

ANNUAL REPORT FOR YEAR TO OCT 2016

In last year's annual report I noted the transformation happening in Sydney and the unknown impacts on our bushland, the preservation of which is the primary focus of STEP's activities. We are none the wiser with major pieces of legislation still in the formative stages. So the focus in 2016 has been on broader rather local issues.

Committee

We are lucky to have a committee with a wide range of skills including ecology, landscape and bushland restoration, the intricacies of planning regulation and web communications. These people have been hardworking committee members for many years. We would welcome new ideas and experience. We recently emailed a survey aimed at discovering if there are any members, or people members may know, who could contribute in some way to STEP's activities.

I would particularly like to thank Helen Wortham for the fantastic work she has done in getting the new website up and running and setting up the system for emailing the newsletter. Many hours have gone into getting the email addresses updated and developing a presentation that is very clear and attractive.

I would also like to thank Frank Budai for all his work over the past 3 years as treasurer, keeping track of our finances and organising the audit of our financial statements. Frank has resigned so we are looking for a new treasurer.

Publications

We have reduced the prices of our books and sales have been similar to recent years. Map sales are still solid. Our maps are more detailed than generally available on-line and there is no better way to plan a walk than poring over a full-size paper map.

The new Lane Cove Valley map is about to be printed using the more durable 'stone' paper that is waterproof. We are thankful for having a large team of volunteers who have been ground checking the new map that has been masterminded by John Martyn. Copies will be available before the end of the year.

Accounts

Our finances show a deficit of \$3,550 for the year to 30 June mainly from a write down in the value of our stock of publications. Until now the major expenditure item has been the cost of production of the newsletter. This cost will be lower in future because of the use of email for distribution.

We have maintained the Environment Protection Fund which provides Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status for donations that support STEP's environmental objectives. We received a total of \$350 in donations in the past financial year. The government has been reviewing the criteria for providing DGR status. The current recommendation from a parliamentary report released just before the election is that this status should apply only if at least 25% of an organisation's expenditure relates to on ground environmental work, however that can be defined. There is a risk that many environmental organisations will lose their DGR status.

Electronic Media

Our website has been upgraded and rebranded so that there is full functionality on tablets and smart phones and well as old-fashioned computers. New features include a secure shopping cart where you will be able to order and pay for publications and membership on-line. There is a simple system for registering for our walks. If you haven't had a look, please do.

Trish Lynch creates an innovative Facebook page with an attractive selection of photographs and alerts of current local events and issues.

John Burke looks after our Twitter feed with incisive comments on current environmental affairs.

Education

We support the Young Scientist Awards run by the Science Teachers' Association NSW with a prize in the environmental sustainability category. The winner of our award in 2015, Jade Moxey went on to win the overall Young Scientist of the Year and international awards as well. She has extended her project this year and is again our winner. There was another worthy project so we have also awarded a runner up prize this year. It is great to see the interest the students have shown in environmental research.

The Environment Protection Fund can be applied to educational and research projects. Ideas and proposals are welcome.

Talks

We organised public talks over the past year on Sydney's birdlife, the unique geology revealed by the Hornsby Quarry, Wahroonga Waterways Landcare, exploration of the seafloor and land snails.

We did not manage to organise a STEP lecture last year as the potential speaker was not available.

Walks

STEP organises a walk every month or two (eight since our last AGM) in both our local area and further afield. Two of the walks focusing on birds were very popular. We also introduced members to some very different plant communities in western and south-western Sydney. The walks aim to be educational and to encourage new walkers so most walks are not physically challenging. We thank Andrew Little and John Martyn for organising and leading walks. If you have a request for a walk please let us know.

Newsletter

Our newsletter, *STEP Matters*, is our main means of communicating events, our activities and issues with our members. We also include other articles with an environmental angle that will be of interest to members. The newsletter is also sent to local councillors and politicians. We welcome alerts from our members of local events and developments and, of course, feedback on articles is always welcome.

We are now emailing the new editions to the majority of members and a few members still prefer a hard copy in the post. All past editions are available on our website going back to scans of the typewritten versions from 1978.

Environmental Issues

Despite the huge opposition on scientific and sustainability grounds to proposals to change the biodiversity conservation and land clearing legislation the Baird Government has given no hint that it is listening. There are also proposals to change Crown Land management that could have the potential to encourage commercialisation and alienation of green spaces. We are soon to be invited to comment on a broad picture framework for the development of Sydney over the next 20 years as set out in District Plans drafted by the Greater Sydney Commission. STEP's major concern is whether there will be adequate provision for the maintenance of healthy bushland and tree canopy within our suburbs in the face of rapid unsustainable population growth. We urge everyone to get involved by sending comments to the Greater Sydney Commission.

Then there is the prospect of council amalgamation hanging over our heads. It is likely there will be a period when we will have no local representation with decision making taken over by an administrator appointed by the government. Once amalgamation is bedded down there is uncertainty about the application of planning instruments where, for example building standards or tree preservation orders could be set at a common standards that will lead to denser development in low and medium density residential areas and loss of the current treed character and amenity of many Sydney and other coastal areas.

One local issue is the outcome for the Hornsby Quarry after it has been filled with spoil from the NorthConnex tunnels. We have been unable to get any assurances that the rock face of the volcanic diatreme will remain visible.