

Annual Report for the year to October 2011

Retiring STEP President Barry Tomkinson

The STEP focus continues to be on both local and national issues which we believe are of long term importance to the protection of the environment, and where we believe that our actions and activities can make a real difference. Our bi-monthly newsletter, which some now regard as having grown to be near journal in size and content, covers most of these matters relatively comprehensively and I will today therefore only deal with these in overview.

Committee

STEP depends heavily upon having a hard working and effective committee, which generally meets monthly but more often if required. For 2012 we are fortunate to be able to retain the existing committee and I thank them all for their efforts over the past year. We have also recently had Anita Andrew join the committee. Dr Andrew is currently, amongst other roles, the Honorary Editor at the Australian Journal of Earth Sciences and Adjunct Professor, Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Macquarie University. I would like to extend a warm welcome to her.

Tonight I stand down as President but intend to remain active on the committee. Jill Green has nominated for the role of President of STEP and if elected I believe that she will bring both drive and enthusiasm to that role. The continuity of the committee assists STEP to deliver and execute cohesive policy. I would like to urge all STEP members to consider nominating for the Committee in future, as we are always on the look out for fresh ideas and talent.

John Burke

It is with regret that the committee notes that John Burke is standing down as Vice President and will cease to hold an executive position with STEP as from the date of the AGM. John has filled a number of roles within STEP over many years, including serving with distinction as President and editor of STEP Matters. His contribution over has been enormous and this continues to be the case, as can be seen by the recently published *Position Paper on Population*, which is substantially his work. John has decided to stay on the committee and we look forward to many more years of being able to access his wise counsel on a wide range of matters.

Accounts

STEP continues to enjoy a sound financial position, in no small part due to the profitable sale of our publications and also to subscriptions from our solid membership base. We also benefit from receiving a steady flow of generally small but valuable donations. Total revenue for the year is up fourfold compared with 2010, mainly due to the strong sales of our publications, especially the revised edition of the *Field Guide to the Bushland of the Lane Cove Valley*. Our total funds have as a result increased by over 16%, despite an increase in expenses associated with the new publication.

Secretarial

I need to also mention the untiring efforts of our secretary, Helen Wortham. Helen makes sure that our membership records, event organisation, publication sales and much more are handled in a smooth and timely manner. She is also the editor in chief of many of our publications, including our recent *Position Paper on Population*.

Educational grants

We continue to support the Young Scientist awards and are always on the look out for worthwhile new avenues by which we can support the education of all members of the community in the value and enjoyment that comes from having access to natural bushland within our local region and beyond.

Bushwalks

This year we again organised a programme of monthly walks for both experienced and recreational bush walkers. STEP is already well known for its series of maps of the various walking trails stretching from Middle Harbour all the way to the top end of Lane Cove Valley and our revised *Field Guide* has now updated many of these local walks. Bush walking is an activity which attracts interest from all age groups and is proving to be an excellent educational medium as well as helping to attract new members to STEP. Our thanks go to Robert Bracht, Andrew Little, John Martyn, Tim Gastineau-Hills, Jim Wells, Jill Green and many others for organising and leading these walks.

Talks

We organised four public talks during the year, the topics of which all addressed key environmental issues. In addition, tonight after the AGM we have the first in what is planned to be an annual event, the STEP Public Lecture. Our intention is to both educate and to question prevailing wisdom. The topic, "Saving civilisation is not a spectator sport", clearly fulfils both of those criteria.

Newsletter

STEP Matters, our newsletter, continues to be our prime method of communicating with our members and also with local councillors, politicians and other like minded organisations. We have seen *STEP Matters* grow in size as we try to cover a greater range of both local and national issues. We know that the newsletter is well regarded in conservation circles and helps to maintain the high profile of the STEP brand. There have been some suggestions that we make the newsletter available via email for those who would prefer to receive it that way; your comments in this regard would be appreciated. Past copies can always be found on our web site.

