

Sunfish Magazine Conservation Vs Environmentalism

by Dr. Walter Starck.

Fishermen, farmers and hunters are by nature conservationists. Their own well being requires a sustainable relation to a healthy natural world. They not only appreciate the beauty of nature they see themselves as a part of it and it as an important part of themselves. For most of the past century their views and concerns played an important role in conservation.

A new vision of conservation has emerged

Over the past few decades however a new vision of conservation has emerged with a quite different constituency. It's called environmentalism. Environmentalism involves more than just concerns, principles, and ethics. Like other isms it has assumed some of the aspects of a religion. In this view, nature is something pure and perfect while humans are separate and apart from nature, by definition not natural. Any detectable effect of humans is unnatural, undesirable, a desecration. For its more extreme adherents it has become a form of fundamentalism, with all of the righteousness, narrowness, and even hatred that so often accompanies that form of belief.

Environmentalism reflects not so much a connection with the natural world as with a disconnection from it. It has arisen from the modern urban lifestyle where necessities come from shops and nature is a distant romanticized ideal known chiefly through television, books and magazines. Although consumers of vast quantities of natural resources from all over the world, most urbanites have little real awareness of the effect they have beyond the store or the garbage bin. They live a blameless existence shielded by middlemen from most of the effects of their lifestyle. Many, moreover, do little to enjoy such largess but by inheritance, luck or connivance live in comfort while producing little or nothing themselves.

Environmentalism has a lot going for it. A righteous cause offers purpose and direction to life along with a delicious sense of moral superiority. Why feel guilt or gratitude when you can feel righteous superiority instead?

The failures of various political and religious isms have left environmentalism with less and less competition in the belief department. For politicians it has become a constituency they can't ignore. It also affords an ample supply of political cheap shots. Promises to "save" things or prevent "threats" are widely popular and cost little. Closely following public and political concern the academic community has found environmental issues can provide generous access to government funding. Bureaucracy too has found this to be a rich vein of budgets and authority with little accountability for results. For the media it is a rich source of drama abounding with dire threats, conflicts, controversy and attractive suggestions of wrongdoing. Finally, it is big business.

Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International and various other environmental organizations are in fact multinational corporations. Their logos and brand names have global recognition rivalling their commercial counterparts. They have also borrowed useful bits from religion. Like churches and charities they are tax exempt. They offer attractive career opportunities and lifestyles. Though not as lavish as those afforded by commercial companies they are more secure and less demanding of ability or performance, more in fact like a church. Unlike old style conservation which was outcome

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oriented and celebrated its successes, environmentalism is problem oriented and seldom speaks of success other than with suspicion. Any suggestion that a problem may not be as serious as proposed or that a simple solution may be possible is greeted with hostility, not interest. Little distinction is made between the real and apparent vs. the hypothetical. Invocation of the precautionary principle justifies all possibilities, so long as they are detrimental.

Indisputably we live in a finite world and human influence is increasing. Environmental problems do exist. Some are growing, some are being successfully addressed. Determining what is happening and what to do about it is not easy. Recognizing and assessing problems is important but confusing a difficult task with misinformation, exaggeration, and outright lies not only makes the task harder, it squanders resources and leaves important problems unaddressed.

Environmentalism has come to embody an unholy coalition of disparate parties whose main commonality is a vested interest in there being problems. Followers and leaders of the movement, politicians, bureaucrats, academics and the media all thrive on environmental problems. Farmers, fishermen and hunters do not but they are a minority with little voice in an agenda overwhelmingly determined by the urban majority. They also make attractive scapegoats for problems, both real and imagined.

Over the past four decades hardly a year has passed without some dire threat to the GBR being declared. Crown-of-thorns starfish, overfishing, tourism, anchor damage, pesticides, fertilizer, cattle, cane, oil shale, development, roads,

marinas, shipping, global warming and sundry other menaces have been repeatedly declared and "experts" trotted out to support them. None of these things have been dealt with in any effective manner yet the reef remains much as it has always been. Credibility however, never seems lacking for another threat nor for more expert opinions.

