

Annual Report for the year to October 2010

STEP continues to perform strongly, with a focus on those local and national issues which we believe are important and to which we believe our activities can make a real difference. These matters have all been well covered in our newsletter, STEP Matters, copies of which are to be found on our new web site. I will today therefore only deal with these in overview.

Committee

STEP continues to benefit from an effective and well credentialed committee. We generally meet monthly and more often if required. We were fortunate to have two new members join the committee during the year. Steve Procter is a long time STEP member, bush regenerator and bush walker and he will be assuming the role of Treasurer after the AGM. Jill Green is a relative newcomer to STEP and brings both excellent environmental and business qualifications to the Committee. I would like to extend a warm welcome to both of them.

Apart from one resignation, the committee of 2010 will remain unchanged after the AGM. The continuity this ensures will help STEP to deliver cohesive future policy. I would however like to urge all members consider nominating for the Committee in future, as we are always on the look out for fresh ideas and talent.

Jim Wells

It is with great regret that the committee bids farewell to Jim Wells, who has filled the role of Treasurer with great dedication and skill over many years. Our current very sound financial situation is due to a numbers of factors, not the least of which has been Jim's extremely safe husbanding of STEP resources. Fortunately, Jim has indicated that he will retain an active interest in STEP, and will remain available to provide assistance to our new Treasurer if required.

Accounts

STEP continues to enjoy a sound financial position, in part due to the profitable sale of our publications and also to subscriptions from our solid membership base. We also benefit from receiving a steady flow of generally small but valuable donations. This year we would particularly also like to acknowledge the receipt of a \$5000 grant from the Turrumurra Community Bank (Bendigo Bank), to assist with the expenses of producing a revised and enlarged edition of the iconic 1994 STEP publication "*A Field Guide to the Bushland of the Upper Lane Cove Valley*". We will finance the remaining bulk of the production costs of the publication from STEP reserves.

Secretarial

While I have acknowledged the contribution from our entire Committee, I would like in particular to mention the untiring efforts of our secretary, Helen Wortham. Helen makes sure that our membership records, event organisation, publication sales and much, much more are handled in a smooth and timely manner. She is also the editor in chief of many of our publications, including our recent Position Paper on bushland tracks and trails, the upcoming new edition of our Field Guide and our just released new web site.

Grants

We continue to support the Young Scientist awards but some while ago decided to no longer support, with grants, local schools who wished to invest in environmental projects. This arose due to continuing difficulty in attracting good applications for such projects. Instead we last year decided to explore other options to get our message into the school age group, including helping to run a competition with the 350.org to encourage school children to understand the importance a CO₂ target of 350 parts per million. This project too seems to have delivered disappointing outcomes, and so we are now engaged with the bicyclensw in discussions to use their schools education programme to deliver a message of environmentally responsible bike riding in bushland areas.

Bushwalks

This year we organised an active programme of monthly bush walks for both experienced and recreational bush walkers. STEP is already well known for its series of maps of the various walking trails stretching from Middle Harbour all the way to the top end of Lane Cove Valley. Our walks programme now provides a guided practical alternative for those who do not belong to organised walking groups. Bush walking is an activity which attracts interest from all age groups and is proving to be an excellent educational medium as well as helping to attract new members to STEP. Our thanks go to Robert Bracht, Andrew Little, John Martyn, Tim Gastineau-Hills, Jim Wells for organising and leading these walks.

Talks

We organised three public talks during the year, the topics of which all addressed key environmental issues. Our intention is to both educate and to question prevailing wisdom in key areas, as indeed does the topic following tonight's AGM. This year we also tried a new Q&A type format for the release of the *STEP Position Paper* on bushland tracks and trails. As a result, we believe that the format is suitable for use in cases where active community engagement is desired. Attendances have been good and an ambitious programme for 2011 is being planned.

Newsletter

Our newsletter, *STEP Matters*, continues to be our prime method of communicating with our members and also with local councillors, politicians and other like minded groups. We publish five editions per year and we have seen these grow in size as we try to cover a greater range of both local and national issues. We would like to receive more direct feedback from our members, but we know that the newsletter is well regarded in conservation circles and helps to maintain the high profile of the STEP brand. Past copies can always be found on our web site.

