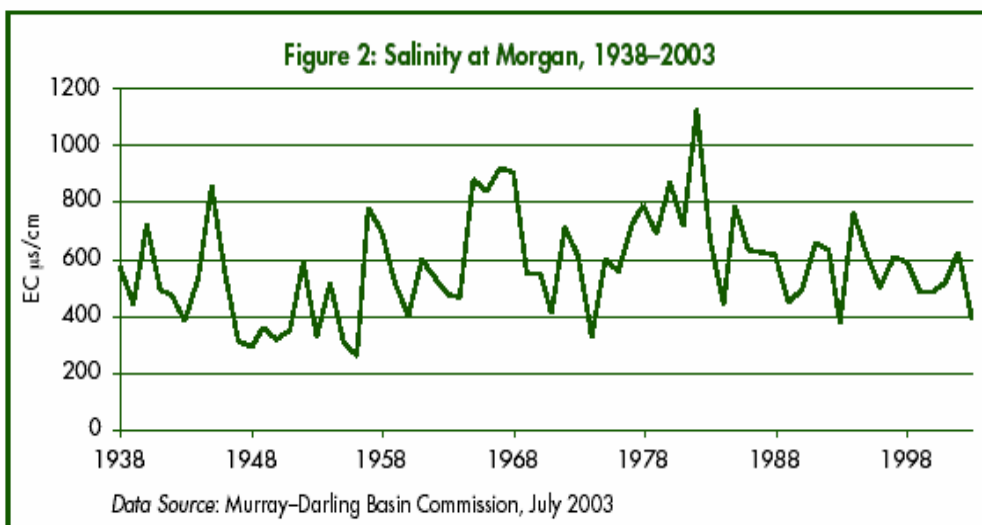
When I started with the IPA back in July 2003 both sides of politics, and the CSIRO, were claiming that salt levels were rising in the Murray River. I didn't have any reason to dispute the claim, but I wanted to see the data to understand the magnitude of the problem.

I initially had trouble accessing water quality data. Output from computer models was available, but I wanted to see the actual data. I eventually received daily readings back to 1938 from the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) for the key site of Morgan which is just upstream from the offshoots for Adelaide's water.

When I plotted yearly averages, Figure 1, I could see that salt levels were rising in the 1960s and 1970s, but from the early 1980s levels dropped. Salt levels in the Murray have in fact halved, that's right halved since 1982. Over the last two years salt levels have fallen further and are now at historical lows. This is due in part to the construction of salt interception schemes as well as improved land management practices.

Figure 1. Salt Levels at Morgan, 1938-2003

From Myth & The Murray: Measuring the Real State of the River Environment, IPA Backgrounder December 2003. http://www.ipa.org.au/publications/publisting_detail.asp?PubID=249



This year, on federal budget night, Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, announced another \$500 million for the Murray River. Incredibly the Treasurer was suggesting salt levels are still rising and this money was to be the centre-piece of the Government's commitment to saving the Australian environment.

Leaders within the environment movement and farm lobby know that it is wrong to claim salt levels are still rising in the Murray River, they know there are higher priorities for the \$500 million, but they turn their heads the other way because so many vested interests seem to want to keep believing there is some sort of environment crisis in rural Australia and the Murray River has for too long been the icon for these doomsayers.

In August this year I read at ABC Online how water levels in the Murray River are the lowest since records began more than 100 years ago.

But the article was confusing low water inflows with low water levels, the journalist apparently unaware that the Murray River ran dry in 1914, Figure 2.

During this drought, South Australian irrigators are receiving fully 80 percent of their water entitlements thanks to the dams and weirs upstream in NSW and Victoria, and the river is full of water all the way to South Australia, Figure 3.

Figure 2. Murray River at Riversdale, January 1914

Picture taken of the dry Murray River bed at Riversdale on 1st January 1914 – courtesy of Daryl McDonald.



Figure 3. Murray River at Riversdale, 2006

Picture taken of the Murray River at Riversdale on 9th September 2006 – courtesy of Daryl McDonald.



The latest false claim about the Murray’s record low water levels gave the doomsayers yet another opportunity to lament yet another perceived environmental catastrophe in rural Australia. The Murray River has a special place in white Australia’s history. It is a part of our mythology but we have never reconciled with it.

We seem unable to accept that it is naturally muddy and salty and that during a worst drought it is still full of water because of all the dams and weirs that have been built upstream.

We are a young culture living in an old landscape and we have created an image of ourselves, which like our image of the river, is confused and unreal.

The Pilliga-Goonoo

In May last year the New South Wales government legislated to ban logging over a further 350,000 hectares in the Pilliga-Goonoo forests of North West NSW in response to environmental campaigning including by the Wilderness Society.

Government claimed it would be protecting these iconic forests. Yet the forests are only about 150 years old. Early European explorers described the landscape as open grassland or open box woodland.

Settlers followed the explorers with sheep and cattle. Then came terrible drought, and then terrible floods. A native cypress grew up after the floods and with no fire and limited grazing thickets developed along with a timber community which started to thin, control burn and generally tend the young forests.