The truth is, scientific understanding of reefs is still only patchy and highly specialized. Only a literal handful of persons have the scientific background, plus widespread and long term experience necessary to make reasonable judgments of reef conditions. Even then assessment is difficult due to the highly variable nature of reef communities. What is often seen as evidence of human detriment is either a natural condition of reefs in a particular situation or the result of natural events such as storms, floods, and population fluctuations of various organisms that appear unnatural to those of limited experience.

Although reefs in many places have indeed been damaged by human activities the extent of such damage has been considerably inflated by the prevailing assumption of detriment and a focus on information and interpretation that supports this while ignoring or dismissing that which does not. Even accepting recent reports that about one third of reefs have suffered noticeable damage it still means that two thirds have not. Of those affected, damage is often patchy and how much is from natural causes that will repair is unknown.

Regardless of what may be may not be happening on some heavily impacted reefs elsewhere, that is there and the Barrier Reef is here. You don't board up your house in Townsville because a hurricane threatens Florida. The GBR is among the most pristine of reef areas. Distance, weather and a

Conservation cont.

among the most pristine of reef areas. Distance, weather and a relatively small population mean most of the GBR is rarely even visited. Of the 2900 reefs in the complex only a few dozen are regularly used for tourism and the total annual fish harvest per Km² is less than 1% of what reefs elsewhere commonly sustain. Solutions appropriate to the problems of heavily impacted reefs are at best uncalled for and may even have undesirable results here.

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uncertain, receive all the attention and good news remains no news regardless of how well founded it may be.

No take areas have proven effective where fishing pressure is very high and breeding stocks have been reduced to low levels. Their benefit has not been demonstrated and would not be expected where substantial breeding stock is already widespread as on the GBR. The benefit from closed areas here is undemonstrated and unlikely. Their effect should be monitored and evaluated on an experimental basis before applying them on a large scale. The proposed rezoning will concentrate fishing pressure by about half as much again in the areas left open. It amounts to wholesale environmental meddling for no good reason and no idea of what the effect will be or even a plan in place to monitor it. Calling this a precautionary measure defies common sense. It is indeed just the opposite.

Threats to the reef from siltation, pesticides, and fertilizer are equally ill founded. Their extent

and detriment are unmeasured and undemonstrated. Their threat is almost entirely assumed and hypothetical. Abundant reason and evidence to the contrary is ignored. Study after study points out the inadequacy of available information to determine conditions with any reasonable certainty and the need for much more extensive and ongoing monitoring. Still, threats and problems, no matter how

So, what can farmers and fishermen do against the arrayed power of the media, urban voters, politicians, bureaucrats, academics, eco-freaks and self appointed saviours of the environment? Getting the matter before a court is the only way reason and evidence can prevail, uncertainties be exposed, and answers to questions be demanded. Laws regarding defamation, discrimination, vilification, environmental protection, negligence, and even consumer protection all provide possible grounds for litigation. The legal basis for action is not the important thing, getting the issues before a court is what matters. In the legal arena the questionable, exaggerated, and false claims that are being repeatedly made would be very difficult to defend and damage, both financial and to reputation, could be shown.

The media readily and often one-sidedly provide prominence and credibility to such claims without the exercise of due diligence or concern. They then purvey such material to consumers as factual "news". This is consumer fraud of a particularly dangerous kind as it not only damages individuals, industries and the economy it weakens the very foundation of democracy which is an informed electorate. As with any other faulty product they should be held liable for damages and subject to penalties if neglect or fraud is apparent. Appropriate consumer protection laws already exist, they need only be applied.

