

Reef, Range and Red Dust Conference
Closing Summation
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Healthy Environment, Productive Economy
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What does it truly mean to live sustainably?

A truly sustainable society is one that creates wealth without degrading its natural capital.

It means maintaining our environmental assets in a healthy condition, so that they can provide all the goods and services that people desire – now, and for all the generations of Australians who are to follow us.

It means maintaining a stable climate system, it means maintaining our soils and rivers and estuaries and forests and oceans in a healthy condition, and it means protecting for all time those precious gifts of nature – our natural heritage.

There are the great icons such as the Great Barrier Reef, but to quote our national anthem – *our land abounds in natures gifts ... of beauty rich and rare.*

I represent a group of concerned scientists. Science can help conserve these precious gifts, but science is not the answer, it is simply a tool to help people achieve these outcomes. Conservation is about people, and that is what this conference is all about.

You have heard from experts describing the big picture, and you have heard from local people taking local action to help make this world a better place.

The tragedy of a modern industrialised society like Australia is that we herd ourselves into big cities, and those city folk rarely get to see the hundreds of thousands of people who manage our vast continent. All they hear these days is conflict – conflict between greenies and developers, conflict between farmers and miners.

But people do care about our natural world, and the presence at this conference of your Premier, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Commonwealth Minister, Minister Lynham and Minister Miles, is testament to how much our elected representatives respect the work you do.

They know that the only way we will conserve our natural heritage is when people – people who manage this vast landscape, whether they be farmers, or indigenous rangers, park managers or local Coastcare groups.

Which brings me to the topic of my closing summation – Healthy Environment, Productive Economy.

Toxicity of climate change debate in this country has seen powerful vested interests building a narrative that we must now sacrifice the environment to create jobs. This has been a disaster for long term environmental reform.

The climate change debate has had a secondary impact where broader NRM and biodiversity conservation has been pushed to the sidelines – Landcare has been cut in half, the National Reserve System program has been abolished, and we have witnessed massive cuts to one of Australia’s great institutions, the CSIRO.

This jobs or the environment nonsense is partly ideology, partly driven by vested interests wanting to rush through CSG and coal mining approvals, and partly raw politics. And the irony of course, is that it damages our long term economic prospects, not enhance them.

But take heart, this is not a phenomenon confined to our generation. Let me quote from the 6th edition of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, published in 1872: *“Great is the power of steady misrepresentation; but the history of science shows that fortunately this power does not long endure.”*

The truth is Australian’s have for generations overwhelmingly supported the conservation of nature. In every opinion poll conducted by Newspoll since 1993, the majority of Australians have said they considered the environment a very important issue in setting their voting intentions. If you don’t believe the polls, take a Northern Quoll and stand in the Queen Street Mall in Brisbane or Martin Place in Sydney and see the reaction you get. Look at the reaction of Australians when they feared the reef would be damaged by bad development.

Late last year the Wentworth Group decided to remind Australians that this country is facing very significant, systemic, long term environmental challenges. The paper is called *a Blueprint for a Healthy Environment and a Productive Economy*, and is available on our website.

In this toxic political climate we knew nobody would listen unless we confronted head on, this nonsense that it’s jobs or the environment. Wentworth Group are not economists, so we were delighted that people such as Ken Henry (former Treasury Secretary), Quentin Grafton (Crawford School ANU) and Martijn Wilder (Global Environmental Markets Baker McKenzie) agreed to contribute to our blueprint, as did many other respected professionals such as Professor Darryl Low Choy who spoke to you yesterday.

We used the blueprint to establish the case that it is possible to grow the economy and have a healthy environment, provided we value the future a little more, and get away from this short-termism ‘policy by press release’, that is plaguing our society today.

Having established the case that it is possible to grow the economy, create jobs and have a healthy environment, we set out the 5 major long term institutional and economic reforms that are necessary to achieve this outcome:

1. **Avoiding further damage to natural capital** by putting in place regional scale land and water use plans that address the cumulative impacts of new development on the environment;
2. **Using markets to finance conservation** by removing subsidies that pollute the environment, and instead create economic incentives for business and consumers to conserve our natural capital;
3. **Turning around the systemic decline in biodiversity** by closing the gaps in our national system of public and private reserves, connecting these across the landscape, and committing to a long-term plan to conserve our endangered native plants, animals and ecosystems;
4. **Regionalising the management of Australia's natural resources** so that investment decisions are underpinned by an understanding of how landscapes function; and
5. **Creating landscape scale, national environmental accounts.**

We recently released a more detailed paper on our most controversial proposal, titled *Using Markets to Conserve Natural Capital*. This paper was presented as a submission to the tax reform process.

It shows that by eliminating fossil fuel subsidies that cause climate change, and use part of those savings to create incentives to restore degraded environmental assets, it is possible for Australia to cut taxes and create a healthy and productive Australia, without any impact on economic growth.

We can cut taxes, create jobs, grow the economy, and have a healthy and productive Australia, provided we value the future a little more.

In producing this work with eminent Australians, we have made a solid economic case that conservation of natural capital is, or at least should be, a universal human value that underpins all political philosophy. The great US Republican President Theodore Roosevelt once said:

“Of all the questions which can come before this nation, short of the actual preservation of its existence in a great war, there is none which compares in importance with the great central task of leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us.”

How can the NRM community help?

Let me finish with some comments on the other major work we are undertaking at the moment, which is finalizing our regional trial to build a system of landscape scale, national environmental accounts.

If Australia is to become a truly sustainable society, one that creates wealth without degrading its natural capital, a most fundamental reform is to integrate the management of our environment into everyday economic decisions.

To do this we need a consistent, comparable, practical and affordable way of measuring the condition of environmental assets at all scales at which economic and policy decisions are being made – whether it is Commonwealth investments in ecosystem services, setting targets for regional NRM investments, or acquiring and managing environmental flows in

the Murray Darling Basin, down to the monitoring the condition of our national parks, Indigenous Protected Areas or private conservation reserves, local councils, and even farm scale monitoring of their environmental assets.

We developed this *Accounting for Nature* model with the help of other experts in 2008. It provides a framework for measuring and tracking the change in condition of environmental assets, using a common unit of measure based on reference condition.

When in place these environmental accounts will do for environmental policy, what economic accounts do for economic policy.

We have been working with Australia's 56 regional natural resource management bodies, CSIRO, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, state agencies and other experts, to conduct a continental scale trial of this *Accounting for Nature* model.

When it is published in the next few weeks, it will shine light on what I believe will be one of the most important policy advances of the 21st century, ... because it means finally, we can use science to address one of the great failures of public policy of the twentieth century, our inability systematically measure the condition of environmental assets at scales that can inform policy and investment decisions.

And this is where you come in.

The trials have been hard work, and have revealed some very interesting results, both positive and negative. The key finding is not necessarily the lack of information, rather the lack of an organising framework and access to that information.

We have shown for example, that it is possible to regularly and cost effectively measure the condition of native vegetation, rivers, estuaries, even agricultural soils across the continent, that can inform regional scale policy and investment decisions, once this information is made available and applied in a common accounting standard.

NRM Regions Australia will be going back to the Commonwealth and States with these results, with a formal proposal for a 4 year program to build the first regional scale, National Environmental Accounts of Australia.

Watch this space, because it will help you communicate to others the value of nature to people.

Science and Values

Let me conclude with another quote from Charles Darwin, because it speaks about science and values. It's the last sentence, in the last paragraph, in the last chapter, of the *Origin of the Species*, published over 150 years ago:

"There is grandure in this view of life ... that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved".

Thank you for inviting me today.