You see the forests that the NSW government now wants to protect from logging are in fact a result of logging and management by a local timber industry - koala and barking owls' habitat created and enhanced through sustainable forestry practices.

Much of Australia, including the land west of the Great Dividing Range, was once open grassland actively managed by Aboriginal people through use of fire. Remove fire as a management tool, introduce sheep, cattle and some overgrazing, and grassland areas will be lost to various species of woody weed. In some situations, for example the Pilliga-Goonoo, the woody weed can be effectively managed and grown into biologically diverse and productive forests.

But rather than considering the evidence, including the history of the forests, the NSW government blindly responded to environmental campaigning.

Imagine how different the outcome might have been if there had been an alternative strong environment lobby explaining the history of the forests and explaining the plethora of studies that show managed state forests can be as biologically diverse as unmanaged national park. We might still have viable timber communities as well as happy barking owls and koalas in the Pilliga-Goonoo.

I live in a wooden house and I work off a wooden desk. I know trees re-grow and that Australia has one of the most productive and sustainable timber industries in the world. I want to be able to buy Australian hardwood, not support the importation of timber from South East Asia.

GM Food Crops

Environmental campaigning by the established conservation groups tends to focus on doomsday scenarios. The formula for campaigning appears little changed from the 1960s and 1970s when the Club of Rome was announcing the imminent exhaustion of our nonrenewable resources and Professor Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University 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".

He also predicted that life expectancy in the United States would drop to 42 years as a consequence of the use of pesticides.

Of course life expectancy has continued to increase and we didn't all starve to death. Technological innovation, including modern high yielding agriculture, has enabled farmers to feed a world population that has doubled over the last 30 years from essentially the same area of land.

The next big technological breakthrough in food production is also likely to be in the area of biotechnology with genetically modified (GM) crops. However, campaigning by environmental activists has greatly limited adoption of this technology by Australian farmers.

Greenpeace is largely responsible for the bans on commercial production of GM food crops which are now in place in every state except Queensland.

Cotton is exempt from the bans on the basis it is grown primarily for fibre. It is indeed a best kept secret that about 30 percent of the vegetable oil consumed in Australia is from cotton seed from locally grown GM cotton.

GM cotton has been a huge success, a boon not just for cotton farmers, but also for the environment with the latest GM cotton varieties reducing pesticide application rates by 88 per cent.

In August this year Melbourne was host to an international agricultural biotechnology conference. A principle sponsor was the Victorian Government. I was amazed to see this State government sponsoring a conference which was promoting the very technology it had banned.

Global Warming

I began my talk with reference to Al Gore and his new movie 'An Inconvenient Truth' and the claim that global warming is a moral issue.

Global warming is not a moral issue, but a technological issue. The elevated levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are there because we get our energy from fossil fuels. If we want to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide it won't be achieved through the signing of Kyoto it will be achieved by finding a way to power motorcars and generate electricity without burning fossil fuels.

In his State of the Union address earlier this year, US President George Bush, suggested it was hydrogen that would emerge as the dominant transport fuel of tomorrow.

He said: "With a new national commitment, our scientists and engineers will overcome obstacles to taking these cars from laboratory to showroom, so the first car driven by a child born today could be powered by hydrogen, and pollution-free."

The US President has backed this vision with at a \$1.2 billion commitment to research into the new technology.

It's fair to conclude there will be a worldwide transition from oil to something else, but we don't know how rough or smooth this transition might be, nor whether in 20 years time ethanol, or hydrogen, or something else, will be the dominant transport fuel.

But as one former Saudi Arabian oil minister famously commented: the Stone Age didn't end because the world ran out of stone and so the oil age will end before we run out of oil.

