

STEP Matters

Number 145, July 2008

On Climate Change, Economic Growth and Other Matters

In this issue *STEP Matters* looks at climate change, population increase and our obsession with economic growth. We wonder at the tepid political and community response to the challenges these present. The scientific evidence is clear; the climate is changing more rapidly than ever before and human activity is the main cause. Some more recent indications:

- The Natural Resources Management Board of the South Australian Murray Darling Basin reports that parts of the river system has started to die, turning the water into acid capable of burning human flesh. No hurry; Federal and State Water Ministers are not due to meet until November to discuss the Report.
- As scientists warn that introduced species such as the cane toad threaten to wipe out native fauna, including brown snakes from the Northern Territory and the remaining quoll population in New South Wales, plans are being made to import hybrid

As always, your feedback and comments are welcome!

- savannah "monster super cats" into the country. While feral animal researchers call for their banning, importers are threatening legal action against critics, dismissing suggestions that they could threaten native wildlife by saying "they would not be allowed to roam".
- A group of high profile Australians has issued a "call to arms" to avoid the most dangerous effects of climate change. Professor Barry Brook warns that global warming is happening much faster than expected. "We really haven't got much longer to go before the problem is taken out of our hands" he said.
- Inside, Susie Gemmel reports on the latest blow to the State's planning laws, which was delivered this month when the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act Amendment Bill 2008 was introduced into the NSW Parliament.

Gareth Johnston talks to STEP

"IT and Climate Change: the opportunity to achieve significant Emissions Savings."

"The scale and scope of the telecommunications sector's operations unlock the ability......to achieve nationally significant emissions savings"

"Towards a High Bandwidth, Low Carbon Future". A Climate Risk Pty Ltd Report

The 2007 Lowy Institute Poll found that tackling climate change is as important to Australians as improving standards in education – and more so than improving the delivery of health care, ensuring economic growth and fighting international terrorism.

Gareth Johnston, Director of Corporate Risk at Climate Risk Pty Ltd, says that the telecommunications sector is uniquely well placed to provide important services that can yield nationally significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. "Our work demonstrates the role telecommunications providers and technology can play in travel and energy emissions avoidance, reduction and smarter living. A key finding of the Climate Risk Report is that many of the telecommunications solutions for living and working in a carbon constrained

world can actually lead to cost savings for business and consumers".

Gareth Johnston is post graduate qualified in sustainability, with a background in land management and infrastructure development. He was the founding CEO of a CSIRO energy technology company and has consulted to the largest Australian, European and Japanese utilities. He spoke recently at the International Symposia on ICT and Climate Change in Kyoto, about the latest Climate Risk Report, "Towards a High- Bandwidth, Low- Carbon Future".

For all those who are interested in exploring innovative solutions to the reduction of carbon emissions, you are invited to share with Gareth his insights into this important topic.

Date: 12 August 2008

Time: 8.00pm

Place: St. Andrews Church Hall, corner Chisholm and Vernon Streets, Turramurra.

STEP Inc

Community-based Environmental Conservation since 1978 PO Box 697, Turramurra, NSW 2074

Bird Species and Climate Change

We thought that STEP members would be interested in the following excerpts taken from a Global Status Report regarding the current scientific understanding of climate change impact on global bird species, by Climate Risk Pty Ltd*

Climate change is likely to emerge as the greatest threat to natural communities in many, if not most, of the world's ecosystems in coming decades. Mid-range climate change scenarios are expected to produce greater extinction rates than habitat loss, currently deemed the top threat to biodiversity.

More is known about birds' response to climate change to date than for any other animal group, mostly as a result of many species and location specific analyses. There is compelling evidence that, with 0.8°C of warming having occurred over the past century, strong negative impacts on birds are already taking place. Climate change is affecting birds' behaviour, distribution and population dynamics, and is implicated in complete breeding failure in some populations.

Highly sensitive to climate and weather, birds are pioneer indicators of climate, the quintessential "canaries in the coal mine". As global warming brings changes in temperature, altered moisture and precipitation, more extreme weather and a generally more variable climate, birds from the Arctic to Antarctic are already responding. In future, global warming will also affect birds indirectly through sea level rise, changes in fire regimes, vegetation changes and land use change. With a doubling of atmospheric CO2, climate change could eventually destroy or fundamentally alter 35 per cent of the world's existing land habitats.

