

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION - IS FURTHER ASSESSMENT WARRANTED

6.1 The flooding of the original Lake Pedder was regarded by many people a mistake that should not have happened. More objective and detailed assessment twenty-five years ago probably may have led to the identification of alternatives that could have allowed the original lake to be protected. Public perception of the importance of conservation has changed considerably in the last quarter of a century and it is unlikely that such a project as the flooding of Lake Pedder would now be approved. This does not mean that the Australian community would now support draining the new lake.

6.2 Draining Lake Pedder would be a symbolic event that would inspire conservationists around the world and create considerable interest in Tasmania, but it would also involve some costs. Although the proposal has already attracted international interest and support there is spirited opposition from many sectors of the Tasmanian community and the Tasmanian Government and the opposition. This opposition also has a symbolic basis. The HEC and its predecessor since 1985 has employed many thousands of Tasmanians and they identify the HEC with jobs, security, quality of life and their families. To many Tasmanians the hydro dams have a heritage significance in terms of working history. The opponents of the proposal also believed that draining Lake Pedder would symbolically denigrate those who supported the decision to flood the lake and those who worked on the Gordon River Power Development.

6.3 The area in question is world heritage. The proposal is therefore a matter for consideration and assessment by the Commonwealth as well as the Tasmanian Government. The proposal, if successfully implemented would enhance the world heritage values of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area by exposing unique geomorphological features, but world heritage values might be diminished while the area inundated by the current lake is rehabilitated. Careful management, monitoring, research and, possibly, a costly intervention in the rehabilitation process would be required to ensure that any short term damage would not be made permanent.

6.4 Although draining and restoring Lake Pedder would enhance the world heritage area there is no obligation on Australia to do so nor are there any compelling biological conservation or environment protection reasons for implementing the restoration proposal. So although Lake Pedder is subject to the provisions of the World Heritage Convention, the suggestion that the Convention obligates Australia to restore the original Lake Pedder is not sustainable if the terms of the Convention are given a standard interpretation. To proceed with the proposal would be a matter of choice and negotiation between the Commonwealth and Tasmania.

6.5 Recent investigations show conclusively that the key geomorphological features are intact and will re-emerge if the current lake is drained. Rehabilitating the biological features of the lake, its surrounds and, if need be, the whole area of inundation is more problematical but could be achieved. The proposal therefore is technically possible. More than this, it is also a proposal that has symbolic and spiritual value to some people. It has the potential to inspire conservationist around the world. As such it could be one of the largest environmental rehabilitation projects ever attempted.

6.6 Those who advocate restoring Lake Pedder argue that it would be a wonderful asset with high universal value. Much of the benefit of restoring Lake Pedder would be aesthetic and inspirational in nature and therefore difficult to assess. The Committee believes that such values, however measured, would be significant. There is some doubt however that the environmental benefits would offset the costs.

6.7 It is clear that the proposal involves significant costs as well as substantial risk. The existing lake has its own aesthetic and environmental values that would be lost if it were drained. The costs and benefits of the impact on the hydro-electric system and tourism would also need to be considered before an in-principle decision could be made but at present this is largely an area of speculation. The consequences of removing Lake Pedder as a hydro-electric system water storage would vary with changes in future demand. Removing this lake from the system could well have a negative impact on future investment decision in the State.

6.8 It is not necessary for the lake and the impounded area to be restored to its pre-flooding pristine condition. It is possible, although unlikely, that the vegetation would naturally re-create a near pristine condition. It is more likely that, after a long period of time and with intervention, a vegetation cover similar to that which existed before flooding could be established. However, there is a risk that weeds would invade and other exotic species might become established. A view was also expressed by some witnesses that draining the lake would cause a reduction in the platypus and the introduced trout populations.

6.9 The proposal to drain and restore Lake Pedder was sufficiently developed to be raised as a question for an in-principle decision but insufficient detail and information is currently available to provide the basis for a definite commitment to proceed. More information would be required before an in-principle decision could be taken and even then there would be a need for research, planning and environmental impact assessment before a final commitment could be made to 'pull the plug'. A final decision would commit governments to further research, some site rehabilitation work, monitoring, on-going management and the provision of new infrastructure. It could also commit governments to a costly intervention in the natural rehabilitation process.

