



STEP Matters

Number 152, October 2009

In this issue

In this final edition of STEP Matters for the year, we celebrate the contribution of two towering STEP figures, Michelle Leishman and Helen Preston. Both have made a real difference for the better to the local environment.

Local issues are dominated by the SAN redevelopment and we cover the continuing STEP involvement in our Key Issues update.

The STEP AGM was well attended and the various constitutional amendments adopted. The STEP "year in review" is covered in the annual report.

For those who believe that planning battles with the State Government are a new phenomenon for our area, the article by early Turramurra resident Patricia O'Keeffe will be a revelation. The outcomes and negative impacts may be distressingly familiar today, as the article by Janet Harwood implies.

Our new electronic environment news section

covers a host of sometimes contentious but always interesting items and views, often at odds with accepted orthodoxy. What do you think?

Population growth, and its impacts, has even more deniers than there are climate change sceptics. We sometimes wonder how they can all fit on a flat earth without falling off the edges. The article by Prof. Ian Lowe suggests that this may soon be unnecessary.

The upcoming holiday season would not be the same without some lightweight reading but we will have none of that airy facetiousness. Our range of articles are meant to both seriously enlighten and entertain.

The STEP committee wishes you all well over the forthcoming season. Have a great break, because the environment will doubtless be in need of your help in 2010!

STEP end of year BBQ

Once again, STEP invites all members to our usual end of year get-together, to be held from 4.30 pm on Sunday 6 December in the parkland behind Leuna Avenue, at the end of Broadway at Wahroonga.

Harry and Neroli Lock will once again supply the barbeque and hot water but please BYO everything else.

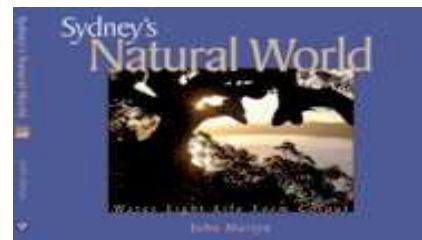
This is one of the best opportunities to meet other STEP members and we hope to see many of you there. However, if the weather looks really threatening, call Neroli Lock on 9489 5794.



A Festive Season Special

STEP members are reminded that they have the opportunity to purchase Dr John Martyn's iconic publication, *Sydney's Natural World*, at a special member price.

This makes a wonderful gift for visitors to Sydney, both from inter state and from overseas. Visit our web site for how to order: www.step.org.au



STEP Inc

Community-based Environmental Conservation since 1978
PO Box 697, Turramurra, NSW 2074

secretary@step.org.au

www.step.org.au

ABN 55 851 3472 043

Update on Key Issues

Wahroonga Estate Redevelopment Concept Plan (SAN site)

There has been some recent progress on this matter, with the proponent, the Johnson Property Group (JPG), lodging a Preferred Project Report (PPR) with the Department of Planning (DoP). The PPR responds to the various issues raised by both the community and the DoP. It becomes the final submission from the developer on which the Department, ultimately the Minister, will decide if and how the proposal may proceed.

The PPR contains both positive and negative elements when compared to the earlier proposals for the SAN site. The PPR has now been discussed by members of the Community Reference Group (CRG), on which STEP is represented. In summary, the PPR proposes to increase, from 18 ha to nearly 24 ha, the amount of land designated for Environmental Conservation. This includes most of the land previously proposed to be included in the so called Residential East Precinct, which is the majority of the land located on the eastern side of Fox Valley Road. This is a very good result and it is in line with the submission that STEP put in to the DoP.

The area has one of the finest examples of the vegetation transition from shale to sandstone in the northern region of Sydney. The adjoining freeway corridor land to the north-east has a further 2 ha of Blue Gum High Forest/Turpentine-Ironbark Forest, while the lower riparian corridor links to the rare diatreme rainforest vegetation at Browns Field. This indeed is an environmental crown jewel worthy of special protection. STEP commends both the developer and the SAN for their consideration of the environmental issues involved.

On the other hand, the overall size and scale of the WER proposal has not much altered. The number of proposed new dwellings to be erected has in fact been increased to 1255. The proposed school and oval have been slightly reconfigured to allow a greater retention of vegetation but the school is, in the words of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, "poorly sited and planned". The height limit for some buildings in the PPR has been increased to six stories and the retail and commercial expansion plans remain.

The traffic infrastructure, or lack of it, remains in the view of STEP a significant problem area and one without an apparent solution. With some minor amendments to the original plan, the PPR reports that both the RTA and their own traffic consultants now believe that the road system is adequate for the proposed development, once some upgrades have been completed. It is clear that they have not

addressed the issues raised in the very detailed traffic report submitted by STEP. STEP members may recall that this submission [available on our web site] was endorsed by an independent traffic consultant.

The STEP submission took a detailed look at the road and intersectional capacity of the local traffic infrastructure and found it wanting. Yet the majority of issues raised in it have not been responded to by either JPG or the RTA. Indeed, the RTA sign-off for the development plan does not even include the need to upgrade the Pennant Hills Road/Comenarra Parkway intersection, which had previously been specifically included by the developers own traffic experts as needing upgrading!

STEP has accordingly written to the Chairman of the Sydney Regional Development Advisory Committee, who on behalf of the RTA, consented to the WER Concept Plan. We have placed in front of them our detailed analysis of the issues, drawing attention in particular to a number of apparent anomalies. Copies have been sent to Ku-ring-gai and Hornsby Councils. We await a reply.

Local community sentiment seems to be strongly against the WER concept plan, with 160 individual and community submissions received by DoP. Of these, 154 were objections and 6 in support. STEP supports an upgrade and expansion of the hospital, hostel and teaching facilities at the SAN site. There is however no justification for the significant over-development of the site as current plans propose.

STEP has accordingly also written a supplementary submission to the Department of Planning, bringing to their attention a number of key points which we believe still remain. These relate to a number of the specific DoP Director-General Requirements which we believe have not been adequately addressed. STEP has also raised a number of more general issues, including the lack of proper supporting infrastructure, traffic and loss of vegetation.

