



STEP Inc

Community-based Environmental Conservation since 1978

President's Report for the year to October 2009

STEP continues to perform strongly. We focus mainly on local and national issues which we believe are important enough for us to try to make a difference. These have been well covered in our newsletter, STEP Matters, copies of which are to be found on our web site.

Committee

STEP is fortunate to have an effective and well credentialed committee which generally meets monthly and more often if required. Susie Gemmell had to withdraw from the committee doing the year due to pressure of work commitments, but we were fortunate to have Robin Buchanan rejoin the committee after an absence of some years. Apart from one resignation, the committee for 2010 will be largely unchanged after the AGM as we have had only one new nomination, apart from the remaining current committee members. I want to extend a warm welcome to Donald Davidson, who is the new nomination to the committee. Don is an ex TABS committee member who is active in the volunteer bush management movement. He has for many years been the Short Street site organiser.

Michelle Leishman

It is with great regret that the committee bids farewell to Michelle Leishman, who has resigned from the STEP committee. Michelle served on the committee with distinction for many years, both in her capacity as a hard working committee member and, over a lengthy period, as an effective President. Michelle will be more properly honoured in the next edition of the newsletter.

Accounts

We acknowledge the continuing excellence of the work done by our Treasurer, Jim Wells. STEP enjoys a sound financial position, in part due to the continued profitable sale of our publications and also to subscriptions from our solid membership base. Increased operational costs, including insurance and the publication of our newsletter, have however forced us to address the issue of the level of member subscriptions. The modest increase in membership fees your committee is asking you to approve today is the first for seven years and is intended to cover the expenses of our core operating costs. It will take effect from 1 July 2010.

Secretarial

If an army marches on its stomach, community groups like STEP depend on volunteers like Helen Wortham, our secretary, to maintain their focus and their efficiency. Beneath the smoothly run surface, it is Helen who makes sure that our membership records, event organisation, publication sales and so much more are handled effectively.

Grants

We continue to support the Young Scientist awards but this year decided to no longer support, with grants, local schools who wished to invest in environmental projects. We said last year that we were having difficulty in attracting good applications for such projects and therefore this year decided to explore other options to

get our message into the school age group. We are trialling, together with other like minded groups in this area, a competition with the 350.org to encourage school children to get involved in their future by sending a message to our Prime Minister about the importance of taking a serious CO2 target of 350 parts per million to Copenhagen. STEP has written to sixty local schools and the local media with the details of the competition.

Bushwalks

This year we organised a programme of five bush walks for our more experienced bush walkers. Unfortunately some have had to be cancelled due to safety reasons after spells of wet weather. Our thanks go to Andrew Little, Neroli Lock, John Martyn, Tim Gastineau-Hills and Bill Jones for organising and leading these walks. We also supplemented these walks with a new STEP Out programme of recreational walks designed for those less experienced walkers who simply want to discover the beauty of our local natural environment. We are grateful to Robert Bracht who successfully piloted this programme of five walks.

Talks

We organised three talks during the year, the topics of which all addressed key environmental issues. They were all well attended and an ambitious programme for 2010 is currently being planned.

Newsletter

Our newsletter, STEP Matters, continues to be our prime method of communicating with our members and also with local councillors, politicians and other like minded groups. We publish five editions per year and we have seen these grow in size as we try to cover a greater range of both local and national issues. We receive little by way of direct feedback from our readers, but the little we do get tells us that the newsletter is being read and appreciated. Past copies can always be found on our web site.

Digital

Electronic communication allows us to deliver new and quicker services to our members, including email reminders of upcoming events, STEP campaigns and urgent updates on key issues. Our web site is increasingly important information medium and is especially well placed to reach younger audiences provided it is both fresh and information rich. Our current web site has served us well and has been expertly maintained by both Tim Gastineau-Hills and Helen Wortham, but we now feel the need to call in some outside assistance to help us give our web site a new and more dynamic look and feel. The results should be apparent in 2010; let us know what you think!