In the Arctic, where several hundred million migratory birds breed, a doubling of CO₂ suggests the loss of almost half the breeding grounds of 10.4 million geese and 14.5 million waders by 2080-2099. Some Arctic birds will lose more than 90 per cent of their habitat at higher levels of warming

In Europe, Mediterranean coastal wetlands, which are critical habitat for migratory birds, could be completely destroyed with 1.5 to 4.2°C of warming by the 2080s. Risk is dependent on the species. For example, the golden bowerbird, like many other bird species in the Wet Tropics of Australia's northeast, is particularly vulnerable. Its suitable habitat would decrease 63 per cent with less than 1°C of future warming, illustrating

why this zone's climate scenario has been called "an impending environmental catastrophe".

In the Australian Wet Tropics bioregion, mid-range climate change is predicted to threaten almost three quarters of rainforest birds there with extinction in the next 100 years. However, many current projections of climate impacts are likely to be underestimates. Most analyses have not yet factored in the devastating impact of climate extremes, to which birds and entire ecosystems respond particularly rapidly and strongly.

Such factors explain why species are already responding more strongly than expected from the global warming that has occurred over the past century. In fact, the expected combination of climate change and other human disturbances, such as habitat loss, has been termed an "extinction spasm" due to its potential to disrupt communities and wipe out entire populations.

Birds have served as reliable indicators of environmental change for centuries and now indicate that global warming has set in motion a powerful chain of effects in ecosystems worldwide. In this global status review there is growing evidence of climate change affecting birds' behaviour, ability to reproduce and even to survive. Furthermore, the march toward major bird extinction may be underway, with evidence of climate change linked to unprecedented breeding crashes, and declines of up to 90 per cent in some bird populations. Forecasts of bird extinction rates depend on the potential resilience of ecosystems, and vary from 5 per cent to over 70 per cent, based on current emission and warming trajectories. Unfortunately, our analysis indicates that more comprehensive consideration of risk factors is likely to upgrade such extinction estimates in future.

The most fundamental variable in the future impacts on birds will be the extent of global warming, which is dependant on to what extent and how quickly emissions of greenhouse gases are reduced. Interventions that reduce future greenhouse gas concentrations and therefore warming levels could also lessen the extinction rates of bird species and other groups.

* Climate Risk Pty Ltd are specialist advisors to business and government on risk, opportunity and adaptation to climate change. A full copy of this report can be downloaded in PDF format from their website at www.climaterisk.net

From the Greens......

Very little coverage is given in our so called quality daily broadsheets to the consistently thoughtful work done by the Greens, and in particular by **Senator Christine Milne**. We have to go to Crikey to get a better coverage. We thought that we would share some snippets of her thinking with you:

On the first Rudd budget

"The first Rudd-Swan Budget was qualitatively barely different on climate change from the last Howard-Costello Budget. Investment was not substantially increased, nor was it reprioritised. If anything, it was shifted further into the future and skewed more towards coal and away from renewables. We still have tokenistic, ad hoc gestures dressed up for press releases and photo opportunities rather than a comprehensive, prioritised effort at rebuilding Australia for the post-carbon economy.

Had Howard and Costello scraped through last November, we would have had an emissions trading scheme, a significantly higher renewable energy target and continued minimal and piecemeal Budget investment in renewables, efficiency and mass transit. Spot the difference.

The Government is already scrambling to fix up one mistake: the allocation of absolutely no funds to the renewable energy commercialisation program until 2009-10. When so many renewables technologies are ready for that funding, the proposed patch-up job of funding geothermal drilling is a band-aid when a complete rethink is needed. What¹s more, the proposed solution is robbing Peter to pay Paul, taking funds from R&D for solar energy storage rather than from the coal corporations¹ overflowing coffers.

