

A Vote Winning Eco-political Strategy

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Attention to environmental concerns have become both a political necessity and a cheap shot for parties of all persuasions. “Saving” things is popular. The precautionary principle obviates any necessity for evidence of need. The up-front budget cost is usually low and success can be proclaimed immediately with little risk of contradiction. However, though the budget cost may be minimal, the actual ongoing cumulative cost of ill-founded environmental regulation has been immense.

While manufacturing of material goods in Australia is the lowest of OECD nations and declining, our manufacture of hypothetical solutions to imaginary environmental problems leads the world. Precautionary measures to address problems which might exist but actually don't, have become a major burden on the economy. Their creation, regulation and enforcement now comprise a vast bureaucratic industry costing billions of dollars to maintain. Worse yet, compliance, constraints on productive activity and the stifling of harmless freedoms multiply the cost many times over.

The following are but a few examples:

- A small but lucrative trap fishery of six boats fishing an area of over 200,000 Km² on the N.W. Shelf is suffering ongoing restrictions on fishing effort because of purported concerns about overfishing. However, catches have remained excellent and, at present levels of permitted effort, it would take over 1,000 years to fish the entire area just one time. These six boats are restricted to a total catch of under 1,000 tonnes annually. Thailand, which is our own largest source of seafood imports, has a smaller total shelf area than does this fishery. It also has 60,000 fishing boats and for many years has sustained a catch of about 2,500,000 tonnes.

Still, office bound bureaucrats based a thousand miles away have managed to concoct a fantasy of overfishing. In the 19 years they have “managed” this resource these “managers” have never once gone out on a fishing boat to actually see what they are “managing”. They manage by remote control using unverified theories and computer models which bear little resemblance to the obvious reality. The average catch per trap is some 20 to thirty times more than the bureaucrat's estimates claim to exist in a unit of area. Moreover, video cameras on traps clearly show that only a small portion of fish around a trap are caught by it. The utter impossibility of catching fish that don't exist or of overfishing an area when 99.9% of it isn't fished at all, simply does not compute in brains infected with eco-delusions.

- Drought stricken farmers in the Murray-Darling are having to pay tens of thousands of dollars each year to retain rights for water which they have not received for three years. In financial desperation, more and more are being forced to sell their rights at discount prices to the only buyer in a depressed market, the government. The government plan is to use this water for so-called environmental flows to “restore” a condition that never existed

naturally. This exercise in national self-abuse is permanently removing some of our most productive agricultural land from future use and “restoring” it to desert aridity.

- Tree clearing prohibitions are turning large areas of productive grazing country supporting diverse wildlife into unproductive, low biodiversity, scrub forest dominated by a few eucalypt species producing only fuel for future intense fires. Clearing restrictions are likewise forcing rural residents to helplessly allow encroaching tree growth to create a potential fire bomb around their homes awaiting only an inevitable ignition to devastate their lives.
- Aquaculture is the fastest growing sector in world food production. During the past three decades global production has increased by over 1200% with an average compound growth of around 9 % per annum. Australia, with some 60,000 Km of mostly uninhabited coastline well suited for aquaculture, a benign climate and unpolluted waters, clearly has vast potential. However, development of the industry here remains feeble. A comparison of Australian aquaculture production with that of a sampling of other nations is instructive. Thailand and Vietnam each have only about one-eighth of Australia’s coastline; but, both have around 30 times greater aquaculture production than Australia. The EU has over 40 times greater production. Even New Zealand has over double Australia’s production.

Although the small size of Australia’s industry has been attributed to higher cost structure there is obviously something more to it than this. Certainly Australian costs for land, labour, equipment, energy and feedstock are at no disadvantage to Canada, France, Japan, Norway, the UK, or the U.S., yet all have hugely greater aquaculture industries.

The real reason is only one thing, over regulation. Despite the world’s best natural conditions for it, aquaculture in Australia has been strangled at birth by an impossible morass of regulations. These impose multi-fold greater expenses, delays and uncertainties than anywhere else. Apart from a few exceptions that became well established before regulation made new operations uneconomic, aquaculture here has actually been declining in recent years while it continues to boom elsewhere. The only sector booming here is regulation.

