

CONSERVATIONISTS – AND THEIR BLIND SPOTS

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Abstract

Society has moved towards a situation of increasing uncertainty about the future – the turbulent environment. Although this presents problems to conservationists, it is argued that it may also provide a positive opportunity for action. A number of issues concerning the strategy of conservationists are discussed:

- * the suggestion that conservationists should distinguish themselves from preservationists is rejected,*
- * conservationists should pay attention to the long-run implications of present events,*
- * although development interests may have much greater power resources than conservationist movements, the uncertainty of the future will render them much less willing to invest in projects which may invite conflict,*
- * more attention must be paid to developing wide public support, or to not alienating existing public support, and to clear statements of conservationist issues,*
- * in developing one's case, it is vital to see the overall picture of any area or feature, to not under-rate public attitudes and values, and to think in ecosystem terms rather than single feature terms.*

Introduction

This paper seeks to indicate ways in which conservationists might achieve greater impact upon decisionmaking than they do at the present time. Before entering into the major issues of the paper, it may be useful to outline my rationale for deciding to write on this topic at the present moment.

The conservation movement has enjoyed a great deal of limelight and even some success over the last several years. Governmental funds have been made available on a relatively generous scale for both governmental action and in grants to non-governmental bodies concerned with conservation. There has been a generally sympathetic attitude to conservation by the Australian and some state governments.

This situation has perhaps lulled some conservationists into a false sense of well-being, and has perhaps dulled the drive and energy of others.

However, the situation has now changed drastically. Not only have funds been severely reduced, but there is now a considerable back-lash against conservationist trends being voiced throughout the community. Governments are forced to hear this backlash, and there are many indications that they are heeding it when making decisions.

Perhaps I should stress that I do not see this merely as a result of change of government at federal level. I believe that much of this would have happened even if the 1975 change of government had not occurred. The impact upon conservationist movements might have been a little more moderate, but it would have been significant.

Partly, as a result of these economic and political pressures, governmental policies have vacillated, and the term "stop-go policies" has become familiar. Critics of government describe this as irresponsibility; governments describe it as necessary flexibility. Irrespective of one's perspective, the conservationist, with his inevitable commitment to the long-range view, to planned use of resources and to a notional state of equilibrium finds this a disturbing phenomenon and one which is difficult to handle.

Again, I suggest that we are likely to continue in this apparently unstable economic, social and political environment for some time. Futurologists do not agree about very much, but they do generally agree that:

- * society will become increasingly varied and complex*
- * there will be increasing change of all kinds*
- * it will become increasingly difficult to make forecasts of any kind.*

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In simple words, society is moving towards increasing uncertainty – or to what has been labelled the “turbulent environment”. Attempts to develop new patterns of social organization to cope with this emerging environment have mainly followed three major lines:—

- decentralization of authority and control
- decreasing specialization and segmentation
- more open systems of planning and decision-making.¹

The conservationist today is therefore facing an uncertain future, which by its very nature will be somewhat antithetical to his basic commitments. At this point in time, he is not only doing so from a relatively powerless position (as always), but one which is particularly vulnerable.

Conservationist or Preservationist?

A popular bit of rhetoric which strikes me as a dangerous one, particularly when conservationists themselves really believe it, goes something like this:

“Conservation is to do with the balanced use of resources; we are therefore going to be reasonable at all times and see the other viewpoint as well as our own; we recognise and accept the need for compromise; we are not nasty negative people like those we label preservationists”.

Obviously, there is some truth in this statement. After all, it is often heard from the Hydro-Electric Commission of Tasmania, mining interests, the timber industry, building developers and a multitude of others. All those people cannot be wrong.

Unfortunately, it also clouds the real issue. Conservation-oriented decisions grow out of two circumstances – either something is of no conceivable economic value, e.g., the Simpson Desert National Park, or there has been a resolution of conflict. It is not the responsibility of the conservation activist to start from a compromise position, but rather to unashamedly start from a preservationist stance, leaving compromise to others as much as possible. Conservation interests are almost inevitably in conflict with development’s interests. We should not be ashamed of seeking to *preserve* elements of our natural environment, nor frightened of adopting an extremist position. In our own field of interest, caves are a non-renewable resource – each compromise which removed a cave reduces our resource stock for all time.