A second clanger is gaining momentum: the ludicrous decision to means test the rooftop solar panel rebate. While means testing is generally policy that we Greens support and advocate, applying it to a policy geared at bringing down the price of what is currently the Rolls Royce of renewables is either an utter failure to think or a deliberate move to undermine the industry. What family on less than \$100,000 will spend \$20,000 on solar panels? The move has already sent shockwaves across the country, with speculation that the installation and manufacturing industries could collapse, along with the Solar Cities program and other so-called government priorities.

Kevin Rudd has called climate change the greatest moral, economic and environmental challenge of our time and a top priority for his government. This is reflected in his first Budget by giving it one fortieth of the funding allocated to Defence. Defence¹s \$100 billion over the next four years stands in stark contrast to the \$2.3 billion for climate change over that time."

On the oil "shock" and climate change:

"During last year's election campaign, and as oil passed \$100 early this year, I and many others repeatedly called for action to deal with peak oil and climate change together. And then, in my Budget Reply last week, I started with a reference to dwindling oil supplies matching the threat of Arctic Ice melt, and repeated my calls made in the 2006 Budget Reply, to use the surplus to oil-proof Australia.

The Prime Minister cannot legitimately say he has done all he can when he is making decisions now that will make the situation worse. Last week's Budget allocated to rail a tiny 5% of what was given to roads in the next year. \$78 million on metro public transport is whistling in the wind. The much-vaunted Green Car program doesn't even start until 2011, after the next election. Infrastructure Australia and the Building Australia Fund only have to consider climate change at the discretion of the Minister and peak oil not at all."

"The great thing about climate change and peak oil is that the solutions are the same for both, and that these solutions will lead to a better quality of life in cities, better air quality, a healthier population and a more connected community. The re-design of cities will see more walkways, bicycle paths and localism as we move to urban villages linked by rapid mass transit, and as we encourage businesses to take their jobs to where the people are. It's a chance to get off the treadmill if we embrace it.

As Einstein said, you cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that created it. Those who now finally realise what we are facing should involve the people who saw the problem coming and listen to the solutions that we have advocated. Only then can we sweep aside the failure of imagination and the refusal to leave the fossil fuel age, and get on with building the post-carbon world."

The SAN Adventist Hospital... a healthier proposal?

The last edition of STEP Matters reported in detail on the Adventist Hospital proposal. (Refer the STEP website for details: www.step.com.au). STEP's concerns relate both to the scale and the impacts of the proposal on the local environment and the fact that Kuring-gai Council has been sidelined by calling in the project under Part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act.

STEP is represented on the Community Reference Group (CRG) established by Frank Sartor to "consult" with the community on the matter. The most recent meeting of the CRC was held on 15 May and while progress updates were provided, the Chair acknowledged that the consultancy team still had a lot of work to do. It was expected however that by the next meeting both the Environmental Assessment and the State Significant Site Study would have been lodged and tabled for discussion. STEP will provide a more

detailed report when these documents have been placed on exhibition and properly examined.

STEP still has significant concerns regarding the Adventist proposal, in particular in relation to the bushland and traffic impacts flowing from the much enlarged schooling and hospital proposals. However, we are pleased to note that the net additional housing has been greatly reduced to 688, of which much will be for people who work on-site but who currently reside elsewhere (generally on the Central Coast). This should have a positive overall impact in terms of their environmental and travel-energy footprint.

Make a difference Get a friend to join STEP

In case you missed it.....

Sydney Morning Herald June 2, 2008.

Sydney's population will grow by nearly 1 million people by 2021 due to the Rudd Governments expansion of the immigration program. Demographer Bob Birrell said immigration intake would pump up the city's population to more than 5.1 million, "350,000 more than planners had expected".

Excerpts from Ross Gittins. Sydney Morning Herald May 7, 2008.

"The one thing people like me aren't allowed to do is question economic growth. To almost all economists, business people and politicians, the need to maximise the growth of the economy is a self-evident truth. So let me tell you about Clive Hamilton, Australia's leading critic of what he calls "the growth fetish".