STEP is particularly anxious to ensure that the long term legal ownership of the lands designated for Environmental Conservation is made clear, with our view being that they should be transferred to the Department of the Environment and Climate Change, the managers of the Lane Cove National Park.

The next steps include the DoP completing an independent ecological analysis of the area, followed by assessment period of up to 120 days and a final recommendation to the Minister.

St Ives Showground Precinct Options

The last issue of STEP Matters (available on our web site) contained a comprehensive summary of the state of play on this matter. The STEP submission has gone in but we understand that

competing priorities have meant that Ku-ring-gai Council has not made much progress on this matter since then.

Independent Public Transport Submission

STEP members will be aware that the Sydney Morning Herald is sponsoring a Public Inquiry into Sydney's long term public transport needs. STEP is in favour of an effective long term master transport plan for the greater Sydney area. STEP has therefore put in a short submission, emphasising the inadequacies of the present situation and the additional long term needs being created by population growth. STEP points out that on current

trends it is probable that the Sydney area population will grow at the current growth rate for Australia of over 2% p.a. and so will almost double over the 30 year time frame of the Inquiry. That implies that our public transport infrastructure might need to more than double over the same time frame. Current thinking, planning and political leadership needed to take this fact into account, or act to reduce population pressure in Sydney.

Annual report as presented to the October 2009 Annual General Meeting

STEP continues to perform strongly. We focus mainly on local and national issues which we believe are important enough for us to try to make a difference. These have been well covered in our newsletter, STEP Matters, copies of which are to be found on our web site. I will today therefore only deal with these in overview.

Committee

STEP is fortunate to have an effective and well credentialed committee which generally meets monthly and more often if required. Susie Gemmell had to withdraw from the committee doing the year due to pressure of work commitments, but we were fortunate to have Robin Buchanan rejoin the committee after an absence of some years. Apart from one resignation, the committee for 2010 will be largely unchanged after the AGM as we have had only one new nomination, apart from the remaining current committee members. I want to extend a warm welcome to Donald Davidson, who is the new nomination to the committee. Don is an ex TABS committee member who is active in the volunteer bush management movement. He has for many years been the Short Street site organiser.

Michelle Leishman

It is with great regret that the committee bids farewell to Michelle Leishman, who has resigned from the STEP committee. Michelle served on the committee with distinction for many years, both in her capacity as a hard working committee member and, over a lengthy period, as an effective President. Michelle will be more properly honoured in the next edition of the newsletter.

Accounts

We acknowledge the continuing excellence of the work done by our Treasurer, Jim Wells. STEP enjoys a sound financial position, in part due to the continued profitable sale of our publications and also to subscriptions from our solid membership base. Increased operational costs, including insurance and the publication of our newsletter, have however forced us to address the issue of the level of member subscriptions. The modest increase in membership fees your committee is asking you to approve today is the first for seven years and is intended to cover the expenses of our core operating costs. It will take effect from 1 July 2010.

Secretarial

If an army marches on its stomach, community groups like STEP depend on volunteers like Helen Wortham, our secretary, to maintain their focus and their efficiency. Beneath the smoothly run surface, it is Helen who makes sure that our membership records, event organisation, publication sales and so much more are handled effectively.

Grants

We continue to support the Young Scientist awards but this year decided to no longer support, with grants, local schools who wished to invest in environmental projects. We said last year that we were having difficulty in attracting good applications for such projects and therefore this year decided to explore other options to get our message into the school age group. We are trialling, together with other like minded groups in this area, a competition with the 350.org to encourage school children to get involved in their future by sending a message to our Prime Minister about the importance of taking a serious CO2 target of 350 parts per million to Copenhagen. STEP has written to sixty local schools and the local media with the details of the competition.

Bushwalks

This year we organised a programme of five bush walks for our more experienced bush walkers. Unfortunately some have had to be cancelled due to safety reasons after spells of wet weather. Our thanks go to Andrew Little, Neroli Lock, John Martyn, Tim Gastineau-Hills and Bill Jones for organising and leading these walks. We also supplemented these walks with a new STEP Out programme of recreational walks designed for those less experienced walkers who simply want to discover the beauty of our local natural environment. We are grateful to Robert Bracht who successfully piloted this programme of five walks.

Talks

We organised three talks during the year, the topics of which all addressed key environmental issues. They were all well attended and an ambitious programme for 2010 is currently 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 receive little by way of direct feedback from our readers, but the little we do get tells us that the newsletter is being read and appreciated. Past copies can always be found on our web site.

Digital

Electronic communication allows us to deliver new and quicker services to our members, including email reminders of upcoming events, STEP campaigns and urgent updates on key issues. Our web site is increasingly important information medium and is especially well placed to reach younger audiences provided it is both fresh and information rich. Our current web site has served us well and has been expertly maintained by both Tim Gastineau-Hills and Helen Wortham, but we now feel the need to call in some outside assistance to help us give our web site a new and more dynamic look and feel. The results should be apparent in 2010; let us know what you think!

STEP into the Future

STEP has been a successful community based environmental group for over thirty years and we continue to grow steadily our membership base. During that time it has long outgrown the original issues which gave rise to its formation, but it has always maintained its primary aim to protect and preserve natural bushland in this area from alienation and degradation. The threats to our natural environment have however changed over the past thirty years and the committee is in the process of exploring future directions for STEP and identifying priority areas of focus for the next five years. More outputs in 2010!

Issues

The issues that STEP consider important are fully covered in the newsletter and the electronic versions of STEP Matters on our web site, so there is little point in rehashing them here. There is however a common and continuing theme, 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 Australian Government seems 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. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has been heard repeating the nonsensical claim that "numbers are not the issue". They are.