6.10 Even without intervention, significant costs would be incurred if the proposal were to proceed. There would be a need to commit resources to research, planning, environmental impact assessment, monitoring and some restoration work to prevent erosion in key areas. Management of access during the rehabilitation phase would also require considerable resources, particularly if the tourism benefits posited by Pedder 2000 were to eventuate. It is also likely that the only feasible ways of draining the Huon catchment would be to either breach the Scotts Peak Dam or to install a spillway. The latter option could be costly but might be the preferred option if it is found that it is necessary to retain a flood mitigation capability to protect downstream communities and industries.

6.11 Although it is not possible at present to predict with certainty what the costs would be, it is most likely that they would be significant. The Commonwealth and Tasmania would have to commit considerable resources to the project if the proposal were to proceed. Even in the initial stages, millions of dollars could be required before a final decision could be made and the draining begun. It would therefore inevitably become a question of priority in the allocation of budget funds. There are other more urgent and pressing environmental concerns that need to be dealt with and the resources available seem increasingly inadequate. There are already necessary projects within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area that are not proceeding because of a lack of resources.

6.12 By comparison, retaining the current Lake Pedder would not constitute an environmental problem. Governments have much less discretion in deciding how and when they will respond to other problems and Lake Pedder can be left as an option to be possibly pursued as circumstances and resources allow. The most compelling reasons for restoring the lake are symbolic - there is no obligation in world heritage terms to proceed with the restoration proposal nor are there compelling conservation reasons to do so. The proposal does have some world heritage and conservation merit but it is the symbolic merit which weighs most heavily with those in favour of proceeding.

6.13 Even if the questions identified in the proceeding chapters can be answered and it can be shown that there are net benefits, it would not automatically follow that a decision to proceed would be made. To do so would be a matter for the Commonwealth and State governments of the day and they would need to be sensitive to the weight of public opinion.

6.14 The matter is not urgent and this acknowledged by Pedder 2000. Things are changing very slowly under the current Lake Pedder. The Pedder 2000 Committee acknowledges that it may take some time for the attitude of the Tasmanian Government to change. This would presumably occur if the weight of public opinion was clearly in favour of the proposal. If the views of the State Government and the Tasmanian community changed and it appeared that the proposal had more likelihood of success, then the Commonwealth could review its position on funding further studies and assessments.

6.15 The identification, evaluation and balancing of the costs and benefits would not be an easy process and would involve some cost. The effort and expenditure required to answer quickly all the possible questions is not an appropriate use of the resources of either the Commonwealth or the State, given the absence of any real prospect that the proposal will get the go ahead in the near future.

6.16 The request from the Pedder 2000 Committee for the Commonwealth to support research, further investigation and the establishment of a Centre for Restorative Ecology should be evaluated in the context of general budgetary considerations. This evaluation should include consideration of the need to direct resources to other high priority environmental concerns and the extent of the opposition to the current proposal. The Commonwealth's role should be to encourage and support investigations undertaken by the Tasmanian Government and to ensure that whatever is done does not detract from the world heritage values of the region. For the time being the question is academic, and any research support from the Commonwealth should be limited to the pursuit of academic research.

6.17 There are more compelling and urgent priorities that make it inappropriate to allocate Commonwealth resources to consideration of a proposal that is not supported by the relevant government and which has no real prospect of proceeding in the foreseeable future.

6.18 In view of these factors it is the opinion of the Committee that further research or evaluation of the feasibility of draining Lake Pedder would be inappropriate at this time. It is unfortunate that the beautiful, geologically unique lake was ever flooded but with finite resources and many competing environmental goals, it is unlikely that enough of the other higher priority tasks will be accomplished in the near future to make way for the allocation of resources for the restoration of the original lake. Members of the Committee understand the disappointment which those who advocate draining the lake will feel when they read this conclusion, but we consider this recommendation to be the one which most fully reflects our responsibilities to all Australians and to Australia's natural heritage. One lesson from the

history of Lake Pedder is that, in future, a much greater weight must be given to the preservation of biological and geological diversity when considering use of pristine areas.

John Langmore, MP
Committee Chair

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