Hamilton, founder of the Australia Institute, is widely loathed by economic rationalists, libertarians and many others. They'd dearly like to dismiss him as an ignorant ratbag - were it not for his PhD in economics, which makes him better qualified than most of his critics. Last week Hamilton renewed his attack on the unthinking pursuit of economic growth in a speech to senior federal public servants. "

"You'd expect that, if any side of politics was going to question the capitalist obsession with growth it would be Labor. Wrong. The Rudd Government - like the Hawke-Keating government before it - is desperate to prove it can be as economically hairy-chested as the conservatives. Labor is still haunted by the intemperance of the Whitlam government.

No, probably the only leading politician to question the primacy of economic growth is David Cameron, the Conservative leader in Britain. Only a Tory could dare to say this: "It's time we admitted that there's more to life than money, and it's time we focused not just on GDP, but on GWB - general wellbeing."

"Fortunately, we don't get such soppy talk in Australia. Hamilton says that when our 1000 best and brightest got together at the twenty-twenty summit, one of their exciting new ideas was to try harder to maximise economic growth. The summit concluded our goal should be: "Increasing gross domestic product per capita so that Australia is among the top five countries in the world on this measure, with strong, stable economic growth."

Hamilton says no one ever challenges these sorts of statements. Yet the evidence to sustain the view that national wellbeing is best achieved by high GDP growth cannot be found. "Aiming to be among the five richest countries in the world is a form of cargo-cultism; we will have succeeded if we beat 195 other countries in the GDP stakes," he says.

Another of the summit's blinding insights was that "Australia should be the best place in the world to live and do business" which would require "urgent action to increase economic capacity"."

"Allied with the attitude that too much growth is never enough is the belief we need all the growth in population we can get, particularly through immigration. The Rudd Government professes to be terribly concerned about the housing shortage, but never admits that immigration accounts for 40 to 50 per cent of the growth in the number of households.

The trouble with the growth fetishists is they're always confusing quantity with quality - or refusing to admit that the former comes partly at the expense of the latter. Hamilton notes that high levels of immigration are greatly increasing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

"Australia can be among the richest five nations on Earth if we sacrifice more of our leisure, more time devoted to the community and time with friends and loved ones," Hamilton says. But how exactly would this make us better off?" It is important to stress that, contrary to the usual caricatures; critics such as me are not antigrowth

"We simply take the position that there is far too much emphasis on promoting economic growth over other things that affect our wellbeing. The argument is not that we should allow the economy to decline, but that promoting growth should receive less emphasis."

Thornleigh Bushland Area: Progress with Land Managers

The eastern side of Thornleigh is bounded by valuable bushland comprising the upper end of the Lane Cove National Park, the Scout Association lease and parts of Hornsby Shire. To the south is Pennant Hills Park. The bushland is representative of a tall open forest community comprising *Eucalyptus pilularis* (blackbutt), *Angophora costata* (Sydney red gum) and *Syncarpia glomulifera* (turpentine).

The Thornleigh Bushland area is effectively the main north-western entry point to the Lane Cove National Park. It is also the entry point for a number of local streams that come together further down to form the Lane Cove river system. For this reason, the area is critical to the health and well being of the Lane Cove National Park as a whole. It plays a valuable role as the gateway to the Park from the Thornleigh area, and it is therefore vital that everything possible should be done to prevent the entry of undesirable flora, fauna and water pollution through this area. Legal responsibility and bush care obligations in the Thornleigh Bushland area are fragmented. They lie with the respective land managers, the Department of Environment and Climate Change (DEEC), Hornsby Shire Council (HSC) and the Scout Association of Australia (SAA). It is of the utmost importance that these groups manage the area in a cohesive and unified manner

The bushland/residential interface is subject to continuing pressures from urbanisation including stormwater runoff, green waste dumping,

domestic and feral animals and weed intrusion. Weed penetration into the bushland results from aggressive growth of vines, and from seed dispersed by fauna, wind and water.

STEP has recently met with representatives from both HSC and DEEC in an effort to get an agreed strategy to manage some of the short and medium term issues facing this area, and specifically in the Short Street area. We are pleased to report that great cooperation has been received and progress made, including agreed plans to:

- manage the sediment basins in the area,
- address the problems posed by the existing piles of rubbish and weeds,
- assist the existing Short Street bush care team in their work by erecting additional sediment fences
- mulching of certain sections of the area.
- a plan to deal with fire management and related concerns

The Scouting movement have now also indicated that they are willing to actively support these plans. All parties will be encouraged to treat the Thornleigh Bushland as a single geographic entity and to return it to a state of well managed, healthy bushland and public reserve, capable of sustained management with minimal resources and human intervention.