At this stage I am not discussing strategies, but only our basic position. In practice, strategies will have to be developed quite separately for each situation, but they will be strengthened if we are sure of our basic position. Naturally, we will have to accept compromise at times, because one principle of our kind of government and society is that nobody wins every round. But one sure way to lose every round is to start from a compromise position.

Good Management and Wicked Plots

Many development interests are playing for high stakes in major projects. This leads to three important factors:

- development interests employ very highly skilled negotiators who really understand power and negotiation.
- major projects demand a long “lead-time” and considerable planning, e.g., the decisions necessary for the introduction of the STD telephone system to Australia were all made by 1960; the legislative basis for introducing the wood-chip industry to Victoria was laid down in 1961.
- this, in turn, means that the turbulent environment creates big problems for the development interests even more than for conservationist interests.

Development interests are often accused of hatching plots in secrecy, and of only announcing plans when it is too late to fight effectively against them.² I suggest this is an over-simplification. It is often more a question of the long lead-times involved and the lack of community awareness at the time. Few conservationists could foresee at the time the implications of the Victorian Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act of 1961, and still fewer members of the general public could have been stirred at that time.

In this context, it therefore concerns me deeply that the purchase of freehold land in the Buchan

area by mining interests commenced over six years ago.³ The crunch will probably come within the next ten years, and as yet, there are too few signs of our preparedness for action in this area.

However, although the odds are against us in terms of resources for planning and negotiation, I would argue the stakes are weighted in our favour. Development interests cannot afford to lose too heavily; future uncertainty presses very heavily upon them, and the risks inherent in over-investment in a project facing conflict with conservationist interests can be extreme.

Basically, therefore, there are two potential blind spots in this situation:

- * We fail to perceive the significant long-run implications of present events, and hence may well find ourselves acting too late.
- * We may also fail to recognise the extent to which future uncertainty may, in fact, represent a source of power to the conservationist movement.

A Power Base for Conservation

It has often been said that a statesman is concerned primarily with the good of his country, while a politician is concerned primarily with the next election. Even though some politicians may cause us to wonder whether they are motivated by either, the fact is

- (a) that it is probably a reasonably accurate statement; and
- (b) Western countries are governed by politicians.

In other words, the power of the conservation movement is largely dependent upon the extent to which governments see conservation issues as likely to concern a significant number of voters.

There is, in fact, considerable research evidence to show that legislators are more likely to vote in agreement with what they perceive is the attitude of their electors than on the basis of their personal preference and belief. This is influenced by a few other factors, for instance, a parliamentarian from an uncertain seat is less likely to be influenced by the official party line than one from a safe seat. Similarly the greater the division of community opinion, the more likely it is that the parliamentarian will adhere to the party line.⁴

Without going into too much detail on the social science research evidence, let me try to summarize its practical implications. It is vital to convince decision-makers that our interests are held and/or supported by a large number of citizens. It is important to not only communicate this but to communicate a clear perception of the issue under consideration — in other words, arguments for conservation are much more likely to succeed if they are put in simple clear terms. There is also extremely good evidence that an image of respectability is much more successful than a more radical stance and that the capacity to form alliances with other interests can contribute immensely to one's success.

A specific practical example of general failure in conservation has been the conservationists insistence upon the pure wilderness concept. I am personally convinced that this has alienated community support because the conservation message comes across as one of excluding people — no one wants to be excluded.

There is a strong community support for conservation in general and for wilderness. This is demonstrated quite clearly in the relevant research in Australia, e.g., Rinkis⁵ and McKenry⁶. The latter asked a sample of the Victorian population their opinions regarding a number of statements and his results include the following:

- 59% of Victorians disagreed with the statement:
"We have sufficient national parks to meet our needs".
- 76% disagreed with the statement:
"Too much emphasis is placed on preservation of the environment".
- 95% agreed with the statement:
"We have a duty to our grandchildren to preserve some areas as nature created".
- 80% disagreed with the statement:
"The preservation of wilderness is a waste of time".

These are merely some examples of opinions expressed. The overwhelming impression from the research evidence is that the general population are very positive towards conservation and even positive towards the wilderness concept.