All levels of Government in Australia seem to suffer a characteristic in common, namely chronic short termism when it comes to planning. We continue to rail against this Lord Nelson approach to planning but we also spend inordinate amounts of our time fighting against its manifestations, be it in projects such as the Wahroonga Estate Redevelopment at the SAN site, the State Government edicted Housing Strategies foisted on local councils, the proposal to commercialise our National Parks (and allow the hunting of native animals!), the wish by some sporting codes to effect a take over of the St Ives Showground precinct, and the list goes on.

As STEP Vice President John Burke wrote in an article in our April newsletter, "Something is terribly wrong!" In this context we are delighted tonight to have a mainstream political leader address us on a topic that is directly relevant to many of these concerns.

Good News

While by its nature as an environmental campaigner STEP tends to highlight issues of concern, we also celebrate good news. We investigated the bio-banking initiative and think it has a place to play in modern conservation. We loved the article by STEP member Ralph Pridmore recounting the return of wildlife to the streets of Turramurra. We were encouraged by Syd Smith's report that the Sustainable Schools Programme has now gone national. We enjoyed hearing about the practical efforts to make an ecological difference in both the city and country, in the articles by Matt Heffernan and Lorna Tomkinson. The glass is half full?

Publications

STEP's various maps and books continue to enjoy consistent sales and bring in much needed revenue for the organisation. Our most recent, Sydney's Natural World, is increasingly gaining recognition as an iconic publication that deals with the natural assets of the Sydney region more completely than does any other current publication. These publications all result from the hard work, dedication and enthusiasm of John Martyn and we again thank him for his continuing efforts in this regard. This year has seen the updating of one of our maps, which is currently being reprinted, and the complete revision of the Field Guide to the Bushland of the Upper Lane Cove Valley. The latter is a mammoth job and is still work in progress. We expect to have the new edition ready for sale by mid to late 2010.

The Year Ahead

While the global financial crisis has had the full attention of our political leaders, their commitment to the global environmental crisis seems to be more apparent than real. They continue to differ on key climate change objectives, seemingly more concerned about scoring cheap political points than achieving meaningful carbon reduction targets. STEP does not believe that ultimately any country can enjoy a robust economy if it does not first ensure that it has a healthy environment. It is our joint challenge for 2010 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.

In conclusion

We thank out members for their support of STEP and of the various issues in which we became involved during the year. There is strength in numbers and we were able demonstrate that in our ability to get grass roots support for campaigns as diverse as the idiotic Shooters Bill and the shameful over-development planned for the SAN site. These campaigns by STEP do in many cases 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. Incremental gains are nevertheless real gains and we look forward to continuing to make a real difference in 2010.

Barry Tomkinson

New committee elected at AGM

The STEP committee elected at the AGM for 2010 demonstrates remarkable consistency with that from the previous year:

Barry Tomkinson - President
John Burke - Vice President
Helen Wortham - Secretary
Jim Wells – Treasurer
John Martyn

Tim Gastineau-Hills
Robin Buchanan
Andrew Little
Don Davidson

Michelle Leishman steps down from the STEP committee

Michelle has been a permanent fixture on the STEP committee for more than twelve years and her contribution to STEP and its members has been enormous. Her decision to step down will provide her and her family with a well deserved break from the press of STEP demands, but her insights and outputs will be sorely missed.



Dr Leishman has contributed both in a leadership capacity, as President of STEP for a number of years, and in her capacity as an expert resource. In regard to the latter, she has always been our first port of call when we are putting together and managing grants for ecological restoration. In particular she worked closely with the management team of Lane Cove National Park to obtain a grant from the New South Wales Stormwater Trust for the Fox Valley area.

Michelle's efforts on this project were particularly successful, resulting in a significant reduction in channel erosion and much reduced nutrient and sediment loads. More importantly, the further research work she completed in the laboratory on the role of nutrient enrichment in exotic plant invasion has been widely accepted and is today accepted by bushland managers as setting the standard in this area.

Michelle has also been active in the provision of high quality advice across the wide range of bushland management issues that come to STEP for comment and expert assistance. She also regularly (and willingly) delivers talks on issues arising from environmental weeds and their control and is one of the expert editors that STEP uses in the production of its highly acclaimed maps and field guides.

Michelle has recently been appointed as Associate Professor at Macquarie University Department of Biological Sciences and we wish her well in the next stage of her academic career.

Patricia O'Keeffe remembers earlier planning battles in Ku-ring-gai

Patricia O'Keeffe now lives in the far north coast of New South Wales and recently contacted STEP after reading reports in the media about the on going Ku-ring-gai area battles with the draconian planning laws of the current NSW State Government. She recalls earlier battles with the then State Government; similar issues, similar outcomes?

This is her story:

I was born in 1946. I was a 4th generation Turramurra resident. My mother was born in 1912. My grandfather's father settled in Turramurra from Ireland in the 1800's because of the rainfall and soil suitable for earning a living from growing fruit, vegetables and flowers.

My family created and owned the last working orchard and market garden in Kissing Point Road and Maxwell Streets, Turramurra. My father carved out our orchard at Kissing Point Road using a draught horse. My grandfather helped him. There are still large gum trees standing there that I remember from my childhood. My parents, Luigi Angelo Iury and Muriel Josephine (nee Bourke), purchased the property at Kissing Point Road (called Walden by the previous owners) after working as sharefarmers at Rosedale Road, St Ives, where they started married life in a tin shed. We had a great view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge from our rear orchard.

The produce from our orchard and market garden was sold at the City of Sydney Markets, around 20 km away from where it was grown, plus to fruit and vegetable shops all along the highway. Some produce was sent by rail, to country destinations. Much more environmentally friendly than road transport

My father died suddenly at age 44, two days before Christmas Day, in 1954. One of my mother's brothers (Basil Bourke) who was helping my father in the peach orchard had died suddenly one week before, aged 46. I was only 8 years of age. My brother was 6. I had always believed that these two healthy, fit, young men died from sudden heart attacks until a cousin mentioned several years ago that they both died from being poisoned by the fruit fly sprays used on the peaches. The peaches were sprayed from September through to February, each year as we grew varieties that were continuously picked from November to late February, following a certain withholding period. Those poisons are no longer available.