Submissions

STEP made numerous submissions during the course of the year to a wide variety of local and State bodies on a broad range of topics. These often required committee members to make site visits and to conduct research on a range of topics. I would like to thank all committee and other STEP members who assisted with these submissions. We believe that they have helped in a very practical way to preserve important areas of local bush land from alienation and destruction.

State election candidates forum

STEP pioneered a local Candidates Environmental Forum in February, in partnership with the Nature Conservation Council of NSW. The nine local candidates who agreed to attend the Forum answered a broad range of environmental questions from the local community.

Issues

The issues that STEP consider important are fully covered in the newsletter and on our web site. Many are of a local nature, particular to our northern Sydney region. Most however are issues of substance that concern Australia nationally and internationally. There is no room to repeat them all here, save to say that they will all require solutions that will go to the core of the way we live and work.

They do however have a common and continuing theme, which bears repetition from this same report last year and 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. Our recent *Position Paper on Population* lays out the problems, and some potential solutions, in a coherent manner.

Another issue which has begun to strongly manifest itself is a renewed focus on the usage and value of our local bushland. There are now many interest groups who have come to see local natural bushland as convenient areas available for them to use for their recreational and sporting activities, be they motorised trail bikes, mountain bike cyclists, four wheel driving, sporting groups, horse riders

and others. These groups all have a legitimate right to pursue their activities, but not at the expense of the remaining areas of good quality urban bushland. STEP and other like minded conservation groups have spent much of the past three decades working to ensure that the likes of the Lane Cove Valley National Park are protected as national parks, both now and into the future. There are many in the community who would apparently prefer not to see these national parks remain as natural bushland or wilderness, but to become quasi recreational parks to be used for the economic benefit of tourism operators and thrill seekers. STEP has the view that these areas have a value in their own right and need to be conserved for the benefit of current and future generations, because they are our heritage, and not because someone else sees them as being a useful economic commodity.

Not much good news

Last year in this report we highlighted a number of items of what we regarded as good news. Unfortunately there seems to be less reason to celebrate over the past twelve months, with limited progress being made in delivering an effective climate change policy and with the level of debate and absurd claims reaching new low levels, even by the standards of some of our more polemical politicians. To provide some context, Australia is currently aiming to reduce emissions by 5% by 2020 on 2000 levels, while Britain is aiming to reduce emissions by 50% by 2025 on 1990 levels. In addition, recent research by Oxfam estimates that more than 60% of emissions cuts by 2020 are likely to be made by developing countries. It is clear that rich countries, such as Australia, need to do more.

Publications

STEP's various maps and books continue to enjoy consistent sales and bring in much needed revenue for the organisation. This year has seen the official launch and marketing of the revised *Field Guide to the Bushland of the Lane Cove Valley*, which has been a mammoth job on the part of a dedicated team, led by author and photographer John Martyn. John's hard work, dedication and enthusiasm continue to astound us all and we thank him for his efforts.

STEP has also recently published its *Position Paper on Population*, under the direction of John Burke. We believe that this well reasoned and fact based Paper should go a long way to establishing a sensible frame work for the ongoing debate of this contentious issue.

The year ahead

STEP will continue to question conventional wisdom where we believe that it is deficient and self serving. It is our joint challenge for 2012 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. STEP will also continue to address the wide range of local environmental concerns, including making detailed fact based submissions on key issues where required. We are fortunate to have well credentialed resources available to us to conduct our work at such a high level, but we are always on the look out for new talent. Our member numbers exceed 400 and over the course of the past year our membership base has continued to grow. A strong STEP is our best defence against those who would alienate the local bushland and we consequently need to continue to grow our membership. Our best recruiters remain our current STEP members; we ask that you all invite your friends to join STEP.

In conclusion

The campaigns led by STEP often make a substantial and 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.

We look forward to continuing to make a real difference in 2012. We thank our members for their support of STEP and the various issues with which we became involved during the year.