- Small miners were a once numerous sector of primary production that is now on the way to extinction from bureaucratic demands. Numerous widespread and valuable mineral deposits that are too small for large scale exploitation now lie idle but are eminently economic for small scale operations using modern technology. Only impossible regulations stand in the way of a thriving small mining sector.

A broad spectrum of the electorate from landowners to primary producers to the millions who enjoy outdoor recreation are fed up with the costs, restrictions, and harassment of myriad poorly conceived environmental regulations enforced with mindless rigidity. A core promise to impose some common sense onto environmental issues would find strong resonance with millions of voters.

The era of cheap abundant global resources is drawing to a close. Immediately beyond the current financial recession lurks a second knock down from a resumption of steep energy price increases.

The world faces tough, ongoing economic circumstances. No nation is better situated than Australia to weather these conditions, but doing so will entail making full use of our abundant natural advantages.

We simply can no longer afford the burden of a bloated unaccountable bureaucracy stifling productivity nor can we continue to pander to the delusions of green non-producers. The bureaucracy will have to be pruned and made accountable for positive results. Ever increasing management budgets which result only in ever decreasing production and profitability is a travesty of the very concept of management. The one sure way to improved outcomes would be to index management budgets, employment and salaries to the production and profitability of the sector for which they are responsible.

If government won't impose accountability, severe recession will. Adding more and more ill-conceived restrictions onto our producers is tantamount to treason in a time of war. It is time that positive outcomes be required, not just meaningless eco-waffle. It is also time that real evidence be demanded of researchers, not just unsupported claims by a chorus of "experts" singing for their supper.

We cannot go on imposing more and more costly and restrictive measures to prevent problems that don't even exist nor can we ourselves exist without detectable effect on the natural world. Ecology is above all holistic. Every creature, including ourselves, has its impacts. Aiming to maximize our benefits and minimize our detriments will require trade offs and balances whereby we seek to spread our impacts across our whole resource base within the bounds of sustainability. Every unnecessary restriction in one place becomes an increased impact somewhere else.

It is past time for the public to realise that we are all paying the price of gross resource mismanagement in our cost of living, our health, our freedom and in the broader well being of the nation.

Some Key Facts on Marine Resource Management

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- With the world's largest per capita fishing zone, Australia has the lowest harvest rate at only 1/30 of the global average.
- Two-thirds of the seafood we consume comes from imports. These add some \$1.8 billion to our annual trade deficit. We are selling off non-renewable mineral resources to import a renewable one we have in abundance. This is then called sustainable management.
- The total Australian seafood catch is less than half that of N.Z,
- Thailand, the largest source of Australian imports, produces over 10 times greater total catch with less than 5% of the EEZ area.
- PNG catches more tuna alone than the total production of all Australian fisheries. It is over 20 times greater than our tuna catch. We currently import \$165 million in canned tuna from Thailand each year and the cost is rapidly growing.
- Australia has a much higher percentage of protected marine area than any other continental nation. We also have the world's lowest fishery harvest rate at only 3% of the global average. In other words, we have the most protection where it is needed the least and we put 2/3 of our seafood demand on heavily exploited resources elsewhere by importing it.
- The GBR marine park already protects the biologically richest part of the Coral Sea by the world's largest coral reef park. There is no habitat nor any threatened, endangered or overexploited species in the Coral Sea which is not already well protected by the existing GBR park. Still, we plan to put our entire Coral Sea area into a Marine Protected Area.
- In a time of recession when government is faced with exploding deficits and trying desperately to stimulate economic activity why are we taking on additional millions in expenditure to address a problem which does not exist and to further curtail productive activity and employment?
- No marine fish or invertebrate, anywhere, ever, has been exterminated by humans.
- Line fishing is self limiting as increasing fishing results in a population that is increasingly difficult to catch.
- I cannot find a single example of a stock collapse anywhere due to recreational line fishing.
- The environmental impact of recreational line fishing is a non-problem while the social, health and economic value of the industry is substantial. Any competent government should be encouraging recreational fishing, not restricting it.
- Under Article 10 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (to which Australia is signatory), Australia is required to:

"(c) Protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements...."