It was around 1956, when I was 10 years of age that the first subdivision happened at Geoffrey Street near our orchard, and the houses started to be built. From the kitchen table gossip I remember at that time, I understood that the Government had done a terrible thing in opening up the green belt, and the consequences were to be devastating, especially for our little family. I heard that the Government was going to take our land and we would be homeless. They apparently had let all the people build in the nearby bush, but then realised they needed a school for the influx of children.

They already had a primary school up on Kissing Point Road, but needed a high school. So, as my

mother used to say, they looked around in panic, saw that our orchard would be ideal, and decided to take it from us at a pittance of the price it would have realised on the open market. My mother used to say that when zoning was changed from green belt to urban, the land rates were calculated on how many house blocks would fit onto the parcel of land by dividing the size of the land by the size of the blocks and making no allowance for contours of the land. We had to cut our losses and move.

Around 1956 the then State Government Dept of Education resumed a large portion of our orchard in order to build the existing high school after changing the zoning from Green Belt to allow housing development. My widowed mother had to deal with the authorities. She would not have been able to pay the rates on the rezoned property in any case. She was therefore forced to sell the land not needed by the Government for the school. She was also forced to donate some of the bushland for public conservation. Lend Lease Homes built approx 70 houses on the land she sold. We moved to Pennant Hills Road, Normanhurst in 1957.

There was an article called "*How the Plateau People Fed Sydney – Both in Body and Soul*" written by Elizabeth Dokulilmany years ago, which details the various market gardens in the St Ives and Turramurra districts (I have a copy in my possession). A book in the Ku-ring-gai Library, titled "*The Story of St Ives (NSW) and some of its inhabitants*" by Gay Halstead gives an indication of just how much urbanisation has altered the demographics and landscape of the area in which you live. I am sorry to say, financial ability has always influenced the progressive gentrification of desirable localities. Old timers get forced out by "progress" and upwardly mobile new settlers.

Your STEP newsletter mentions St Ives Showground. My mother's father, Michael Bourke, was one of the foundation members of the St Ives Show Society, and manually helped in the formation of both showgrounds, the first one being close to Brigidine Convent at St Ives. The Bourke's (several brothers) owned orchards and market gardens along Bobbin Head Road, and my grandfather's orchard and house were at the corner of Bobbin Head Rd. and Pentecost Avenue. He subdivided his orchard and removed the pioneer-type settler's cottage to Murdoch Street, Turramurra - I have the original subdivision plan in my possession. I think this move was also prompted by economic necessity, due to rezoning of the land.

I think the landholding Bourke's were conscious of preserving as much of the natural environment as they could when they carved out their orchards and market gardens. They were involved in the local community as part of Irish Town (North Turramurra),

particularly the St Ives Show Society, and the Pymble Catholic Church and church schools.

The original residents of the North Shore were displaced, well and truly before I was born. I have never ever seen an aboriginal person in the flesh anywhere in the Northern Suburbs streets or on the trains from Wynyard to Hornsby and I have visited relatives over the years since moving away from Sydney nearly 30 years ago.

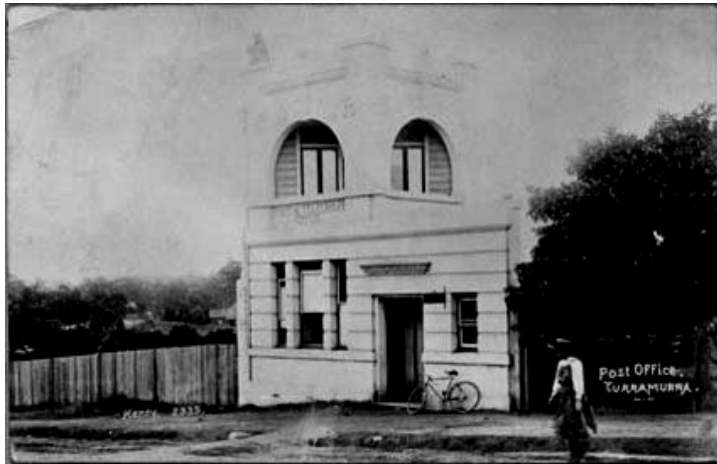
High density housing development in Ku-ring-gai will no doubt attract another generation of upwardly mobile residents, and those inhabitants that no longer "fit" the demographics will be forced out. Hopefully they will have the good sense to move to a dying regional town and be able to infuse new life into the pre-existing infrastructure. Most of these people I would guess would be those baby boomers who are reliant on the current aged pension and some with insufficient superannuation income to maintain a North Shore lifestyle.

I now live on a 22 acre bush block near Nimbin,

subdivided off a once-huge thriving dairy farm. It is interesting to hear the stories of the early days in this region as told by those original old-timers who are still alive. The dairy farms here have gone the way of the orchards and market gardens of North Shore Sydney. I think developers are still aiming to operate on prime parcels of food producing land with little forethought as to long term consequences. The NSW Government is killing off our railways, especially here in Northern NSW. But we do not have high rise development, traffic lights and traffic jams or polluted water at Blue Knob!

A few weeks ago the Repco Car Rally took place from Kingscliff to Kyogle, despite valid protests by environmentalists. You would be well aware that the manner in which the State Government allowed this matter to proceed showed a total disregard for the democratic process.

The overdevelopment of Ku-ring-gai with the Government's blessing is just another such example.



Original Turramurra Post Office

Located on a hill on Sydney's north shore, the area that would become Turramurra takes its name from the Aboriginal word meaning 'big hill'.

With initial land grants in the area covering relatively small allotments, the suburb housed small agricultural pursuits such as market gardens and orchards and handsome residential country houses for the Sydney elite.

