



Good News and Bad

In our first newsletter for 2008 there is good news and bad, as well as, we hope, some matters of interest. Successful completion of the campaign to acquire the last Blue Gum High Forest on Rosedale Road is the good news. Victory seldom comes to the good but often to the persistent!

On the other hand the future for both the UTS Ku-ring-gai and Adventist Hospital sites is most uncertain as the destroyers go about legitimising their intentions.

The Lane Cove Council Local Environmental Plan on exhibition is another glimpse of the future as we prepare to pack another million people into Sydney over 25 years. As evidently instructed by the government, normal protection of urban bushland has been abandoned and bushland areas are now to be available for a host of developments. Read about it!

We review David Lindenmayer's excellent book that every Australian should read and hope that you will take the hint.

The effect of urban consolidation and fire hazard provisions on tree preservation has been significant and we attempt to summarise the situation.

The hysterics from those proposing a duplication of the F3 is remarkable for ignorance and short-term thinking and we have a shot at them. And of course a STEP newsletter could not go out without something on the ultimate environmental issue of over-population.

There are interesting walks and talks coming up. Remember to put them in your diary and please let us have you comment and feedback.

Shoreline Walk, Royal National Park Sunday 6 April 10 am

Route and theme

The route follows the coast path from Garie to Burning Palms and return, diverting along the shoreline where possible, and especially to Figure Eight Pool if sea conditions permit. The cliffs and shore in the Triassic Narrabeen Group rocks have some of the most fascinating geology in the metropolitan area, and the wide rock platforms are full of rock pools. The beaches are sensational as are the coastal views. The cliff tops and hills have a flora strikingly different to that found on Hawkesbury Sandstone.

Access

Equidistant via Audley or Waterfall entrances. Via Waterfall is recommended. Once in the park take well-signposted Garie turnoff from Bertram Stevens Drive. To play safe allow about an hour and a half to drive from Sydney's north.

Grade

Moderate, steep 80 m climb both directions across Thelma Ridge, distance about 8 km.

Meet

10 am at the beach end of Garie Beach car park (this is a huge car park and you should have no trouble finding a place). Return to Garie about 4 pm.

Bring

Suitable footwear (trainers or vullies are best for walking the shore), sunscreen, hat, raingear, picnic, drink, camera, binoculars, if you have an identification. book on seashore life bring it along too.

Cost

Free, but \$11 park entry fee if you don't have annual pass. No need to book but some form of contact would be appreciated then if you are late we'll wait.

More details

John Martyn 9449 7962, 0402 284 366,
johnmartyn@optusnet.com.au.

First STEP Talk for 2008

David Tribe on Tuesday 18 March.
See page 5 for details.

Clean Up Australia Day – 2 March

STEP committee member, Graham Jones, is organiser for a site at Thornleigh on the edge of the Lane Cove Valley.

On Sunday 2 March the STEP/TABS clean up site is at Thornleigh Oval on the corner of Ferguson and Handley Avenues, Thornleigh. All are invited between 9 am and noon, to help clean up the bushland and parks around Thornleigh Oval as well as the local streets around the shopping centre.

What to bring

You will need to wear solid shoes and a hat. Bring leather gardening gloves, sunscreen and water. You may find a broom handle, with a sharp spike one end, handy for picking up rubbish items without so much bending. Rubber gloves and collection bags will be provided.

Check in and register at the registration table on the oval forecourt from 9 am. Contact Graham Jones on 9484 4220 and mobile on the day 0414 871 809.

Thornleigh Oval is a registered site with the Clean Up Australia team and further information may be seen at <http://events.cleanup.org.au/?Thornleigh+Oval> or at www.cleanup.com.au where you can find other sites if Thornleigh is too far away for you.

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A Successful Conclusion to the Blue Gum High Forest Campaign

In December Ku-ring-gai's Mayor, Councillor Nick Ebbeck, announced the purchase of 102 Rosedale Road, the 'last piece of the jigsaw' of Ku-ring-gai's treasured Blue Gum High Forest. He said that the sale of the half hectare piece of land, finalised after a lengthy negotiation process, meant the entire 18 hectare forest site will be kept intact for future generations.

The BGHF committee have worked tirelessly for years to achieve this. Great credit goes to Nancy Pallin and all those who worked closely with her. There were two parcels of land involved, 100 and 102 Rosedale Road.

