

CHAPTER 5: LAKE PEDDER AND OTHER PRIORITIES

5.1 A decision to proceed only with further consideration of the restoration proposal would still require the commitment of government resources. There would be a need to meet the cost of preliminary research, environmental assessment, planning, monitoring and management. This would raise the question of whether further consideration of the proposal could be accommodated within the current funding priorities of governments.

5.2 In the longer term, an allocation of significant funds from the Commonwealth budget could be required to share the cost of rehabilitation and to either compensate or provide an inducement to the Government of Tasmania. The Committee found that it was important therefore to take a long term perspective when considering priorities and to at least allow for the possibility that a commitment to the proposal could require that significant funds be quarantined from other use for a considerable period.

5.3 The Tasmanian Government argued that other, more urgent, environmental problems had a higher priority to any proposal to drain and restore Lake Pedder:

If funding is available to tackle environmental problems it would be far more productive to consider the environmental challenges already existing in the State. The recent discovery of the European carp in Tasmanian waterways, the emergence of a new strain of *Phytophthora* which is threatening Tasmania's pencil pines, the pollution in the King and Queen rivers and the resultant damage to Macquarie Harbour and the plague proportions of the Pacific sea star in Tasmanian waters are all real problems which are threatening the Tasmanian environment. All of these projects rate well ahead of the draining of Lake Pedder.¹

5.4 The Tasmanian Government apparently has not sought Commonwealth financial assistance in relation to these problems and not all of them may be amenable to expenditure of large amounts of money, nor are they all matters in which the Commonwealth would have an interest. However, concern about some of these other problems was raised in a world heritage context and this could have implications for the Commonwealth's budget. When asked whether the Tasmanian Government had raised its concerns with the Commonwealth a representative of the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories told the Committee that:

... the Tasmanian minister has raised a number of issues associated with the world heritage property management and other parts of Tasmania. The two most recent concerns to be expressed deal with the discovery of European carp in lakes in central Tasmania and the potential for those to spread to other river systems and also the discovery of rootrot fungus *phytophthora* which seems to be capable of surviving and expanding rapidly at relatively high altitudes in colder temperatures. In terms of conservation not just of the world heritage area but more broadly within Tasmania, they are obviously both major concerns.²

1. Tasmanian Government submission, covering letter from the Hon Ray Groom MHA, Premier of Tasmania

2. Evidence p 187.

5.5 The allocation of funds to the draining of Lake Pedder could necessitate a reduction in funds available for the management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area as a whole. This possibility was raised by the Tasmanian Government in its argument about priorities:

There is also work which is required to be undertaken within the WHA. A large number of essential programs have been identified and agreed upon, ranging from visitor interpretation work through to necessary protection and preservation projects. While several will be funded under the current five year management plan, a large number of important projects will not be undertaken due to a lack of funds. Again, if funding were available, these projects would and should be given priority over a proposal which could lead to the generation of a major environmental problem within the WHA.³

5.6 If the Commonwealth were to commit resources, it would first need to consider where its priorities should lie. It would also need to consider whether there would be a risk that it might become committed to a costly intervention in the restoration of the area around Lake Pedder if the low cost option of natural rehabilitation proved to be unsuccessful. The question of priorities would then go beyond the State issues raised by Tasmania, but it would need to be considered in a Tasmanian context because the State Government would also be called upon to commit resources. It might be able to allocate funds only at the expense of management of other parts of the world heritage area generally.

5.7 Other national environmental priorities could require the allocation of significant resources, possibly amounting to several hundred million dollars in each case. Land degradation continues to be a major problem that is almost too serious to measure. Landcare programs may have assisted in reducing the rate of acceleration of land degradation, but a significant proportion of Australia's agricultural lands require attention. The only national survey of land degradation conducted over twenty years ago, found that works in excess of \$600 million (in 1975 prices) were required. Similarly in 1993, the Committee identified a need to spend more than \$200 million over six years on biodiversity programs. A small portion of such funding has since been allocated but not nearly enough to ensure the survival of Australian ecosystems through the establishment of a national comprehensive representative system of protected areas.⁴

5.8 Some of the other potentially expensive environmental problems that require urgent attention are the deterioration of inland water resources, ecologically unsustainable land clearing, protection of endangered species, eradication of feral animals, restructuring of forest industries and urban air pollution. Some problems, such as the emission of greenhouse gases, may require substantial economic adjustments. The retention of Lake Pedder in its current form will not adversely affect the environment in the same way that these other problems are causing environmental deterioration and economic loss. The Lake Pedder restoration proposal is therefore an optional project compared to the other pressing environmental concerns.

3 Tasmanian Government, Submission p 12.

4 In the 1995-96 budget, the Commonwealth allocated \$17 million over four years for a restructured biodiversity program.

5.9 The need for resources to be committed to urgent and damaging environmental problems exceeds the capacity of governments to allocate funds without a significant re-ordering of budget priorities or an increase in revenue. This reduces the opportunities to bring forward the consideration of optional or less pressing proposals and the question of priorities inevitably then becomes an issue.

