

Annual Report for the Year to October 2015

Sydney is being transformed by the relentless increase in population and the need for land for housing, infrastructure, sporting fields, recreational parks, etc. The future for our magnificent bushland is unknown.

You will see from this report that we have had a very busy year, not only on the advocacy front but also in developing new approaches to management of our activities.

Committee

The skills of committee members have been put to good use this year. Research for our submission on the draft Plan of Management for Berowra Valley National Park revealed shortcomings in the vegetation definitions and recognition of threatened species.

Last month the NSW Government released a draft plan for filling Hornsby Quarry with spoil from the NorthConnex tunnel. The plan demonstrated scant regard for the special geological feature, the volcanic diatrema, which has been exposed by the quarrying. Our submission called for care to ensure that the exposed face is not damaged and for future access opportunities for researchers and the public.

As always the committee members have done a great job in steering the organisation. It seems that the 2015–16 committee membership will be unchanged. However we urge members to consider nominating for the committee.

Also we are always on the lookout for people who can help with our work, information technology or a particular project or issue. Suggestions for projects and alerts of actions affecting natural bushland are always welcome.

Publications

Sales of books have slowed this year consistent with the experience of other book publishers. Map sales are still solid being less affected by navigation using hand held devices than many would assume. Our maps are more detailed than generally available on-line and there is no better way to plan a walk than poring over a full size paper map.

The Lane Cove map is currently being revised with the help of a team of volunteers and will cover a significantly larger area than the previous edition. We plan to release the new map during the coming year. We are reviewing publishing options, including use of a more durable plasticised paper copy.

Accounts

Our finances remain sound with a small deficit from activities this year. We have maintained the Environment Protection Fund which provides deductible gift recipient status for donations supporting STEP's environmental objectives. This fund also comes under the requirements of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. We received a total of \$336 in donations in the past financial year.

Electronic Media

Our website is currently being upgraded and rebranded and it will go live this financial year. New features include a secure shopping cart where you will be able to order and pay for publications and membership on-line.

Our website is an important source of information about our activities and contains copies of our submissions to local and state governments on current issues and development proposals.

Trish Lynch continues to do a great job with our Facebook page with an attractive selection of photographs and alerts of current events and issues.

John Burke provides incisive comments on Twitter. The number of followers is increasing with currently over 100. Twitter provides links to many like-minded organisations.

Education

We support the Young Scientist Awards run by the Science Teachers' Association NSW with a prize in the environmental sustainability category. The six projects selected for this category in 2015 showed a keen awareness of environmental problems and the role of science in finding solutions.

The Environment Protection Fund can be applied to educational and research projects. Ideas and proposals are welcome.

Talks

We organised public talks this year on the management of wetlands and coal seam gas. We also organised an informative tour of the Sydney Institute of Marine Science.

In October last year Professor Emma Johnson gave the STEP Lecture with a detailed rundown of the outstanding biodiversity and ecological features of Sydney Harbour and the threats posed by human actions and climate change.

Walks

STEP organises a walk every month or two (seven since our last AGM) in both our local area and elsewhere in the Sydney Basin. These are designed to highlight the features of Sydney's unique and diverse bushland environments. The walks aim to be educational and to encourage new walkers so most walks are not physically challenging. We thank Andrew Little and John Martyn for organising and leading walks this past year. If you have a request for a walk please let us know.

Newsletter

Our newsletter, STEP Matters, is our main means of communicating events, our activities and issues with our members. We also include other articles with an environmental angle that will be of interest to members. The newsletter is also sent to local councillors and politicians. We welcome alerts from our members of local events and developments for inclusion in future editions and, of course, feedback on articles is always welcome. In the coming year we will be providing the option of emailing newsletters to members.

All past editions are available on our website going back to scans of the typewritten versions from 1978.

Environmental Issues

After a strong campaign by local groups, including STEP, the 10/50 vegetation clearing legislation has been modified to remove some of the most obvious shortcomings but the basic problem remains that landowners can self-assess whether tress and other vegetation should be cleared (ostensibly) for bushfire protection. The previous system that required expert advice is still our preferred option.

The other main local issue has been the draft Plan of Management for Berowra Valley National Park that allows for the possibility of sporting fields on the old pony club site and construction of a mountain bike track. STEP's submission opposed these plans for many reasons and can be accessed on our website.

While the NSW Government has recognised the risks to water quality and supply from some of the proposed coal seam gas projects in urban and agricultural areas there are still doubts that the risks are being properly recognised in the decision process. Coal mines are still being approved by both the state and federal governments despite the climate change impact of this coal. The world is increasingly recognising that coal-fired power does not have a long term future but our governments are still listening to the coal lobby.

Outlook for 2016

The great unknown for 2016 is whether the NSW Government will force local council amalgamations to occur despite opposition from most councils. The concern is that the community will lose opportunities to have a say in development that will affect the local environment.

The NSW Government has produced some glossy reports on strategic planning for Sydney's future development and it is currently amending the biodiversity legislation framework. There is considerable concern that the current laws will be weakened and the loss of further valuable bushland will be justified by use of offsets that cannot replace what has been or will be lost.