STEP People – Helen Preston

Article by John Burke

Looking back through the STEP archives reveals the huge amount of work that has been done by the STEP presidents and committees over the years. Issue after issue has been dealt with, countless committees belonged to and the cause of the environment always advanced. These advances are sometimes in such small increments that we hardly notice, or remember, them happening. It's hard to imagine, for instance, that only twenty-five years ago you could be considered odd and almost subversive for suggesting that resources should be devoted to bush regeneration. Now there are tens of thousands of paid and volunteer workers in that field.

Helen Petersen (her surname is now Preston) was there at the beginning of STEP in 1978 for the fight over the Canoon Road Netball Courts development. The people involved then fell roughly into two camps – those concerned about traffic and urban amenity and those concerned with the bushland. Of

course there was overlap as everyone was concerned about both to some extent. When that fight was lost, however, STEP continued on as an environmental group concerned then primarily with bushland conservation. Helen was elected president in June 1979 and served in that job for three years. It was a crucial three years that was to see STEP develop an ethos and energy that persists to this day. Helen then continued on the committee until 1989.

Helen was one who inspired others and certainly inspired, and so condemned, me to environmental activism for almost thirty years. Thanks Helen!

While of course Helen was supported by a great committee, I think we can give her the primary credit for:

- The production of *A Plan of Management for South Turramurra Bushland* under the direction of Robin Buchanan. A very important book when

such plans were rare indeed. This was the first of STEP's publications and set a precedent that is still being respected.

- Development by 1980 of the STEP method of selective hand clearing to aid fire management at residential and bush boundaries.
- The successful lobbying of Ku-ring-gai Council to set up the Bushland Management Working Party that was so important in getting bushland management in Ku-ring-gai off the ground.
- The acquisition in 1985 of funding from a CEP (Community Employment Programme) and the employment of six young people to work on a major regeneration project at Browns Field.
- Being one of the founders and the first president of AABR (Australian Association of Bush Regenerators).
- Being instrumental in organising, in 1986, the first TAFE syllabus focused on bush regeneration.



There was of course much more – too much to record here. But the way she was regarded at the time is illustrated by the following letter that I wrote to Council on 1 September 1987 upon Helen's retirement from the Working Party:

Helen has contributed more to bushland management in Ku-ring-gai over the past 10 years than any other person. Her pioneering role has been the key motivating force behind the formation of STEP, the Union of Lane Cove Valley Conservation Societies and the Bushland Management Working Party. She is acknowledged as the foremost expert in bush regeneration techniques.

The Working Party has benefited greatly over the last six years from Helen's work and knowledge. During this period Ku-ring-gai has become the pre-eminent council in bushland management in the Sydney region, not only because of the initiatives such as the Plan of Management and the film, but also because we have successfully implemented in the field the emerging theoretical basis for bushland management. Helen, while she was employed by Council, established the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of a full-time regeneration team.

It is all too easy to take for granted the contributions of people who are well known to us. In Helen's case, therefore, I believe that it is appropriate to record her record of ten years of competent, dedicated hard work towards the efficient management and preservation of Ku-ring-gai's major asset – its bushland.

What I didn't say there, because it was inappropriate in a letter to Council, was that her achievements were in the face of unremitting hostility from key councillors and sections of the community in the early years. Bushland management was a new concept that was foreign to everyone from the managers of open space to the community generally and its proponents were treated almost as if they were on some subversive mission. There were many hard words, disappointments and tears.

Of course Helen didn't do it alone – she was supported by great STEP presidents and committees and worked hand-in-hand with other very effective activists such as Janet Fairlie-Cuninghame.

The years of conflict and difficulty of course took their toll and Helen eventually retired from it all. She now lives in the Blue Mountains and is of course a STEP Life Member.

The (electronic) environmental news update

Introducing EnviroTube

This is an interesting and informative innovation from Ku-ring-gai Council. Follow this link for Peter Clarke's latest rundown on local environmental activity:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5Zz6UukNdl>

What is the environmental cost of spending?

Did you know that more water goes into producing a single steak for your dinner than you will use in an entire week of showering? Find out more...

The Consumption Atlas is an active on line tool developed in partnership between the Australia Conservation Foundation and the Centre for Integrated Sustainability at the University of Sydney. The Atlas maps patterns of consumption and environmental impact across Australia. It illustrates how much water and land is needed, and how much pollution is created, to support household consumption patterns across Australia.

You can find out how your area compares by entering your postcode at:

<http://www.acfonline.org.au/consumptionatlas/>

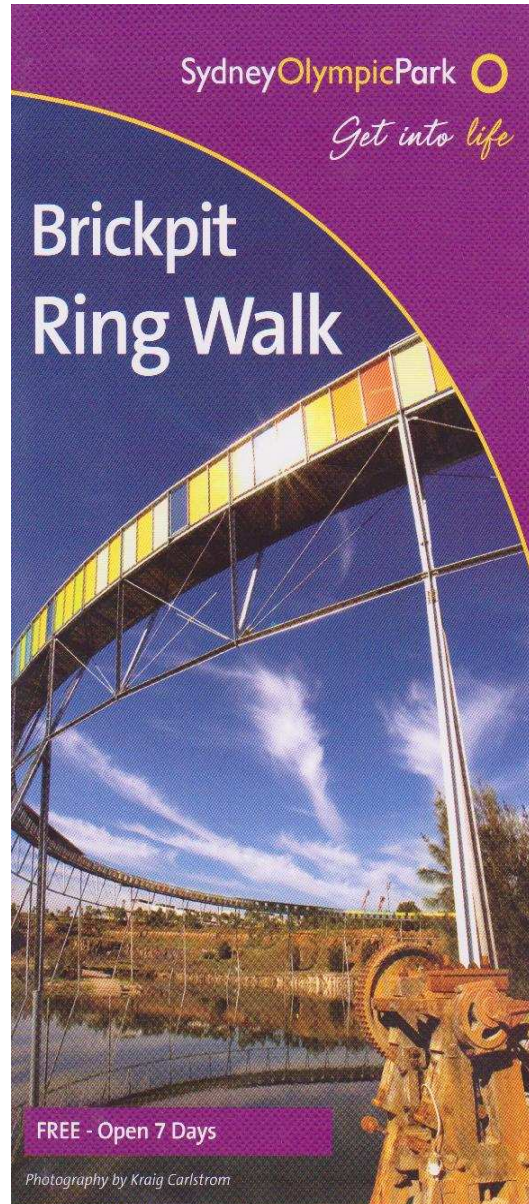
Population viewpoints: link from Anne Carroll

Bob Carr, Wayne Swann and others debate the meaning and likely impacts of the Australian population doubling over the next forty years. See: <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2713263.htm>

Jim Wells asks "do you know about the Brickpit Ring Walk at Olympic Park?"