5.10 The Committee raised the question of priorities with some of those who made submissions in favour of restoring Lake Pedder and was told that assigning priorities to environmental programs was not a valid way of assessing the need to proceed with the proposal. Ms Milne argued that a hierarchical list of priorities was not a meaningful way to consider the environment because '... the immediate short-term goal is obviously to stop further environmental destruction from occurring and to stop things before they happen.'⁵

5.11 Ms Milne explained that the Tasmanian Greens supported the Lake Pedder proposal and she also noted the urgency of several other environmental problems in Tasmania:

In the short term, we are constantly engaged in issues where the destruction is imminent. For example, there is the destruction of Tasmania's old-growth forests as a result of the woodchip licence decision and the destruction of the Tarkine as result of a road being pushed through it destroying world heritage values. We have the degradation of our rivers and streams and our coastal system.

The Greens are working on a number of immediate issues. We have European carp infestation. We have Phytophthora in our central highlands which, no doubt as a result of the Tarkine road, is spreading in the north west.⁶

5.12 The Tasmanian Greens' concern with immediate problems was matched by long term goals:

We are working on a number of short-term, immediate, urgent issues, because we are engaged in a policy of prevention. But we also have a longer term goal of restoring the destruction that has already occurred. So rather than see things in a hierarchical order, I would prefer things to be seen in terms of a circle whereby you have all the issues listed and you network the circle according to which issue has priority, which accords with the fastest destruction.

Taking one issue out of that circle means that the whole web loses its integrity. You cannot say 'This issue is more important than another issue,' or, 'This issue should be dropped or put back on the agenda.'⁷

5 Evidence p 263.

6 Evidence p 263.

7 Evidence p 263.

5.13 A similar position was put on behalf of the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Lake Pedder Study Group by Dr Mosley, who referred to the need for Australia to honour the commitments it made when it became a party to the World Heritage Convention.⁸ Dr Mosley considered that priorities would only become an issue if the amount proposed to be spent was 'so enormous' that it would 'swamp the budget'.⁹ He went on to submit that:

... we do not think the amounts are likely to be anything like of that order so that the obligation that the Commonwealth has, both legally and morally, to restore the area, can be applied ...¹⁰

5.14 The Pedder 2000 committee saw no need for it to consider priorities. Dr Bob Brown stated that '...it is not a priority for Pedder 2000 to restore Lake Pedder. That is our single reason for being. We do not have a list of priorities ...'¹¹ Dr Brown also expressed a personal view:

... there are more urgent issues. They are not of a higher priority; they are more urgent ...

There are other urgent issues around this country which must be addressed now because there is no getting them back once the damage is done.

These are short-term issues. If you are looking at long term issues in this country, I do not think there is anything with a greater positive priority than the restoration of Lake Pedder.¹²

5.15 From a government perspective it is essential to set priorities, particularly with discretionary expenditure such as that which would be involved in the Lake Pedder proposal. Priority setting and close examination of expenditure proposals is an entrenched part of the budget preparation. If the Commonwealth and Tasmania become involved in any detailed consideration and assessment of the proposal there would need to be an allocation of resources. It is not possible for the Commonwealth to make such allocations without regard to its very difficult budgetary circumstances or to the urgent need to allocate resources to achievement of other goals.

5.16 The merits and the urgency of the proposal to restore Lake Pedder have to be considered along with the merits and urgency of all the other major programs, projects and proposals to which the Commonwealth could conceivably need to contribute. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4 above, the Committee does not accept that the costs associated with the proposal would necessarily be minimal, nor does it consider that further assessment of the proposal would be without significant cost. The Lake Pedder proposal could not simply be added to an existing program as a minor expenditure item, to be funded out of current budget allocations as circumstances allow.

5.17 Neither the Commonwealth nor the State could, or should, approach this project unilaterally. Joint funding would be required, possibly with the bulk coming from the Commonwealth, with the Tasmanians making mostly 'in kind' payments of labour and materials. Neither side could commit resources until an agreement is reached. If the proposal were to be advanced there would be a need for work to be done to diminish the uncertainty

8 Evidence p 467.

9 Evidence p 470.

10 Evidence p 470.

11 Evidence p 309.

12 Evidence p 307.

about the restoration work and the likely costs. In the current circumstances it would not be appropriate for the Commonwealth alone to commit significant funds to such work. Even if the circumstances change and it becomes appropriate to contemplate allocating resources to further studies, the proposal would still have to be considered in terms of priorities and, for the present, other priorities would be more worthy of funding.

5.18 The Lake Pedder proposal would only have a priority if it attracts considerably more political and community support. Such support is currently quite inadequate for it to be allocated funds ahead of other projects. Some of the proponents have accepted that draining Lake Pedder is not an urgent matter even though they regard it as extremely important to do so. A delay until priorities change would not appear to diminish the merits of the proposal, except to the extent that it would close off the possibility of initiating the process by the symbolically significant year of 2000. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this would also allow time for the clarification of uncertainties about possible costs and benefits.