100 Rosedale Road was purchased by the NSW Government in 2005 as an offset, to compensate for the destruction of a small remnant (0.33 hectare) of Blue Gum High Forest Ecological Community as a result of the upgrade of the railway north of Hornsby. That left 102 to be acquired.

Many people and organisations were involved. Over \$70,000 was raised from individual donations which demonstrated that this issue had struck a nerve in the community. At a ceremony in Dalrymple Hay Nature Reserve the Federal Member for Bradfield, the Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson, announced that the Commonwealth Minister for

Environment and Water Resources, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, had made a funding contribution of \$350,000 to Ku-ring-gai Council to assist in securing this critically endangered ecological community. Ku-ring-gai Council contributed the rest and negotiated the purchase.

We are often critical of our politicians and bureaucratic processes but in this case everyone involved should be given great credit for delivering a great environmental outcome.

It will now be necessary for the community to stay involved in the management of this important site and STEP will play a role in doing so.

Book Review

On Borrowed Time

A book for every Australian by David Lindenmayer

David Lindenmayer is Professor of Ecology and Conservation Science at ANU. He has written hundreds of scientific articles and some weighty text books on conservation biology, landscape ecology, wildlife biology, forest ecology and the management and restoration of Australia's woodlands. Paul Ehrlich is quoted as saying that 'this is a wonderful book which should be read by all Australians'. Ehrlich is correct.

On Borrowed Time is a book for everyone. It is a record of what is great about natural Australia, what is wrong with it because of our interference and what can be done to stop the rot.

In general terms Lindenmayer sees the problems as

- our temperate woodlands and native grasslands have all but vanished;
- our pastoral lands are heavily overgrazed;
- our soils are rapidly eroding or becoming saline;
- desertification is increasing;
- freshwater in Southern Australia is woefully overcommitted;
- our oceans are over-fished;
- far too much of our countryside burns in major bushfires every year; and
- a huge proportion of our continent's animals and plants are either extinct or highly threatened.

Borrowing from a film, Lindenmayer has titled his chapters The Good, The Bad, The Ugly and The Hero.

While it's easy enough to get depressed by the number, seriousness and scale of the problems that we face, this is not in the end a depressing book. The final chapter *The Hero: Fighting Back against Inadequate Action* sets out ten problems and what should be done about them. Those problems are:

1. Failure to make appropriate investments in our environment.
2. Failure to achieve true sustainability by integrating production and conservation.
3. Overcommitted landscapes and landscape accounting.
4. Failure to establish credible yardsticks for progress.
5. The need for major institutional change.
6. Repeating past mistakes.
7. The need for stronger focus on key environmental issues.
8. Australia's growing population, and levels of consumption and resource use.
9. The need to develop new economic models.
10. The need for strategic responses to climate change.

The wonderful thing about this book is that it summarises with clarity just about every environmental issue that we have been concerned about in recent decades. Issues that you wish you had learnt a little more about are presented in a sophisticated but easy to read and understand format. It then tells us what should be done. You don't have to be a scientist to get full value.

In problem 8 Lindenmayer takes up the matter of the effect of population on consumption in a way that supports what we have said in this newsletter over the years. He says:

Nor have we managed to separate discussions about population size from issues of refugee intake and racism. It is nonsensical to keep putting aside the issues of population size and resource consumption ... and treating them as unimportant.

There is also a recital of some of the good things that have been achieved including:

- slowing land clearing in NSW and Queensland;
- water reform and increasing environmental flows;
- recognition of the urgency of tackling salinity;
- rediscovery of some mammals thought to be extinct;
- amazing recoveries of mammal populations where introduced predators are controlled;
- initiatives for private land conservation; and
- evidence that replanting programmes on farms in south-eastern Australia benefit biodiversity.

There are 74 colour photos and plenty of charts, tables and boxes to make key information more easily available. A great book!

Lindenmayer, David, 2007.
On Borrowed Time: Australia's Environmental Crisis and What We Must Do About It. Penguin Books

The Adventist Hospital Site

In a media release on 19 December 2007, Minister Sartor called in this project under Part 3A of the Act. You can access the media release at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/mediarepl/an/fs20071219_662.html. There is to be a community reference group as happened for UTS, and Ku-ring-gai Council has nominated a STEP representative to it.

