

West Aust
(Security of tenure)

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CONSERVATION - IN PERPETUITY

by J.A.K. Lane, June 1986

loss trend note

If the natural values of conservation areas retained undiminished in perpetuity then the following points need to be addressed.

Security

It is insufficient simply to decide that an area is to be conserved. Any landholder can do that, and can just as easily reverse the decision. If we are to be confident that an area will be conserved in perpetuity the decision must be given some security. In Western Australia the most secure form of protection currently available for natural areas is reservation under the Land Act as an A Class Reserve for the purpose of Conservation of Flora and Fauna with vesting in the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority. Reservation in this manner gives the area concerned legal protection against uses which are inconsistent with the declared purpose of Conservation of Flora and Fauna. It also places the area under the control of an expert body (the NPNCA) with a statutory responsibility (i.e. a legal obligation) for wildlife conservation. Thus the area has more protection than if it were vested in some other body which may, at the time of vesting, be predisposed towards wildlife conservation but which may at some later date, due either to a change of attitude or membership, become apathetic or antagonistic towards wildlife conservation.

The reserve's Class - A, B or C - also has considerable bearing on its security. "A" Class reserves may only have their purpose or vesting changed or their boundaries reduced by consent of both Houses of State Parliament. "C" Class reserves, on the other hand, are less secure since their purpose, vesting and boundaries may be altered by the Government of the day without reference to Parliament. "B" Class reserves have an intermediate level of protection.

Note that no reserve is absolutely secure. The democratic process provides mechanisms by which any reserve may be altered or rescinded. Reserves therefore require continuing public support if they are to be retained in perpetuity.

Management

Most reserves also require some form of management if their natural values are to be retained.

Abuses such as rubbish dumping, timber cutting, sand or gravel removal, off-road vehicle use etc. have obvious harmful effects. The natural values of conservation areas may also be reduced by more insidious agents such as weed invasion, too-frequent fires, fertiliser drift and even genetic isolation. Remedies may be obvious, as in the case of rubbish dumping, or may require expert scientific assessment and sophisticated management techniques. It is important therefore that conservation areas be managed by agencies which have, or at least have access to, both the necessary manpower and equipment, and adequate biological expertise.

Management Planning

The management of natural areas is greatly assisted by the preparation of a Management Plan.

Such Plans should begin by identifying the conservation values of the area concerned. For example, is it primarily of value as a habitat for a particular species of plant or animal, or as a sample of a certain type of biological community, or, in the case of wetlands, as a drought refuge or feeding ground for waterbirds?

Having identified the primary values of a reserve we are then able to determine the objectives for management and the strategies required to achieve those objectives. If the objective of management is to provide, for example, a

drought refuge for waterfowl, the management strategy will be to ensure that the wetland holds at least 0.5 metres of water right through the summer dry season, every year. If the management objective is to provide shallow water feeding areas for wading birds prior to their autumn migration to the northern hemisphere then the management strategy would be to allow the wetland to dry, or at least become very shallow (less than 10 cm) during late summer each year.

Management Plans should also identify threats to the conservation values of the reserves concerned. An urban wetland may for example be threatened by excessive nutrient enrichment or by groundwater extraction. Such threats need to be identified during preparation of the Plan and strategies need to be developed to deal with them.

Community Support

Continuing community support is essential if the conservation values of natural areas are to be retained in perpetuity. Such support is required at both the broad and specific level. Broad community support is required if natural areas are to continue to be set aside for conservation. Broad support is also required if the authorities in whom such areas are vested are to be equipped with adequate resources for management and for management-related scientific research.

Individual reserves require specific community support if they are to withstand future proposals for alternative uses. Such proposals may involve wholesale changes to the area concerned (e.g. alienation for agriculture, mining, or industrial development) or a series of minor changes each of which is of little significance on its own, but which together greatly reduce the area's value for conservation. It is this latter "whittling away" which can often be the most difficult to withstand. This is the "tyranny of small decisions" a phrase coined by the economist Kahn (1966) and

referred to by Odum (1982) when writing about the loss of wetland resources on the north-east United States coast.

"No one purposely planned to destroy almost 50% of the existing marshland along the coasts of Connecticut and Massachusetts. In fact, if the public had been asked whether coastal wetlands should be preserved or converted to some other use, preservation would probably have been supported. However, through hundreds of little decisions and the conversion of hundreds of small tracts of marshland, a major decision in favour of extensive wetlands conversion was made without ever addressing the issue directly".

Natural areas, particularly wetlands, in Western Australia are still subjected to this erosive tyranny. Public awareness and concern will be required if the onslaught is to be stopped.

References

Kahn, A.E. 1966. The tyranny of small decisions : market failures, imperfections, and the limits of economics.
Kyklos 19 : 23-47

Odum, W.E. 1982. Environmental degradation and the tyranny of small decisions. Bioscience 32 : 728-729.