A few such lawsuits against key individuals, organizations and

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media companies could do wonders in bringing about a fairer, more considered, honest and balanced public debate in place of the one sided publicizing of unsubstantiated claims with little or no opportunity of rebuttal. In particular it would make everyone very careful about what they say when it cannot be substantiated and will be damaging to other people. No amount of argument, meetings and campaigns can achieve this. Making those responsible also accountable would indeed be a miracle cure.

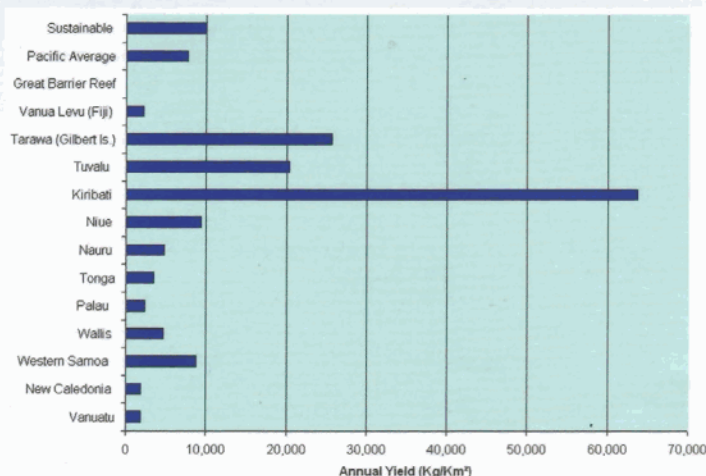
If a large majority of fishermen and farmers plus like minded

concerned citizens contributed only a small amount each to a non-profit association set up for the purpose of demanding honesty in environmental issues a war chest quite adequate to pursue such legal action would be available with little effort or risk to anyone. Anyone, that is, but those so ready and willing to decide for us all regardless of the evidence or how little they themselves really know.

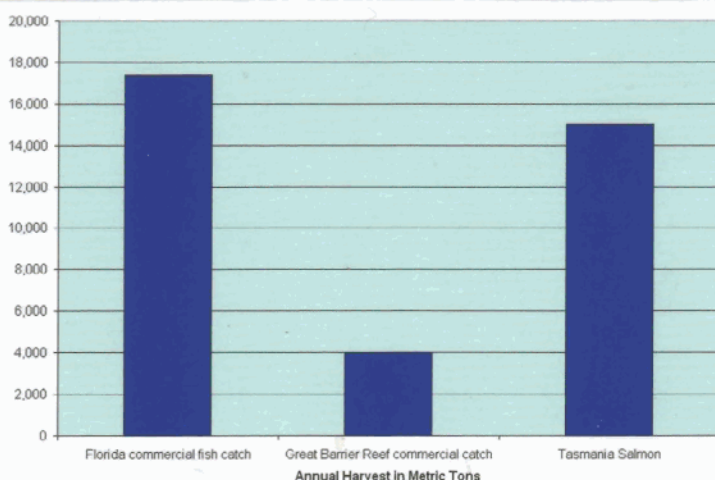
Unfortunately freedom sometimes requires fighting for, but the opposition in this case has a vital weak point. Their strategy is based on exaggeration, supposition and outright misinformation that won't stand up to real examination. The chance of winning the propaganda war in the public or political arena

is remote. The possibility of winning some well founded legal cases is good. Even their instigation would cause real concern and have a substantial sobering effect. It is something worth serious consideration.

Walter Starck has a PhD in marine science with some 50 years world wide experience of coral reefs. Currently he is Editor/Publisher of Golden Dolphin Video CD Magazine, a bimonthly CD based publication on diving and the ocean world. For more on Golden Dolphin and Dr. Starck see www.goldendolphin.com.



Recent annual yields per square kilometre of reef area from various Pacific reefs. The Barrier Reef is almost too small to be seen.



Total annual yield from three fisheries. Florida is about the size of Cape York and the recreational catch (not included here) is even larger than the commercial one shown here. The idea that the GBR is over fished and new restrictions are necessary has no basis in fact or competent reason.