Of course this is simply another example of decision making being taken away from the community when it is the community that must suffer the consequences.

As we have mentioned in previous newsletters, the traffic and environmental consequences of this project, as originally proposed, are severe. Doubling the size of the hospital, adding 1,400 residences, a high school and commercial and retail facilities is simply going to be too much.

We can't do much about it, however, until new concept documentation is available from the developer, Johnson Property Group. Frank Sartor has inspected the site with the mayors and town planners from Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai and so there

is some possibility that there have been changes made to the concept.

In an article titled 'Labor delivers for big donors', *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports that Johnson gave \$184,000 to Labor (www.smh.com.au/news/national/labor-delivers-for-big-donors/2008/02/01/1201801034860.html).

We do have some power, however, as there are endangered plant communities on the site and locals will be outraged when they learn of the traffic mess that will ensue. We are in for an interesting time!

The Tree Preservation Order: Consolidation, Fire and Unintended Consequences

The tendency of people to remove trees without regard to the environmental consequences has, over the years, led councils to implement tree preservation orders (TPOs). Aerial photos over decades have shown a steady decline in tree cover starting from Chatswood and moving towards Hornsby. It is a matter of some surprise that everyone likes the ambience and property values that trees provide but so many people want the trees in someone else's property.

So TPOs came along and environmentally conscious people applauded that. Limits were put on felling or pruning trees and application forms with substantial fees came to be required to get removal or pruning permission. This was all a good thing except that bureaucracies do tend to make a mess of things and penalise the innocent as well as the guilty. Anyone planting a native garden who makes a mistake and puts in an inappropriate tree will be refused permission to remove it and put in a more appropriate one. He or she will probably also have the benefit of a lecture on the importance of the tree, its shape and its place in the environment from a council officer who knows little about native ecosystems.

While residents were generally complying with the TPO and suffering under the dead hand of councils along came tennis courts, swimming pools and dual occupancies by the thousand. These caused a huge loss in tree cover. There was not a lot that

could be done about the courts and pools but the dual occupancies were forced on us by the NSW Government. Thus we could be in all sorts of trouble for attacking an inappropriate tree but the government was free to wipe out forests of them. There was some inconsistency in the proceedings!

Compulsory medium density was another great state government idea. Massive multi-storey developments have wiped out thousands more trees as bushland on surplus government land and heritage housing was and still is being demolished along with the heritage trees surrounding them. Developments such as those proposed for the UTS Ku-ring-gai Campus and the Adventist Hospital land will remove many, many more trees but that's going to be OK because the government wants it so and there are powerful owners and developers involved. But if you decide to replace an annoying tree that you planted then watch out because the full force of the law will be upon you if you get caught. It's one rule for the powerful and another for everyone else.

Now another factor has intervened to make the position more complex. On 2 January 2008 the Rural Fire Service (RFS) approved Kur-ring-gai Council's Bushfire Prone Map and Bushfire Evacuation Risk Map. The map and some words about it are on Council's web site. (Hornsby does not seem to have one approved yet.)

There is a need for a 100 metre buffer zone adjacent to 'category 1' bushland. This takes in most of the bushland perimeter and therefore is next to many hundreds of homes. If guidelines such as are proposed for UTS are used then tree canopies are not allowed to touch in an asset protection zone and so thousands more trees would have to go.

If you are concerned about your site it is possible to have the RFS inspect the property and, if seen fit, issue an order or permit. The exiting Ku-ring-gai TPO states that such a permit or order constitutes an exemption from the TPO. It is reported, however, that the risk here is that the RFS will issue you an order to remove many plants and trees you had no intention of removing and cause you just as much distress as Council which won't let you touch anything over a certain size!

Of course the TPO and RFS orders and permits apply only to one's own land. The bushland next door to you belongs to Council or National Parks and they are so chronically under-resourced that it's hard to see them dealing with the buffer zones on their land any time soon.

There is obviously a need for some rationalisation of all this and perhaps Council has such rationalisation underway.