Digital

Last year we made mention that STEP intended to increase its use of electronic communication to deliver new and quicker services to our members, including a re-vamped web presence, email reminders of upcoming events, STEP campaigns and urgent updates on key issues. The redesign of our web site has taken longer than we anticipated but I am delighted that it is now up and running. Please let us know what you think of it. It is information rich and is targeted not only at existing STEP members but at all in the community who believe that we need to plan within a long term environmental framework if we are to prevent the current tyranny of short term decisions destroying, piece by piece, our remaining natural bushland areas and biodiversity.

Issues

The issues that STEP consider important are fully covered in the newsletter on our web site. Many are of a local nature, particular to our northern Sydney region. Most however are issues of substance that concern Australia nationally and internationally. There is little point in rehashing them here, save to say that they will all require solutions that will go to the core of the way we live and work.

They do however have a common and continuing theme, which bears repetition from this same report last year and for which we do not apologise. Namely, that we cannot continue to hold as true the view that we can sustain an economic model that is predicated on the assumption that infinite growth is forever possible in a world of finite resources. A restructuring of the global economy is needed, and in fact has already begun, with renewable energy and resource recycling at last beginning to gain momentum, albeit still too slowly. The desperate defensive battles of the sunset industries such as coal mining will inevitably delay this process, aided and abetted by Governments who do know better but who are too faint hearted to provide the needed long-term leadership.

A key characteristic of the successful economy of the future will be population stability, yet the political leadership of our main parties displayed a disinterest in and lack of understanding of the challenge in the weeks running up to the recent election. Both parties seem oddly proud of the fact that the country is sleepwalking to population disaster with one of the highest rates of

growth of any country on earth. New Prime Minister Julia Gillard, while opportunistically dumping Kevin Rudd's "Big Australia" policy during the election campaign, has not put forward a plan that would produce any different result.

Good News

As an environmental campaigner, STEP tends to highlight issues of concern and we make no apologies for so doing. However, we also celebrate good news, without claiming all of the credit! In this category, we regarded the environmental outcome of the protracted planning deliberations on the proposed redevelopment of the SAN to be a victory for the community, with the amount of bushland to be protected nearly trebling in size from that originally proposed (but expect more traffic chaos!) We feel that our twenty year crusade to highlight the issues associated with exponential population growth have finally started to get some public grip.

Our involvement with the contentious issue of mountain biking in local bushland has demonstrated that there may be a sensible middle ground, but the capacity for State and Local Government to properly execute any such strategy remains a cause for concern. The Tillegra Dam seems now to be generally recognised as being the planning disaster we labelled it some while ago, and hopefully will not go ahead. The tedious progress on the St Ives Showground Precinct proposals at least seems to carry some promise of a sensible outcome. The recent decision by Hornsby Council to block new trail construction through pristine bushland areas such as Dog Pound Creek is to be applauded, but we are alert to possible round two back sliding.

Publications

STEP's various maps and books continue to enjoy consistent sales and bring in much needed revenue for the organisation. This year has seen the completion of the revised *Field Guide to the Bushland of the Lane Cove Valley*, which has been a mammoth job on the part of a dedicated team, led by author John Martyn. John's hard work, dedication and enthusiasm continue to astound us all and we again thank him for his efforts. Hard copies of the new book are expected to be available from late November, well in time to make the very best possible Christmas present for the person who has everything. The official launch of the new book will take place next February.

STEP also produced an authoritative *Position Paper on Bushland Tracks and Trails*, under the direction of Robin Buchanan, which we believe will go a long way to establishing a sensible frame work for the ongoing debate on this contentious issue. Our thanks go to Robin for her well targeted contribution.

The Year Ahead

It is our joint challenge for 2011 and beyond to focus the minds of all of our elected leaders on the real long term environmental challenges facing both Australia and the world at large. STEP remains non political and will continue to question conventional wisdom where we believe that it is deficient and self serving. STEP will also continue to address the wide range of local environmental concerns, including making detailed fact based submissions on key issues where required. We are fortunate to have well credentialed resources available to us to conduct our work at such a high level, but we are always on the look out for new talent. Our member numbers comfortably exceed 400 and continue to grow, albeit more slowly than we would like, despite various membership recruitment activities. Our best recruiters however remain our current STEP members; we ask that you all invite your friends to join STEP.

In conclusion

We thank our members for their support of STEP and the various issues with which we became involved during the year. The campaigns led by STEP often make a substantial positive difference to the quality of the planning decisions ultimately handed down, even if we do not always get one hundred percent of what we want. We look forward to continuing to make a real difference in 2011.

Barry Tomkinson
October 2010