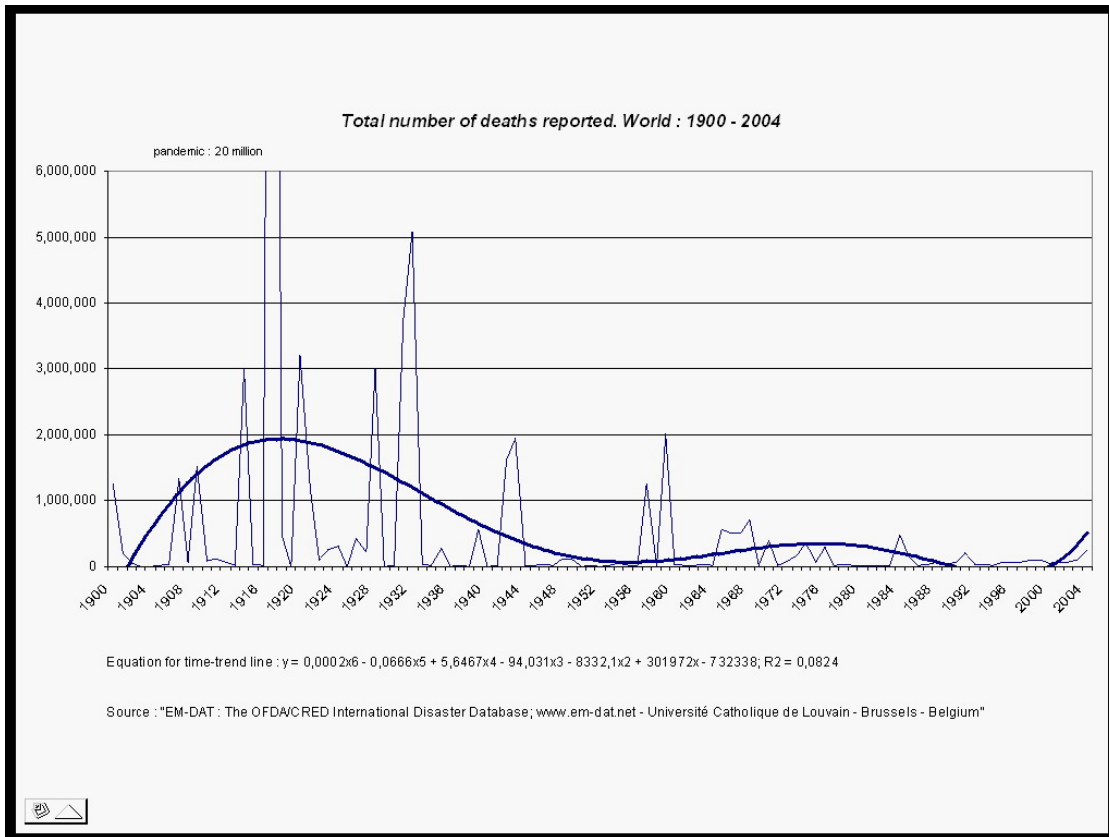
In Conclusion

I began this talk with reference to some market research by Hugh Mackay on the attitudes and values of Australians. He has written that, "The current mood [in Australia] is characterized by self-absorption and escapism, nurtured by disengagement from political and social issues. Consumers are looking to brand advertising for some light relief and for some distraction from a troubled world."

Yet in reality we have never had it so good – we are a rich society living in a resource rich country, with so much promise and so much technology.

And world wide things are looking up for people. Since 1988 the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) has been maintaining an Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT). This data, Figure 4, shows that the total number of deaths due to disasters from 1900 to 2004, has reduced not increased despite the exponential increase in the global population.

Figure 4. Total Number of Deaths 1900-2004



Deaths from natural disasters will continue to fall as societies become more technologically and economically sophisticated.

Yet as a community we are so frightened and troubled by the world.

Through my four examples I hope I have illustrated that we don't need to worry about the Murray River, we do need to better understand the ecology of our rangelands and start to value timber communities. We need to embrace new technologies as they offer us a potential mechanism for both feeding and powering the world while reducing our ecological footprint.

It is amazing how the application of a small amount of reason can result in such shocking solutions. I say 'shocking' because I have just advocated logging in native forests and GM food on the dinner table. I have also just suggested that technology, not pious hope, is the answer to global warming.

In closing I would like us to read together the six core AEF values:

1. Evidence - policies are set and decisions are made on the basis of facts, evidence and scientific analysis.
2. Choice - issues are prioritized on the basis of accurate risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis.
3. Technology - appropriate and innovative technological solutions are implemented.

4. Management - active management is used when necessary, acknowledging that landscapes and ecosystems are dynamic.

5. Diversity - biological diversity is maintained.

6. People - the needs and aspirations of people should receive due consideration.

The Australian community needs to start developing its environment policies from this foundation.

Thank you.

Jennifer Marohasy

Concerned that public policy on environmental issues is increasingly driven by moral crusading, rather than objective science or need, Dr Jennifer Marohasy has worked to provide an important counterpoint in public debate and discussion.

Jennifer was born on a cattle station in the Northern Territory and educated in Brisbane completing a science degree and later a PhD at Queensland University.

She began her career as a field biologist working for seven years in remote parts of Africa and Madagascar. This effort resulted in the introduction of several biological control agents including the rust *Maravalia cryptostegia* for rubbervine.

Jennifer later worked as environmental manager for the Queensland sugar industry and oversaw the development of the first commodity specific code of practice under Queensland environmental protection legislation. While at Canegrowers Ltd, Jennifer developed an interest in environmental campaigning and the Great Barrier Reef. This interest was fostered by the Institute of Public Affairs which started publishing her critiques and later asked her to work for them.

Jennifer started with the Melbourne-based think tank in July 2003, initially researching Murray River issues. Her monograph *Myth and the Murray: Measuring the Real State of the River Environment* challenged conventional thinking on water policy and the role of key research institutions including the CSIRO.

Jennifer is a foundation member and director of the AEF. She works from her home in Brisbane and has a blog at www.jennifermarohasy.com/blog read by environmental activists, academics and resource users from across Australia and around the world.