F3 Hysterics

There have been hysterical stories and editorials in *The Hornsby Advocate* for some time now complaining about the hold-ups on the F3 when there is a serious accident or bushfire. The call is for another freeway crossing the Hawkesbury to the west of the existing crossing. Some local groups and identities are very active in promoting the idea of a second crossing. They have been joined by the NRMA, Justice Mahla Pearlman in her report on the F3 to M7 link and by a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on 31 January 2008. STEP sent a letter off to *The Advocate* (which they butchered in editing) and rather than paraphrase it we produce it in full. The amazing thing is how these people believe that such a road will lessen congestion on Pennant Hills Road for more than a very short time.

The accidents and delays that have occurred on the F3, serious, expensive and annoying though they be, have given rise to ill-considered proposals for another freeway crossing of the Hawkesbury.

Those who think that such a freeway will give any more than temporary relief to Pennant Hills Road, be there a tunnel there or not, are dreaming. Another freeway will simply attract huge industrial and residential development along its route and in adjacent areas as has happened with other such roads. Increases in overall traffic volumes, as Sydney grows by another million or so people over the next 20 years, will ensure that all major roads, Pennant Hills Road included, will stay congested so long as cheap fuel is available. Not everyone will want to take the western route, however, and any lessening of congestion on Pennant Hills Road will simply attract more traffic to it.

So long as our leaders refuse to discuss a population plan for Sydney we shall be chasing our tail. That suits the RTA and the construction industry whose *raison d'être* is to build roads. The RTA has an interest in maximising community angst and perhaps that explains why better diversions were not implemented after the recent accidents.

Then there are the issues of peak oil and greenhouse considerations which may well force vehicles off the roads and goods and people onto trains and busses.

The tunnel may give us some short-term relief but proper long-term planning for Sydney over the next 100 years is required before we go rushing off building freeways through national parks. It would be nice to be able to trust our politicians to arrange that planning rather than leaving it to the amateurs who write for and to *The Advocate*.

Republicans Discover the Environment

This is from a Guy Rundle article in *crikey.com* on 7 Dec 2007. The insurance companies know the risks!

I'm not the type to point to every weird weather episode as evidence of climate change — but an increasing number of Americans are, and that includes the insurance companies. Millions of homes across the west's tornado alley and on the Gulf coast are uninsurable, effectively destroying their value. If anything was likely to remind Americans of the last eight years of torpor and failure, it's this perfect storm, the economy meeting the environment, your sub-prime mortgage home you can't afford the payments on suddenly being unsellable because no one wants to buy a future pile of matchwood.

Sustainable Population Australia Conference

Information on a conference being run by Sustainable Population Australia has come to hand and it looks very worthwhile. Entitled *Population, Peak Oil and Climate Change* the speakers include Bob McMullan, Parliamentary Secretary for Overseas Aid and Development, Don Henry from the Australian Conservation Foundation, Prof. Tony McMichael and an impressive array of local and overseas people.

It is to be held in Canberra on 14 and 15 March 2008. You can obtain a brochure from www.population.org.au or failing that phone 6288 6810, fax 628 87195, email info@population.org.au or write to PO Box 3851, Weston Creek, ACT 2611.

You can read about the conference at www.population.org.au/media/newslet/nl200802.pdf.

The Step Committee

The committee meets once a month other than in January. It is composed of a diverse group of people with a wide range of skills. While most members stay for some years we do have pretty constant turnover which is, of course, a good thing.

Neroli Lock retired last year after many years of sterling service and Susie Gemmell has joined us. Susie will look after all our publicity which is an area that we have always struggled with. Other committee members take responsibility for the web site, our walks and talks programme, accounting, secretarial, and sales of publications as well as the other myriad tasks that have to be dealt with. We have scientists on hand as required and of course John Martyn is our author-in-residence who has been responsible for the maps and books we have published.

STEP's First Talk for 2008

8 pm Tuesday 18 March

St Andrews Church Hall, corner of Chisholm and Vernon Streets, Turramurra

David Tribe is undertaking research on Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and will give a talk entitled

A National Park in Transition: the rich past Aboriginal heritage and future challenges facing Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park.

David has a background in education and has been a school head as well as in senior positions within the NSW department of education. He was in charge of environmental education in NSW and responsible for the introduction of environmental education policy into NSW schools.

David has lectured widely, including at USA universities. He has long had an interest in the local history of the Northern Beaches and North Shore areas and is currently working with Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park specialising in Aboriginal interpretation.

This promises to be a fascinating talk – put it in your diary!