Contact STEP if you wish to assist with bush regeneration

Information, Diary Updates and Good News

STEP Walks Programme: The walk scheduled for June has had to be cancelled. The next walk will be Sunday 21 September at 1.30 pm. Neroli Lock will guide us along the STEP Track in South Turramurra. Further details will be provided in the next Newsletter.

Bush Improvements:

- The track linking Browns Field to the Howson Oval area of Twin Creeks Reserve has recently been upgraded. There is now a wooden footbridge and wooden retainers have been installed at intervals along the track.
- A contract bush care team has being doing some excellent work in the main area of Browns Field. They
 have almost defeated the Tradescantia scourge!
- The old track linking the Sheldon Forest Track to the Warrigal Road sector of Rofe Park is being upgraded and bush care is under way in this area.

Vulnerable plant found: STEP member John Martyn reports that, after unsuccessfully searching for *Darwinia biflora* in the places he used to find it, he has found a specimen in the area "somewhere below the George Christie Oval, Fox Valley".

Australian Plants Society: The North Shore Group run a weekly "Tuesday Walks and Talks Programme" at the Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Garden, 420 Mona Vale Road, St Ives. Enquiries to Bob (9417 5217), Bill (9498 6052) or Margaret (9971 8991).

Australian Plants Identification Course: The North Shore Group of the Australian Plants Society is running this popular course over four Saturdays Sat 16/23 Aug and 6/13 Sept 2008. Each session 9am to 1pm. Venue: Education Centre, Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Garden, St Ives. Presenter is Dr Joan Webb. The course fee is \$125. Registration for the course can be made with Fred Langshaw 9449 1541.

Fido frightens feathered friends....Research from UNSW, Sydney.

New research showing that dog-walking in bushland significantly reduces bird diversity and abundance will lend support to bans against the practice in sensitive bushland and conservation areas.

Until now, arguments and debate about the ecological impacts of dog-walking have remained subjective and unresolved because experimental evidence has been lacking. But the first clear evidence that birds perceive dogs as predators and avoid dog-walking areas is published today in *Biology Letters*, reporting research by UNSW biologist Peter Banks and UNSW honours student, Jessica Bryant.

"We found in field studies that dog-walking in bushland causes a 35 percent reduction in bird diversity – the number of species – and a 41 percent reduction in abundance – the number of individual birds in an area," says Dr Banks.

"The effect occurs even in areas where dogwalking is common and where they are prohibited, indicating that birds don't become accustomed to continued disturbance by dogs. This evidence clearly supports the long-term prohibition of dog-walking from sensitive conservation areas," Banks says.

The experiment was conducted at 90 sites in the Hornsby-Berowra-Cowan regions, 35kms north of Sydney, Australia. The area was chosen because it contains remnants of bushland with trails that are either frequently dog-walked or where dogwalking is prohibited. The researchers used three conditions to study dogs' impact on birds: (1) a

person
walking a dog
on a lead on a
trail; (2) a
person
walking alone
on a trail; (3) a
control
condition with
no dog
walking or
humans.



Observers monitored all native birds seen or heard within 50 metres of a 250-metre trail. Monitoring commenced 20 seconds after the walker/dog-walker had set off and continued for 10 minutes.

Ground-dwellings birds appeared most affected: 50 percent of bird species observed in control sites were absent in dog-walked sites. The effect of dog-walking was most pronounced in the area immediately adjacent to the site where dogs were walked, according to Dr Banks. "There were 76 fewer birds within 10 metres of the trail when dog-walking occurred compared to control sites, suggesting birds were seeking refuge away from the immediate vicinity of threat."

The particular sensitivity of ground-dwelling birds to dog-walking was of concern because it could lead to a "cascade" of behavioural changes that could further threaten these species, Dr Banks says. Dog-walking was also likely to affect the accuracy of wildlife surveys that are used to map bird distributions around the world.