It's a spectacular elevated walkway over a lake in the brick pit – well worth visiting says STEP Treasurer Jim Wells. See:

http://www.sydneyolympicpark.com.au/visiting/venues_and_parks/brickpit_ring_walk



STEP committee member John Martyn writes to say that recent editions of New Scientist magazine have highlighted climate change from several angles.

Two of the most interesting are summarised below.

World will 'cool for the next decade' – 12 September p10.

Mojib Latif, a climate physicist at the University of Kiel, Germany, predicts that a natural cooling trend will override human-induced warming over the next several years. This is principally down to ocean temperature variations: cyclical changes in the North Atlantic Oscillation and Atlantic Meridional Oscillation. These have global effects as distant from source as the Indian Monsoon, and their cooling influence may be apparent already in the reduced loss of Arctic sea ice this past northern summer. If borne out, the cooling will doubtless reinforce the views of climate change sceptics.

The Palaeocene-Eocene thermal maximum – 3 October p32-35

This event took place about 55 million years ago and affected the whole planet. Temperatures rose by up to 9°C in only a few thousand years; the blink of an eye in geological terms. The earth at the time was pre-glacial, and didn't acquire its recent cycles of fluctuating ice caps until 35 million years ago, so warming began from a high base.

Study of sedimentary rocks from the period shows that warming was accompanied by a huge spike in atmospheric CO₂. James Zachos of the University of California attributes this not to volcanic activity, or melting of permafrost, but to peat decomposition due to a drying climate. Plant fossil evidence

supports this. Evidence from the rocks also reveals a period of extreme acidification of the oceans which lasted from 10,000 to 20,000 years.

The Palaeocene-Eocene thermal maximum is being regarded as a model for what may happen if feedback mechanisms in the current warming cycle cause things to go out of control: the melting of ice and permafrost exposing dark, heat-absorbing land

Bernard Keane, the Canberra correspondent for Crikey, wrote an article on 12 October suggesting that it is the Greens who are the most economically rational party on emissions trading.

“This morning the Greens launched a raft of amendments to improve the Government’s CPRS bill. They involve higher targets – 25-40% greenhouse gas emissions reduction by 2020; an industry compensation mechanism based on that proposed in the Garnaut Review, which involves compensating trade-exposed industries for the difference between their competitiveness under the scheme versus business-as-usual; a mechanism for tallying voluntary action and reducing emissions targets accordingly, and a far more rigorous process for imported carbon credits.

The voluntary action mechanism apart, they’re sensible and mean the Greens are currently the most economically-rational party on emissions trading. If the Greens had two more senators, it would make for some fascinating negotiations with a Government tempted by the prospect of passage of

surfaces permitting the decomposition of vast stores of cold-climate peat deposits.

The New Scientist article covers much more ground than this brief summary. You can access it at <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20427281.300-posthuman-earth-how-the-planet-will-recover-from-us.html>

a landmark bill, but incapable of resisting the rent seeking and whingeing of industry. Indeed, if there were two independent senators like Nick Xenophon, a deal might be possible involving the non-Coalition parties. Xenophon differs from the Greens on crucial points but some sort of mutually-acceptable position might be possible. That is, after all, what Xenophon does.

Steve Fielding’s climate scepticism and unreliability however, cruel that hope. He’s more likely to come into Parliament dressed as a smokestack than vote for the CPRS.

To counteract that, the Greens talk of a moderate Liberal like Judith Troeth crossing the floor to help pass the bill. Whatever the possibility of that, it is more likely with the Government’s polluter-friendly version than with the Greens economically-sensible version.”

Perish as we populate

The Canberra Times on 25 September 2009 carried this article by Professor Ian Lowe, who is President of the Australian Conservation Foundation and Emeritus Professor of Science and Technology at Griffith University.

The latest population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics are alarming. New demographic figures show Australia’s population grew by 439,000 in the year to March 2009, including net overseas migration of 239,000. The growth rate of 2.1 per cent was the highest since the 1950s.

The growth rate threatens our living standards as well as worsening our environmental problems. A responsible government would be acting now to curb the unsustainable growth, rather than celebrating the disastrous trend. Australia’s rate of population growth is now among the highest in the industrialised world. Among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, only Turkey and Mexico had higher annual growth rates in recent years. Irresponsible increases in migration have added to the recent surge in the population.

If 2008 fertility and migration levels were to continue, Australia’s population would triple by the end of this century and remain on a growth trajectory. With more sensible policies, we could stabilise our population around mid- century. That should be our goal.

Three national reports on the state of the environment have concluded that the important

trends are going in the wrong direction. Our inland rivers, the coastal zone, rural land and our unique biodiversity are all threatened. Australia’s greenhouse pollution is spiralling out of control, the product of a rapidly growing population and increasing energy use per person. We must stabilise our population and consumption at levels that can be sustainably supported. There is a clear link between population growth and environmental damage. Growing populations require additional energy, water and other resources.

All our major cities are under strain from their increasing numbers. We see pressure on water resources, loss of natural habitat on the urban fringe, increasing greenhouse pollution from transport and other energy use, air quality impacts and loss of the built heritage. The problems are particularly evident in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, where there is increasing community concern at the erosion of the quality of life. Even in Adelaide, where the state government seems disappointed that the population isn’t growing as rapidly as other cities, the semi-rural fringe is being concreted over at an alarming rate. The pressure on our cities is being compounded by smaller households. There were 3.5 people per dwelling in 1960; the figure now is 2.5 and falling. At the same time, the average house has got larger.