UTS Ku-ring-gai Campus Update

The submissions are in and we await the next step. The Department of Planning have advised that 1,407 public submissions were received. A summary of these submissions will be available after UTS has lodged the 'preferred project report'. No doubt the overwhelmingly negative nature of the submissions has had some impact. We are advised that 'major changes (to the design) included dedication of bushland, provision of additional active open space, provision of a new community facility, reduced dwelling yield with flow on reduced residential traffic and reduced building heights'.

We don't like this project at all and, since our first involvement 16 years ago have argued that the campus should remain a university and all the bushland be permanently conserved. Faced with the near certainty of UTS wanting to abandon the site, however, we have fought to have the bushland conserved irrespective of what happens on the developed sections of the site.

It appears that we, along with all the others who have argued for the bushland, may have at least had some success in that regard. The unfortunate aspects of a likely outcome are that a huge amount of bushland will be

turned into mowed parkland for asset protection from fire and that some residents will lose some great bushland that is now next to their properties. While there is still the possibility that UTS will back off on the whole proposal they have their eyes on a pot of gold and will probably chase that down.

As we understand it the outcome will be a rezoning of the site with conditions imposed by the Minister who is likely to accept the Department of Planning's recommendations. The project would then go back to Council to be assessed under the new zoning and the Minister's conditions.

Apart from the hazard protection zone mentioned above we have a concern at the measures proposed to control water and nutrient runoff into the bushland. Bioretention swales are useful for some purposes but almost useless for preventing ingress of excessive water and nutrients. Unfortunately Ku-ring-gai Council's technical people, as well as the UTS consultants, have yet to see that point and we shall be looking for a change in Council's policy.

View STEP's Nov 2007 submission to the Department of Planning on www.step.org.au/UTS_lindfield.html.

Make a difference

Get a friend to join STEP

Send us your email address so we can let you know of events, changes to events or urgent issues.
Email to secretary@step.org.au.

Order Form

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Single	1 year	\$16		
	3 years — saving of \$8	\$40		
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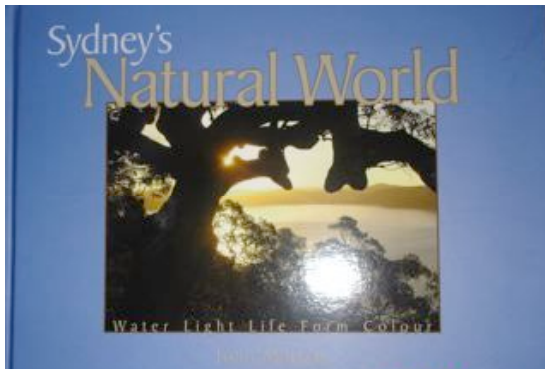
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Sydney's Natural World

John Martyn's wonderful book has now sold some 1,500 copies but we have plenty in stock. They are great books for anyone interested in the bushland of Sydney and make excellent birthday presents or gifts for overseas visitors.

Order copies from the form in this newsletter or go to our web site.



The St Ives Shopping Centre no longer seems to be accepting corks for recycling but STEP committee member, Graham Jones, knows what to do.



What do YOU do with your used corks?

Do you throw them in the rubbish? Probably 'yes'. **STOP!** There is a better way.

The world's cork supply is a limited resource so if we can recycle our used corks, they can be made into other useful products without the need to access new cork materials. Recycled corks are made into cork flooring, notice boards and other similar products.

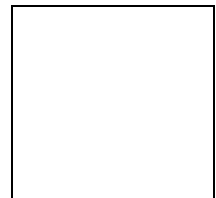
Guides Australia operate a cork recycling and fund-raising programme where something like 16 million corks a year are saved from landfill and put into other cork products. Why not save the environment a little, help the world's cork resources and at the same time help the Guides with some fund raising?

Used corks may be left at Graham Jones's letter box at 2 Clifford Avenue Thornleigh, at John Burke's letter box 116 Browns Road Wahroonga or at the Body Shop Hornsby Westfield (9476 0157).

If you know of a drop-off point further down the North Shore, let us know and we shall mention it next time.



If undelivered return to:
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PO Box 697
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Sartor Again! Is this the Worst Threat to Bushland in 30 Years?

