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CONSERVATION IN A CHANGING WORLD

This issue of *LANDSCOPE* is specially designed to complement the WA presentation to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the theme of "Conservation in a changing world".

Western Australia covers about 2 500 000 square kilometres and is mostly arid - two thirds of this area is regarded as desert. The State's vegetation ranges from tropical savannah woodlands, through arid grasslands to temperate shrublands, woodlands and tall eucalypt forests.

Unlike many more densely populated countries, Australia still has vast tracts of land that are virtually untouched by humans. The North-West of Western Australia has wilderness areas and nature reserves, such as the Man and the Biosphere nature reserve at the Prince Regent River in the Kimberley, that retain their full complement of flora and fauna. In contrast, the South-West corner of the State has been the region in which the majority of development has taken place.

The South-West during the last century was a place of unlimited opportunity - for miners pursuing the gold rush, farmers establishing massive wheat and sheep farms, millers providing timber for the colony and whalers operating off the south coast. The wealth created from these pursuits paid for the infrastructure needed to maintain them, pushing railways, roads and water supply into more remote areas and opening ports on the coast to deal with a greater influx of settlers.

Although there was no initial recognition of the effects of development on such a fragile land and on its indigenous people, a sporadic awareness developed, with governments setting aside natural areas such as Kings Park, near the heart of Perth, and protecting forests against demands for agriculture. More recently, development has been vetoed in areas of intrinsic importance to Aboriginal people, measures have been taken to protect native fauna and flora, and any development likely to impact on the environment has been carefully assessed.

The strong regulatory framework which has been established to protect our environment is a sign of the concern of all sectors of the community, and particularly conservationists both from within and outside of Government, at the effects of earlier uncontrolled development. Our ability to benefit in real terms from future development will depend on the maturity with which we continue to seek to balance such development against environmental effects.

Long-term problems of land degradation caused through overclearing, predation on native fauna by feral animals and the impact of introduced plant diseases remain. However, with increased community support, government and voluntary agencies are turning around past mistakes.

It is important to manage our unique forests and bushland in a way that will maintain the ecosystem in its most natural state. Our forests provide protection for our wildlife, our water, our vegetation and even our oxygen. Fortunately, our forest can be sustained - in ways that will protect all our values. Research has shown that we can learn from traditional inhabitants of the land, the Aborigines, by using fire to manage our bushland. 'Forests for the Future', on page 35, describes how WA forest managers are trying to strike a balance between conservation and timber production.

Another vital task is to ensure that our most precious natural areas are in a secure, well-managed system of conservation reserves. The public is becoming more aware of the need to conserve our unique marine environment. In WA, we are setting aside a comprehensive system of marine parks to protect the complex marine ecosystems along the State's coast - including wonders like the coral of Ningaloo and the dugongs and stromatolites of Shark Bay. 'A Range of Reefs', on page 11, takes a look at the riotous variety of fauna and flora that populates this extensive coastline.

'Scouting the Treeless Plain', on page 16, shows how the same process is being used to protect terrestrial ecosystems. Ecological surveys of the Nullarbor Plain, a proposed national park, are under way to identify which areas should be set aside as examples of Nullarbor ecosystems. The surveys will also show what is happening to the native flora and fauna and what is needed to retain their richness and intricacy. And 'A Fragile Frontier', on page 22, highlights areas in the Kimberley that should be in reserves. The region now has seven declared national parks and several major nature reserves, but it needs many more. Some of its most fragile and beautiful areas are gradually being damaged because they are not being managed.

Efforts are also under way to "rescue" WA's threatened plants and animals, many of which are found nowhere else in the world, and put them on a more secure footing. One of the saddest conservation stories, and one still going on today, is that of 'The Disappearing Mammals' on page 29. The combined effects of extensive clearing and the introduction of feral animals, such as the fox and cat, have led to the demise of many animal species. The pig-footed bandicoot and the desert rat-kangaroo are among those that have disappeared forever. Many others, like the numbat, were brought to the brink of extinction. 'Vandals in a Vulnerable Land', on page 44, describes how some introduced species have disrupted native wildlife communities.

WA has long been known as the wildflower State. In some areas flowers carpet the ground for kilometres; in others, like the Stirling Ranges or Mount Lesueur, there are many species of rare plants. WA has more than 10 000 plant species within its borders, and 80 per cent of the plants in the South-West are found nowhere else in the world. 'Growing in a Wild State', page 49, takes a look at WA's incredible diversity of flora and the steps being taken to ensure that it persists for future generations. 'Endangered', page 21, describes the program for preserving the Bindoon starbush, one of the State's rarest plants.

One of our most positive stories is the feature on 'Kids and Trees'. The response we received to a poster competition for Arbor Day surprised and delighted us. We received more than 7 000 entries from primary school children all across the State. The story highlights growing concern about the environment.

With this new awareness, unique solutions to our conservation problems are beginning to emerge. We may not yet have all the answers, but, with the co-operation of farmers, conservationists, Government departments and concerned individuals, there is great hope for the future.

MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER

On behalf of the Government of Western Australia, I welcome you to our State. We are proud to host the 18th General Assembly of the IUCN, particularly at this crossroads in the future of our planet and the life on it.

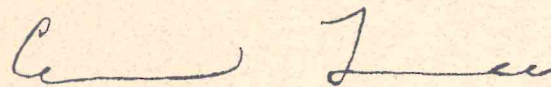
Today there is widespread concern about the adverse effects of past actions on our environment and the use of resources which cannot be renewed. There is also, of equal importance, a growing optimism that we can find solutions to these problems and act upon them.

The Western Australian Government has responded to the heightened public awareness of environmental issues by opening its decision-making processes to require public consultation on all significant issues. *LANDSCOPE* plays a part in our efforts to inform the community about environmental issues and further raise public awareness.

Western Australia has made considerable progress in its contribution to countering the major global problems of the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer. We are well advanced with plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and we have been a national leader in taking measures to prevent the release of ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbons. Through the development which has taken place in our State we now have the economic strength to continue to implement practical environmental solutions, such as commercial tree planting to reduce salinity of streams and improve salt-affected soils.

The IUCN General Assembly will provide an excellent international forum for exchange of information and experiences in work on these solutions. It offers us the chance to learn of other practices that may be applied to some of our conservation problems in Western Australia. Although science and technology have been the cause of some of the problems, they also provide us with the means to analyse them, and in many cases to solve them.

I trust that many positive decisions will be taken and opportunities will arise from the General Assembly to help us continue to build on our emerging environmental achievements, and I wish it every success.



Dr Carmen Lawrence
Premier of Western Australia