NSW Planning Laws - Death by a Thousands Cuts

STEP committee member Susie Gemmel has been a close follower of the NSW Planning Laws. She writes:

"The latest blow to the state's planning laws was delivered this month when the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act Amendment Bill 2008 was introduced into the NSW parliament.

Since its introduction in 1979, successive Governments have watered down the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act to deliver concessions to the development industry. In 2005 the largest assault to date was waged when sweeping changes to our planning laws were introduced under new Part 3A laws. The unprecedented planning powers vested in Planning Minister Frank Sartor under Part 3A were an attack on the Act's original aims to strengthen environmental outcomes in the planning process.

Part 3A introduced the major projects category of development, replacing rigorous environmental assessment of large scale development applications with flimsy concept plans. It streamlined the approvals process and drastically reduced the community's rights of appeal and participation in the planning process.

Since then there have been numerous amendments that further eroded our planning laws. But the 2008 Amendment Bill is bold even by Frank Sartor's standards – it affects the rights and the amenity of every citizen in this state and has potentially devastating consequences for sites with high heritage and environmental values.

Big problems with the Bill include removing control for most developments from elected local councils and placing it in the hands of the Minister and his hand-picked planning panels, along with control over development levies. To add insult to injury, it foists the cost of new planning panels and arbitrators onto local councils, while providing little or no scrutiny of the Minister's use or abuse of these new powers.

One of the worst so called reforms is the expanded role of private certifiers. The introduction of private certification for developers was extremely poor public policy, a grave mistake that has seen many individuals and councils pay dearly for shoddy or corrupt work by unscrupulous certifiers.

The Bill promises new compliance codes and allows private certifiers to determine whether proposed developments meet those codes. The outcome will be that privately certified development proposals will be exempt from going through a formal development application process, removing the rights of neighbours to be informed about a proposed development until they see it going up.

It seems to be obvious to everyone but the state government that there is a fundamental conflict of interest when a private certifier is paid by a developer to decide whether that developer's proposal complies with a code.

In Parliament the Greens, the Opposition and Dr. Gordon Moyes pushed for the Bill to be referred to a parliamentary inquiry to investigate and report on its likely impacts. But the Government did not want any further scrutiny of this bill.

Despite the Minister using the word "accountability" 11 times, the word "consultation" 20 times, and the word "transparency" four times, he refused to release the 538 public submissions made on the draft bill and his Government refused an inquiry into the bill.

With support from the two Shooters Party MPs and Christian Democrat Fred Nile, the Government pushed the bill through the Upper House a few short days after it was introduced.

The Environmental Planning and Assessment Act was first passed into law to strike a balance between development and environmental objectives. After three years of Frank Sartor at the helm the balance has shifted sharply in the developer's favour."

To read the Parliament's review of the legislation, visit: http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/, click the 'Committees' menu, then from Committees list choose 'Legislative Review', then click 'Digest No.7 of 2008'.

Wind farms: Everywhere?

STEP committee member, Jim Wells, ponders the pros and cons of wind farms

Have you seen a wind farm? If you live in Sydney there is a very good chance you haven't because there are only four in NSW and they are all a fair way away. They are near Crookwell, Blayney, Hampton, and on Kooragang Island. The first three places are in the central high country which is regarded as the optimum area in the state for wind farms.

A wind turbine is a very substantial structure and can often be seen from many kilometers away. The visual effect is magnified by the hypnotic effect of the turbine slowly rotating – one cannot take one's eyes of it. It's a bit like the oil rigs in Los Angeles. A new farm has been proposed for the eastern shore of Lake George which is on the highway to Canberra. It will have sixty three turbines, and will supply power to Sydney's desalination plant.

Is this what we want? My view is that we have little choice if we really do want to reduce our carbon footprint but I regret very much the blot on the landscape impact. It won't be the whole solution – there will be some more hydro (problematical given environmental and water supply issues), tidal, wave and solar energy.

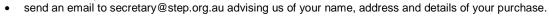
This whole topic is likely to become ever more important and subject to debate. STEP needs to take an informed view on the matter. Some say that wind power is irregular and will always require significant back up from other sources; others that with wide dispersion of sites wind can contribute to base load demand as the wind always blows somewhere.

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