We are indebted to the Lane Cove Bushland and Conservation Society for bringing to our attention what's going on with the draft Local Environmental Plan for Lane Cove that is now out for comment. STEP committee member Andrew Little has been evaluating the problem.

Bushland other than national parks and nature reserves would normally come under zoning E2 or E3 being Environmental Conservation or Environmental Management. In this case, however, the Department of Planning has evidently instructed Council that all bushland is to be zoned RE1 which is Public Recreation. Activities permitted in RE1 zones are as follows.

Zone RE1 Public Recreation

1. Objectives of zone

To enable land to be used for public open space or recreational purposes.
To provide a range of recreational settings and activities and compatible land uses.
To protect and enhance the natural environment for recreational purposes.

2. Permitted without consent

Environmental protection works.

3. Permitted with consent

Building identification signs, business identification signs, community facilities, demolition, drainage, earthworks, environmental facilities, kiosks, recreation areas, recreation facilities (indoor), recreation facilities (outdoor), restaurants, roads, utility installations.

Previously bushland came under the following from Section 36-A-N of the *Local Government Act 1993*:

1. To ensure the ongoing ecological viability of the land by protecting the ecological biodiversity and habitat values of the land, the flora and fauna (including invertebrates, fungi and micro-organisms) of the land and other ecological values of the land.
2. To protect the aesthetic, heritage, recreational, educational and scientific values of the land.
3. To promote the management of the land in a manner that protects and enhances the values and quality of the land and facilitates public enjoyment of the land, and to implement measures directed to minimising or mitigating any disturbance caused by human intrusion.
4. To restore degraded bushland.
5. To protect existing landforms such as natural heritage lines, watercourses and foreshores.
6. To retain bushland in parcels of a size and configuration that will enable the existing plant and animal communities to survive in the long term.
7. To protect bushland as a natural stabiliser of the soil surface.

Unlike the earlier planning instrument, the proposed new one has no specific environmental objectives that reflect the complex ecological relationships that need to be recognized and maintained to sustain healthy high quality bushland areas. Further, under the guise of planning simplification developers have long been seeking use of urban bushland corridors. New high-density development requires extensive excavation for foundations and underground car-parking. This coupled with a shortage of local sites to take landfill has meant expensive long distance haulage to remove this waste. A real threat to local bushland will come from new earthworks where developers pay cash strapped councils tipping fees to allow for the creation of new sports fields and other community facilities that can no longer be levied for under s94 developer contributions.

It is clear that if the government is allowed to get away with this then all urban bushland will be available for all sorts of commercial and recreational uses incompatible with maintaining natural ecosystems and natural areas so appreciated by most residents but clearly not by the business and developer lobbies and the State Government. No doubt it all has to do with the objective of packing another one million people into Sydney over the next 20 or 25 years and who cares if we destroy the essence of Sydney in the process. Everything that won't fit into the developed areas can go into the bushland. Wonderful!

The Local Environmental Plan for Lane Cove is on public exhibition until the end of February. It has a far broader public interest than just Lane Cove. As this is one of the first local environmental plans under the new directives of the Department of Planning it will set the standard for other councils to follow. Whether council-owned bushland will be adequately protected in the future will depend on the responses received from the broader community on the acceptability of this significant change in proposed land use and the broad range of developments now permissible with consent.

Write your objection to Lane Cove Council, 48 Longueville Road, Lane Cove 2066 by 17 March. Say that the proposed Public Recreation Zoning RE1 for bushland will not adequately protect the environmental values of these areas and is not in the public interest. Bushland must be zoned so that it is conserved and managed as follows:

- to conserve areas of environmental significance;
- to conserve biological diversity, native vegetation corridors, aboriginal heritage or other social or cultural values of the areas, and their scenic qualities; and
- to prevent development that could destroy or damage areas of environmental, social or cultural significance.

This article, from Telegraph.co.uk, reinforces what the STEP newsletter has been saying for many years. But the main point is that it is from a prominent person. When shall we find an Australian politician with this much intelligence and guts?

Global Over-population is the Real Issue

By Boris Johnson, MP for Henley in the British Parliament

It is a tragic measure of how far the world has changed — and the infinite capacity of modern man for taking offence — that there are no two subjects that can get you more swiftly into political trouble than motherhood and apple pie.

