

The Greens Crying Wolf

John Hyde

Conservationists are crying wolf. In doing so they may injure their cause. Consider the evidence:

Five weeks ago, writing in praise of Mr Kerin's deregulation of the wheat market, I made this aside: "the carefully fostered belief that Australia's farmland is in general being degraded is nonsense". If reaction is a guide, farmers' rights to dispose of their wheat as they wish is no longer contentious, but their rights over the use of their land have become highly contentious.

One of my correspondents wrote "the overall effect of wheat farming on the Australian environment is disastrous". In evidence he cited the ridiculous as though it were gospel--- for instance, a Sydney Morning Herald article (7/3/87) which had this to say: "From each hectare of land used for cropping, between 50 and 300 tonnes of topsoil is lost a year". Think about it. 300 tonnes of soil covers a hectare to the depth of about 3cm. At that rate of loss, after three crops, a shallow topsoil would have all gone. In fact, over most of my family's farm, but not all of it, after some thirty to forty crops, the topsoil is deeper than it was when first cleared. Those hectares which have lost soil quality are, nevertheless, a considerable worry---a personal worry affecting our pockets. Self interest keeps us well abreast of new ideas for coping with the problem of soil degradation. Self interest also encourages us to identify nonsense.

A front page article in "The Weekend Australian" (Jan. 13-14) also demonstrates my point. It described the Tammin Shire in the Western Australian wheatbelt as "not a pretty place....once one of Western Australia's most productive wheat areas". Aware that Tammin farmland remains valuable, I asked the Australian Bureau of Statistics for some details of the Shire's production. During the five years, 1948/49 to 1953/54 (chosen because Tammin separated from its neighbour in 1948) the Tammin Shire produced 86,538 tonnes of wheat at a yield of 0.95 tonnes/hectare. By contrast, in the five years to 1988/89 the shire produced 291,441 tonnes at an average yield of 1.56 tonnes/hectare. It seems Tammin is still one of Western Australia's most productive wheat areas. In the same period the Shire has more than doubled its wool production and added

35,981 tonnes of a new crop, sweet lupins, to its five-yearly harvest.

These considerations do not change the fact that some very good farmland in the Tammin Shire has been rendered almost worthless by salt encroachment, and that the problem is serious. But farmers knew it was serious long before there was a Green movement of any consequence. The case for action does not need the support of nonsense and indeed may be discredited by nonsense. If I were as dishonest as some Greenies, I could point out that most of the salt land in Tammin Shire is crown land, implying that the government was to blame. The truth, however, is that most of the salt land in Tammin was there before the white man arrived and, being considered worthless, was never alienated.

Other examples abound. The ABC's "7.30 Report" recently showed a badly wind-eroded gateway. It did not, however, identify its location or the season in which the erosion occurred. Nor did the cameras focus on paddocks in the background where, if my eyes served me right, an attempt had been made to control the erosion. Instead it told us that 250 square kms---i.e. 10 to 20 farms---were becoming useless for agriculture, in WA alone, each year. Such patently inaccurate sensationalism is unlikely to produce a rational solution to a genuine problem.

In all apparent seriousness, Katy Sher wrote in "Habitat" that "Soil erosion alone costs Australia \$2 billion a year in lost production. The costs of remedying the problem have been estimated to reach \$600 million". Obviously they were not credibly estimated, because, if they had been, there would have been a rush to invest \$600 million for a 333% annual return.

Phillip Toyne, Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, in "Conservation News" tells us that land degradation costs \$600 million per annum. This is a credible and, in some contexts, probably a useful figure, but without context the figure is meaningless. Degradation from what condition of which farmland? \$600 million less than what once-possible production?

The truth of the matter is surely something like this: Australian agricultural land is becoming steadily more productive---the Tammin Shire is not atypical. This gain is being brought about by many changes---better weed killers; better grain and stock; better rotations, particularly better use of legumes; better fertilisers; and better soil management. Australian farms are improving because self interest encourages farmers to look after them.

Nevertheless, production is considerably less than it would be if farmers knew the answers to some known (and probably some unknown) problems associated with soil management. It is particularly sad to see areas which, against the trend, are going backwards---i.e. being degraded. These are common enough to be easily found, but they do not

constitute most of Australian farmland. I suspect that an even greater loss of potential is associated with other areas, from which production is static or improving only slowly because one aspect of soil quality is deficient---say, structure, pH, salinity or a plant nutrient. But who knows?

Mr Rick Farley, Executive Director of The National Farmers Federation referred to the problem of land degradation as "The AIDS of the Earth". His members will, no doubt, welcome taxpayer subsidies for expenditures which, by and large, they are making already, and they should welcome government intervention to deal with spillover effects---i.e. problems caused by other farmers or, as is quite often the case, by the Shire or Roads Department.

Inasmuch as land degradation is a serious problem that can in most, but not all, cases be avoided by individuals managing their own affairs well, Mr Farley's metaphor is well chosen. However, I think such high-flown rhetoric may encourage further nonsense and become an invitation to people with a totalitarian bent to control the use of farmers' land, just as the Wheat Board controlled their wheat.

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