STEP into the Future

STEP has been a successful community based environmental group for over thirty years and we continue to grow steadily our membership base. During that time it has long outgrown the original issues which gave rise to its formation, but it has always maintained

its primary aim to protect and preserve natural bushland in this area from alienation and degradation. The threats to our natural environment have however changed over the past thirty years and the committee is in the process of exploring future directions for STEP and identifying priority areas of focus for the next five years. More outputs in 2010!

Issues

The issues that STEP consider important are fully covered in the newsletter and the electronic versions of STEP Matters on our web site, so there is little point in rehashing them here. There is however a common and continuing theme, for which we do not apologise. Namely, that we cannot continue to hold as true the view that we can sustain an economic model that is predicated on the assumption that infinite growth is forever possible in a world of finite resources. A restructuring of the global economy is needed, and in fact has already begun, with renewable energy and resource recycling at last beginning to gain momentum, albeit still too slowly. The desperate defensive battles of the sunset industries such as coal mining will inevitably delay this process, aided and abetted by governments who do know better but who are too faint hearted to provide the needed long term leadership.

A key characteristic of the successful economy of the future will be population stability, yet the Australian Government seems oddly proud of the fact that the country is sleepwalking to population disaster with one of the highest rates of growth of any country on earth. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has been heard repeating the nonsensical claim that "numbers are not the issue". They are.

All levels of Government in Australia seem to suffer a characteristic in common, namely chronic short termism when it comes to planning. We continue to rail against this Lord Nelson approach to planning but we also spend inordinate amounts of our time fighting against its manifestations, be it in projects such as the Wahroonga Estate Redevelopment at the SAN site, the State Government edicted Housing Strategies foisted on local councils, the proposal to commercialise our National Parks (and allow the hunting of native animals!), the wish by some sporting codes to effect a take over of the St Ives Showground precinct, and the list goes on.

As STEP Vice President John Burke wrote in an article in our April newsletter, "Something is terribly wrong!" In this context we are delighted tonight to have a mainstream political leader address us on a topic that is directly relevant to many of these concerns.

Good News

While by its nature as an environmental campaigner STEP tends to highlight issues of concern, we also celebrate good news. We investigated the bio-banking

initiative and think it has a place to play in modern conservation. We loved the article by STEP member Ralph Pridmore recounting the return of wildlife to the streets of Turramurra. We were encouraged by Syd Smith's report that the Sustainable Schools Programme has now gone national. We enjoyed hearing about the practical efforts to make an ecological difference in both the city and country, in the articles by Matt Heffernan and Lorna Tomkinson. The glass is half full?

Publications

STEP's various maps and books continue to enjoy consistent sales and bring in much needed revenue for the organisation. Our most recent, Sydney's Natural World, is increasingly gaining recognition as an iconic publication that deals with the natural assets of the Sydney region more completely than does any other current publication. These publications all result from the hard work, dedication and enthusiasm of John Martyn and we again thank him for his continuing efforts in this regard. This year has seen the updating of one of our maps, which is currently being reprinted, and the complete revision of the Field Guide to the Bushland of the Upper Lane Cove Valley. The latter is a mammoth job and is still work in progress. We expect to have the new edition ready for sale by mid to late 2010.

The Year Ahead

While the global financial crisis has had the full attention of our political leaders, their commitment to the global environmental crisis seems to be more apparent than real. They continue to differ on key climate change objectives, seemingly more concerned about scoring cheap political points than achieving meaningful carbon reduction targets. STEP does not believe that ultimately any country can enjoy a robust economy if it does not first ensure that it has a healthy environment. It is our joint challenge for 2010 and beyond to focus the minds of all of our elected leaders on the real long term environmental challenges facing both Australia and the world at large.

In Conclusion

We thank our members for their support of STEP and of the various issues in which we became involved during the year. There is strength in numbers and we were able demonstrate that in our ability to get grass roots support for campaigns as diverse as the idiotic Shooters Bill and the shameful over-development planned for the SAN site. These campaigns by STEP do in many cases make a substantial positive difference to the quality of the planning decisions ultimately handed down, even if we do not always get one hundred percent of what we want. Incremental gains are nevertheless real gains and we look forward to continuing to make a real difference in 2010.

Barry Tomkinson
October 2009