The last time I tentatively suggested that there was something to be said in favour of apple pie, I caused a frenzy of hatred in the healthy-eating lobby. It reached such a pitch that journalists were actually pelting me with pies, and demanding a retraction, and an apology, and a formal denunciation of the role of apple pie in causing obesity.

As for motherhood — the fertility of the human race — we are getting to the point where you simply can't discuss it, and we are thereby refusing to say anything sensible about the biggest single challenge facing the Earth; and no, whatever it may now be conventional to say, that single biggest challenge is not global warming. That is a secondary challenge. The primary challenge facing our species is the reproduction of our species itself.

Depending on how fast you read, the population of the planet is growing with every word that skitters beneath your eyeball. There are more than 211,000 people being added every day, and a population the size of Germany every year.

As someone who has now been travelling around the world for decades, I see this change, and I feel it. You can smell it in the traffic jams of the Middle East. You can see it as you fly over Africa at night, and you see mile after mile of fires burning red in the dark, as the scrub is removed to make way for human beings.

You can see it in the satellite pictures of nocturnal Europe, with the whole place lit up like a fairground. You can see it in the crazy dentition of the Shanghai skyline, where new skyscrapers are going up round the clock.

You can see it as you fly over Mexico City, a vast checkerboard of smog-bound, low-rise dwellings stretching from one horizon to the other; and when you look down on what we are doing to the planet, you have a horrifying vision of habitations multiplying and replicating like bacilli in a Petri dish.

The world's population is now 6.7 billion, roughly double what it was when I was born. If I live to be in my mid-eighties, then it will have trebled in my lifetime.

The UN last year revised its forecasts upwards, predicting that there will be 9.2 billion people by 2050, and I simply cannot understand why no one discusses this impending calamity, and why no world statesmen have the guts to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves.

How the hell can we witter on about tackling global warming, and reducing consumption, when we are continuing to add so relentlessly to the number of consumers? The answer is politics, and political cowardice.

There was a time, in the 1960s and 1970s, when people such as my father, Stanley, were becoming interested in demography, and the UN would hold giant conferences on the subject, and it was perfectly respectable to talk about saving the planet by reducing the growth in the number of human beings.

But over the years, the argument changed, and certain words became taboo, and certain concepts became forbidden, and we have reached the stage where the very discussion of overall human fertility — global motherhood — has become more or less banned.

We seem to have given up on population control, and all sorts of explanations are offered for the surrender. Some say Indira Gandhi gave it all a bad name, by her demented plan to sterilise Indian men with the lure of a transistor radio.

Some attribute our complacency to the Green Revolution, which seemed to prove Malthus wrong. It became the received wisdom that the world's population could rise to umpteen billions, as mankind learnt to make several ears of corn grow where one had grown before.

And then, in recent years, the idea of global population control has been more or less stifled by a pincer

movement from the right and the left. American right-wingers disapprove of anything that sounds like birth control, and so George W. Bush withholds the tiny contribution America makes to the UN Fund for Population Activities, regardless of the impact on the health of women in developing countries.

As for the left, they dislike suggestions of population control because they seem to smack of colonialism and imperialism and telling the Third World what to do; and so we have reached the absurd position in which humanity bleats about the destruction of the environment, and yet there is not a peep in any communiqué from any summit of the EU, G8 or UN about the population growth that is causing that destruction.

The debate is surely now unavoidable. Look at food prices, driven ever higher by population growth in India and China. Look at the insatiable Chinese desire for meat, which has pushed the cost of feed so high that Vladimir Putin has been obliged to institute price controls in the doomed fashion of Diocletian or Edward Heath.

Even in Britain, chicken farmers are finding that the cost of chickenfeed is no longer exactly chickenfeed, and, though the food crisis may once again be solved by the wit of man, the damage to the environment may be irreversible.

It is time we had a grown-up discussion about the optimum quantity of human beings in this country and on this planet. Do we want the south-east of Britain, already the most densely populated major country in Europe, to resemble a giant suburbia?

This is not, repeat not, an argument about immigration per se, since in a sense it does not matter where people come from, and with their skill and their industry, immigrants add hugely to the economy.

This is a straightforward question of population, and the eventual size of the human race. All the evidence shows that we can help reduce population growth, and world poverty, by promoting literacy and female emancipation and access to birth control. Isn't it time politicians stopped being so timid, and started talking about the real number one issue?