Note that “customary” and “traditional” is not limited to indigenous peoples. Under this convention the obligation to protect and encourage the customary practice of recreational fishing by non-indigenous Australians is in no way distinct from the obligation to protect such practices by indigenous Australians.

- The Law of the Sea Treaty under which Australia claims EEZ rights to most of the area that would be included in the proposed Coral Sea MPA, provides that exclusive resource rights requires usage and that other nations can petition for access to unutilised resources.
- The Great Barrier Reef is in pristine condition. Of the over 2500 named reefs in the complex, only a few dozen near population centres are regularly visited. Over 90% of the reefs are seldom or never fished or even visited by anyone.
- Usage of fertilisers and agrichemicals in the GBR catchment has been declining over the past two decades. Agricultural runoff has never been a serious threat to the reef and the situation is improving, not getting worse.
- The commercial fisheries harvest rate for the GBR is 9 Kg/Km²/year. The average sustainable harvest rate for reef fisheries is conservatively estimated by conservationists to be 4000 Kg/Km²/year. GBR fisheries do not even produce enough to meet the local seafood demand.
- Foreign and globalised environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, WWF and Pew have found a happy hunting ground in Australia. They choose to focus where they can exert the most influence and control rather than where the most urgent problems exist. According such power to third rate academics and self proclaimed saviours is dangerous. The threat they pose and damage already done to national well being is much greater than any conventional terrorism.

These are all readily verifiable facts and there are many more, equally at odds with popular perception. The bottom line is that our resource management has become hijacked by the eco-salvation industry and totally detached from any reality.

Health Benefits of Seafood

In addition to the economic and recreational value of fisheries, a growing number of recent studies are finding significant health benefits from seafood and efforts to encourage greater consumption have been implemented by government. At the same time, however, government continues to impose ever more stringent restrictions on the fishing industry. On the one hand government is telling us to eat more seafood while at the same time it is making it increasingly scarce and unaffordable.

Seafood is high in proteins and low in fats, cholesterol, and sodium. It is an excellent source of minerals and vitamins. It is easier to digest than other meats and is among the most nutritionally balanced of foods. It aids weight control and is highly beneficial in preventing heart disease.

In particular, seafood is high in essential omega-3 fatty acids which are deficient in most terrestrial foods. Their consumption has been found to be beneficial in preventing or alleviating a wide range of immune related disorders. These include asthma, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, hypertension, migraine headaches, certain cancers, age related maculopathy and some kidney diseases.

They also play a vital role in neurological development and functioning. A diet rich in seafood facilitates brain development and has been found to have important cognitive and behavioural benefits for children. It has also been found to be valuable in reducing aggression, depression and schizophrenia in adults as well as maintaining mental function with ageing.

The bottom line is that high levels of seafood consumption correlate directly with happier, healthier, longer lives. Fish really is a brain food and it would quite literally be stupid to continue to mismanage our fisheries. It seems particularly ironic to call ourselves “The Smart State” and “The Clever Country” while closing down our fisheries and selling off non-renewable resources to pay for imported seafood we could easily produce in abundance at higher quality and better prices.

One might well imagine a new generation of Asians talking about Australia, “Lovely country, too bad about their brains.”

Still, with no demonstrated problem of overfishing but simply as “*precautionary measures*”, office bound bureaucrats continue to restrict our fishing industry. This is unneeded, unethical and unaffordable. Our marine resources could easily sustain a fishery harvest several times larger than the present one, eliminate any need for imports and still maintain the most lightly harvested and pristine marine environment in the world. This potential is largely unrecognised and won’t improve unless an aroused public begins to demand it. Appeals to unverified computer models, claims of scientific authority by office based experts and wafflings of eco-gibberish aren’t good enough. Show us the evidence.

A proven strategy for improvement in fisheries management would be to have the industry take responsibility for the research necessary for management. Such a change offers three key improvements.

1. The industry is much better positioned to provide the practical knowhow, logistics and management oversight for such research than a government department and can do so much more cost effectively.
2. Experience indicates that the quality of research improves and it becomes more open and transparent as it must satisfy the needs of both industry and regulators as well as answer to outside peer review.
3. There is a fundamental conflict of interest in having research controlled by regulators whose budgets and authority rest on the findings of such research.