Outside our major cities, there is pressure to develop resources, intensify agricultural production, and over-extract water from natural systems as a function of increasing urban consumption. The intense development of many coastal areas, for holiday homes and "sea change" migrants from urban centres, is eroding the quality and resilience of natural coastal systems.

The arguments for continued growth are not consistent or honest. We are being told we need to bring in more migrants to fill alleged job shortages. At the same time, it is claimed we can't provide work for young Australians and that government needs to work on "jobs, jobs, jobs". Those two claims cannot both be true. We are also told we need to fear an ageing population, but migrants grow old just like the rest of us.

Peter McDonald, director of the Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute, has said the argument that migration can keep our population young is "demographic nonsense". What is the alternative? Our aim should be to stabilise our population. This means we must have a look at migration levels.

Immigration has enriched Australia's cultural and

social life. We have important international humanitarian responsibilities, including the need to accept refugees. But more than 50 per cent of recent migrants arrived as "skilled" people, with only 7 per cent coming on humanitarian grounds. Overwhelmingly, migration has been serving the business community's wish for a pool of labour, rather than meeting our responsibility to accept refugees.

Australia can meet and increase its humanitarian obligations and continue to accommodate family reunions, while reducing overall migration to more sustainable levels. Demographic studies show that if the net inward migration is about 70,000 a year or less, the population will stabilise in about the 2050s. If the net migration figure is above 70,000 a year (it was 253,400 in 2008) the population keeps increasing far into the future. That is a grim prospect of continuing decline in our quality of life and the state of our environment.

There is no realistic prospect of meeting responsible targets for reduced greenhouse pollution if we keep increasing population numbers. For the sake of future generations, we need a serious community debate about population.

Extinction is not inevitable – if we remove systemic failures, flaws and gap

By STEP member Janet Harwood

In the days after the Sydney Morning Herald carried the startling front page headline: "Garrett concedes: extinction inevitable" there were no letters in the Herald which seemed to follow up with any major concern. Well, if there were we didn't get to see them. Letters to the Herald about multiple, inappropriate zonings leading to extinction of two critically endangered ecological communities (CEEC) in Ku-ring-gai, where seed-bank of critically endangered ecological communities of species is being excavated and trucked off due to improper re-zoning. They somehow don't get published.

Is it because the editor deems the topic to be less important than the dyslexia of some politician or religious terrorism?

Environmental issues are described in superficial, single worded terms like "leafy", "treed", "loss of canopy" or not at all. Is this level of public awareness sufficient to support dialogue necessary in an era of serious concerns like climate change, mass extinction and urbanisation? As the world becomes less habitable, areas of biodiversity are indispensable to human health. Species extinction is the direct result of climate change and habitat loss. Biodiversity conservation is as urgent as climate change.

In Sydney, Ku-ring-gai is an area of rare, urban biodiversity. (1) Damage to this asset emanates from known systemic failures, flaws and gaps in the land-use planning process. It is relatively easy to remove these problems – if the public is equipped to demand that politicians take action. If they remain unaddressed, the process of re-zoning for develop-

ment is a clear path to extinction.

So how does local biodiversity loss happen?

The poacher is the gamekeeper. Land most desirable to protect has become the land most likely to be destroyed by development. To achieve this environmental controls have to be sacrificed.

In the Ku-ring-gai case study there's a history of diminishing and waiving environmental controls at the point of making Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) for re-zoning. Legislated with support of both major parties, planning changes make systemic problems even more environmentally damaging. The Planning System is un-informed and un-interested in relation to biodiversity depletion and extinction effects. (2) Its power and authority, fuelled by ambitious projects, gives extraordinary freedoms to developers.

As Tim Robertson the environmental barrister says, "There's a further problem with the system ... under Part 3A ... when the developer makes what is called a statement of commitments, then that statement represents the controls that poacher has effectively become the gamekeeper." (3)

Zoning commands donations – albeit sufficiently removed in time to appear unconnected. Endorsed by the Planning System at the highest level, the zoning system is administered into effect locally during development assessment. Yet, environmental damage begins even in anticipation of the zoning stage. Areas of environmental significance like Ku-ring-gai, eyed by developers, have become vulnerable to multiple types of opportunistic re-

zonings – ordinary LEPs, Town Centre LEPs, Minister’s seized sites, Part 3A designated sites, special uses sites, Standard LEPs and even Public Lands for Reclassification.

Failures, flaws and gaps

The poacher/gamekeeper analogy applies even more widely. Held down by the financially more commanding Planning System, weaker environmental arms of government have responsibility without authority. The gates are first opened up, as in Ku-ring-gai, by a failure of the legislated gamekeeper to declare “critical habitat” under the Threatened Species Conservation Act (TSC). Rare urban bushland remnants of two CEECs could have been “red-flagged” under the BioBanking system as high conservation value, yet this was not done either.

There is no federally instituted gazette-able biodiversity strategy to precede rezoning for development. The Turramurra Deferred Matter shows, that an area mapped highly sensitive can be re-zoned, bypassing local biodiversity strategy. In areas of undeclared critical habitat, a serious flaw in the system is absence of assessment of cumulative impact. Unassessed cumulative environmental damage achieved by multiple zonings (listed above) means rapidly incrementing environmental damage.

Finally, waiving of a Local Environmental Study (LES) by the Director General of the Department of Planning means the only statutory control available

for the protection of an environmentally sensitive area is also removed. Re-zoning for development thus proceeds unhindered, across an area of state and national ecological significance.

EP&A Act overrides the TSC Act

Overcome by systemic failures, flaws and gaps, the TSC Act’s BioBanking Bill was a well-intentioned attempt to protect biodiversity from a powerful EP&A Act. However, if used without “red-flagging” areas of high conservation value, it is a gift to developers and could cause instant loss for no guaranteed future gain. Without zoning for protection by declaration of “critical habitat” or “red flagging”, the EP&A Act can override the TSC Act.