McKenry's respondents saw wilderness as being valuable, inspiring, challenging, beautiful, excit-

ing, good, unspoiled, unique, restful, free and natural. Very few saw wilderness in negative terms. However, only 18% saw it as being roadless and when asked the location of their last visit to a wilderness area, the majority mentioned locations which would not be considered wilderness by most conservationists. All this leads me to the position that we have very great potential public support for wilderness preservation but that support could very easily be reduced by campaigning too hard for exclusion of motor vehicles. I believe that in making exclusion part of the conservationists campaign we are confusing objectives and management. The major fight surely is about objectives and the management fight can follow upon that.

Unfortunately it is not just in alienating general public support that conservationists encounter problems with their own lack of understanding power issues. Far too many conservation organizations have torn themselves apart or made themselves impotent by endless wrangle between themselves which, in turn, has been communicated to the public and the decision-makers.

Again, too much of this has grown out of a concern with detail rather than with simple principles.

Defining One's Case:

This now leads to some of the issues and problems associated with defining what it is for which one should fight. It seems to me this has been perhaps the greatest difficulty for many conservation campaigns. There are simple practical reasons why this is so, yet if we are genuine about conservation we must overcome these inherent problems. Let me simply outline a few of these problems:

1. There is all too often a lack of time to see the overall picture. Without any discredit to the remarkable campaign fought for Mt Etna and the surrounding area by Queensland speleologists, part of the problem of this campaign was that after a long and agonising drive from Brisbane, there is little time to do other than focus on the caves which were the object of the visit. In the course of our own studies there last year⁷ we found very few speleologists who had visited the remarkable series of rimstone pools in one of the efflux creeks, the summit of Mount Etna with its splendid panoramic view of the region, the forest on the southern face of Mount Etna, or a number of other features which make this a very attractive and valuable area.

This is very much a lack of time problem, but it is also a matter of close identification with our own specific interest, i.e., caves, and a lack of appreciation of some of those features which might appeal to other members of the public.

2. A strong identification with one's own cause and interest may well blind one either to other people's perception or to an objective test of priorities. I find it very odd that in spite of the immense concern and campaign for South Western Tasmania, virtually never a voice is raised about the potential loss of the central plateau area – an environment probably even more unique in the southern hemisphere than the South West. I know I am leaving myself open to furious attacks from lovers of the South West but I am sure that my point is a very important one. Moreover, similar examples could be cited all around Australia.
3. One of the very strange aspects of this when one turns to speleology is the extent to which conservation thinking is focused upon beautiful decoration and not upon other features. I am well aware this is not universally true but it happens all too often. I believe that at least on some occasions this under-rates the intelligence of the general public. We fall into this kind of campaign because we feel the public will identify with it. Yet I am certain that the millions of Australians who have visited show caves now realize that lots of caves have pretty decoration, it is not at all unusual or unique, and that there may be some other things of far greater value.
4. It is all too easy to think of one specific feature, e.g., a single cave, and forget the extent to which that is part of a wider system. Single feature thinking has been responsible for literally thousands of tiny reserves around Australia upon each of which a piece of rock, a cave or some other natural feature is now left in glorious isolation from the wider system of which it was part. This is a mistake we cannot afford to go on repeating. Obviously it is a mistake of decision-makers but those of us concerned with conservation should not reinforce this pattern or lead to its further repetition.

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In summary, this particular group of problems can lead to poorly developed or wrongly directed campaigns. At the worst it may well lead us to neglect and even sacrifice features which are of greater value than those which we are fighting to save.

Notes and References

- ¹ This discussion has been based upon the very useful summary in *Telecom 2000* (Australian Telecommunications Commission, 1975) pp. 44-55.
- ² There is sometimes a real foundation for this belief. See for instance, *The Future of Lake Pedder* (Report of Lake Pedder Committee of Enquiry, reprinted by Lake Pedder Action Committee, 1973, p.12).
- ³ WHITE, N. (1972) Conservation pressures at Buchan, *Proc. 8th Biennial Conf. A.S.F.*, p. 55-6.
- ⁴ ROTHMAN, J. (1974) *Planning and Organization for Social Change* (Columbia University Press) pages 233-245.
- ⁵ RINKIS, Irene (1974) *Perspectives on Outdoor Recreation Behaviour in National Parks : A case study of six selected national parks in southeast Queensland*. (M.A. Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Queensland).
- ⁶ McKENRY, Keith (1975) *Recreation, Wilderness and the Public*, (Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation, Victoria).
- ⁷ HAMILTON-SMITH, E., and CHAMPION, R. (1976) *Mount Etna and The Caves*, University of Queensland Speleological Society.