

A reasonable case could be made that Australian governments are conducting an unstated campaign to obliterate all traces of indigenous flora and fauna and natural habitats, just as such a campaign was (is) waged against indigenous people.

The truth is more likely that anything that gets in the way of corporate and individual profit is denigrated, neglected or deliberately destroyed. This system generates a lot of cash in the short term but in the long term is necessarily fatal. Many people go along with it in full knowledge of what they are doing, but the salaries and perks, the profits and opportunities of ignoring reality are conveniently put aside. Why, the government arranged a study and said it was ok. Besides it is someone else's responsibility to look after the environment.

Modern Western culture, as promoted by multinational corporations, and therefore media and governments, is based on at least three profound fallacies -

1. Money is wealth
2. Development and population growth is always good
2. People are more important than the environment

All these values are, of course, self-serving. A moment's reflection reveals they cannot be true. Yet our governments follow them, or at least adopt them to suit their purposes i.e. gaining power, taxes for the state, and wealth for their client base.

These profit driven cultural syndromes are supported by death-worshipping religions that sprang out of the Middle East. If paradise lies in the afterlife why worry about life on Earth?

On top of that we have the colonial attitudes. White men know best.

The outcomes

Some examples from Victoria of the results of lack of democratic and open and accountable process, and lack of consideration for environmental impacts are -

Water Projects

The Wonthaggi desalination plant was built under a Labor Government (with Liberal Party support). Labor Premier John Brumby said the project would go ahead irrespective of the outcome of the environmental assessment process. The plant is now built. It cost billions of dollars and may never be used. The north-south pipeline from the Goulburn River to Sugarloaf Reservoir is also complete. It was built in the face of intense opposition from people concerned about environment impacts, cost hundreds of millions of dollars and has been closed down. The environmental damage caused by construction of both projects has been done.

There are many other examples. Some have been approved and partly funded by federal governments. On what basis is a mystery.

Urban Growth Boundary Reviews

The urban growth boundary of Melbourne has been reviewed numerous times over the last ten years or so, and now seems to be under constant review. The reviews are attended by mountains of paper studies and computer models, reams of tables and charts, often contradictory or plainly foolish. Few citizens bother with the process anymore as it is clearly a charade. The developers do more or less as they please. There is no science or environmental consideration at all. The only way developments are constrained now is if opponents are rich, have useful political links, or can muster enough support to threaten the seats of politicians.

The grasslands of the Victorian Western Basaltic Plains are now down to less than one per cent of their original extent, and are still shrinking under the weight of Melbourne's urban expansion. Many of the extant grassland reserves have been wiped off the map, to be replaced by 'offsets' or some recreated simulations elsewhere.

All of this, apparently, was acceptable to the environment departments of state and federal governments.

The options

The Victorian State Government appears now to have abandoned even the semblance of environmental care.

As a result, citizens have had to resort to legal challenges against the state government, which does not follow its own (often inadequate) environmental protection laws and regulations.

Because there is little money in the state budgets for environmental protection an increasing workload is transferred to private enterprise. There is a vast amount of work done by volunteers in maintaining native vegetation – work hours and expertise not recognised in any budget.

Much of the best expertise regarding the native environment resides with native peoples, and the volunteer groups working to preserve what is left. With what is possibly a calculated piece of bastardry, the long years of work put in by many people to preserve native grasslands on the basalt plains north and west of Melbourne was rendered worthless when the reserves were rezoned for urban growth.

Rather than stifling volunteers, it might be more productive to encourage and support them.

Everyone knows that it is easier and cheaper to retain indigenous bush remnants, rather than to restore or replace them with artificial substitutes. Governments are choosing the expensive and second or third best options.

Prevention is better than the cure.

Urban bushland reserves are generally increasingly impacted by weeds, feral animals, changed hydrology, bad air quality, bad water quality, altered fire regimes, increased human traffic including dog-walking, vandalism, stealing of flora and fauna, dumping of live animals and rubbish dumping. As developers move into State and National parks and other reserves, all these kinds of impacts are being duplicated on a larger scale.

The already inadequate permeability rules in Victorian urban areas are routinely breached despite being written into planning schemes.

Prescribed burn targets can be very damaging. Frequent repeated use of fire increases runoff and erosion, and over time can alter the vegetation type to fire tolerant species. Such species are also likely to be more fire prone. A reorientation of burning programs to take more account of the impact on native flora and fauna is important.

In Victoria management or recovery plans for many threatened species are non-existent. If management plans do exist they are often not fully implemented.

The number of listed threatened species across Australia is increasing, and native habitats generally continue to decline. The listed threatened species are probably only a small part of the overall threatened species as many cryptic species remain undiscovered. Even when species are discovered, for example during flora and fauna surveys prior to mining (notably in Western Australia and South Australia) the description and listing process takes a long time. Meanwhile the mining proceeds.

Most of the reserve systems no longer have the full suite of flora and fauna that was present before the arrival of Europeans. This means that these reserves and the rest of the landscape are going to change over time as the consequence of missing pieces in the jigsaw; pollinators, predators, diseases, invasive species, food sources, etc. No-one knows what the changes will be or whether the changes will favour human survival. My guess is that they won't. A weakened ecosystem is more likely to succumb to feral invasions and diseases.

Conclusion

The message is clear. There is a fairly complete lack of will by governments at all levels to adequately address loss of biodiversity and loss of habitat. The problems are getting worse for a host of reasons while at the same time governments are less inclined to do anything about them. "We haven't got enough money," they say. The reality is the problems are extremely complex, and the priorities of politicians generally lie elsewhere. But a good start would be to have some democracy. Open and accountable government might follow.

To continue on our present path is completely pointless.

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