Finally, stakeholders in the line of development impact need reminding that a non-biological, legislative process like zoning for development can gradually or immediately, permanently and irreversibly, do ecological damage.

Non-recognition of zoning for development as a Key Threatening Process (KTP) under the TSC Act means all links of the development chain from applicant to assessor, local council worker to federal compliance bureaucrat – are not conscious of the immediately damage caused by rezoning for development. Zoning is more instant in its extinction effect than biological KTPs. (4) Permanent removal of seed-bank by deep basement parking under five storey development is one clear example of how zoning is a KTP.



Photograph shows the development consequence of non-declaration of “critical habitat” for critically endangered Blue Gum High Forest

More effective Federal authority needed.

Under the EPBC Act bureaucrats and ministerial advisers maintain “An ‘action’ under the EPBC Act includes a project, development, activity or series of activities” – but only at the later development stages. The preceding re-zoning stage is a “paper process” they say. This interpretation of “action” means the Federal “trigger” to become involved comes too late.

The Federal Department of Environment (DEH) sees it as the responsibility of the developer to state significant impact upon the item of national significance. It has been seen if the developer can show his impact will be minimal or “no impact at all” and if local assessors accept it – then there is no “action” worthy of compliance investigation by Federal Government under the EPBC Act.

An aware public is urgently needed

Paradoxically, as the world becomes less habitable, destruction proceeds at a faster pace. Awareness of our ecological predicament is critical. Biodiversity is essential for human survival, yet land most desirable to protect is land most likely to be destroyed. Why? Because communication, education and transport are classed as "critical infrastructure" but soils, plant and animal species and disappearing biodiversity are not.

We need a public equipped to recognise and talk about critical biological infrastructure. If we want to protect jobs and the planet, we must know the adage, "No ecosystems - No economy" also means "No plant and animal species - No ecosystems".

An aware public is urgently needed to support scientists in pushing Life Support problems onto the agendas of the caucus rooms of today. Simplicity and complexity injected into public discourse means we can tackle big issues. (5) This can only be achieved if, at the very top of media organisations, ecologically aware leadership takes on the task of enlightening the people about our ecological predicament.

Footnotes:

- (1) Environmental Baseline Study, (2000) http://www.kmc.nsw.gov.au/resources/documents/Environmental_Baseline_Study1.pdf
- (2) Correspondence to Janet Harwood from Department of Planning.
- (3) Stateline Interview with Quentin Dempster 11/09/2009 <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/nsw/content/2006/s2683929.htm>
- (4) See aerial view of development in proximity of Sheldon Forest
- (5) 2007-2008 NSW Biodiversity and Climate Change Adaptation Framework (NSW Government) Action Area 3: "Incorporate adaptation strategies that deal with impacts of climate change on biodiversity into policy and operations". It says, "these measures include preserving and improving vegetation links between conservation areas on public and privately owned land to allow species to migrate in a changing climate – connecting natural areas will allow species to move and find refuge". The objectives of these actions are:
 - (a) to reduce the vulnerability of ecosystems by identifying land use planning measures to increase the ability of plants and animals to adapt to the impacts of climate change. And,
 - (b) to use all available strategies including natural resource management plans and land use planning policies, to strengthen the above measures." Page 12 of Framework.

Some late night holiday reading

This is the final issue of STEP Matters for 2009, so let your committee be amongst the first to wish all our members a safe, healthy and happy festive season. We hope that you have found much of the information in the articles carried by STEP Matters to be of interest, or to be not easily found elsewhere. In this vein, we bring you another, hopefully thought provoking, article from the Earth Policy Institute. STEP members may recall earlier articles from this Washington based think tank in our February and April editions.

Is our civilisation at a tipping point?

*by Lester R Brown **

In recent years there has been a growing concern over thresholds or tipping points in nature. For example, scientists worry about when the shrinking population of an endangered species will fall to a point from which it cannot recover. Marine biologists are concerned about the point where overfishing will trigger the collapse of a fishery.

We know there were social tipping points in earlier civilisations, points at which they were overwhelmed by the forces threatening them. For instance, at some point the irrigation-related salt buildup in their soil overwhelmed the capacity of the Sumerians to deal with it. With the Mayans, there came a time when the effects of cutting too many trees and the associated loss of topsoil were simply more than they could manage.

The social tipping points that lead to decline and collapse when societies are overwhelmed by a single threat or by simultaneous multiple threats are not always easily anticipated. As a general matter, more economically advanced countries can deal with new threats more effectively than developing countries can. For example, while governments of industrial countries have been able to hold HIV infection rates among adults under 1 percent, many developing-country governments have failed to do so and are now struggling with much higher infection rates. This is most evident in some

southern African countries, where up to 20 percent or more of adults are infected.

A similar situation exists with population growth. While populations in nearly all industrial countries except the United States have stopped growing, rapid growth continues in nearly all the countries of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. Nearly all of the 80 million people being added to world population each year are born in countries where natural support systems are already deteriorating in the face of excessive population pressure, in the countries least able to support them. In these countries, the risk of state failure is growing.

Some issues seem to exceed even the management skills of the more advanced countries, however. When countries first detected falling underground water tables, it was logical to expect that governments in affected countries would quickly raise water use efficiency and stabilise population in order to stabilise aquifers. Unfortunately, not one country--industrial or developing--has done so. Two failing states where over pumping water and security-threatening water shortages loom large are Pakistan and Yemen.

Although the need to cut carbon emissions has been evident for some time, not one country has

succeeded in becoming carbon-neutral. Thus far this has proved too difficult politically for even the most technologically advanced societies. Could rising carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere prove to be as unmanageable for our early twenty-first century civilisation as rising salt levels in the soil were for the Sumerians in 4000 BC?

Another potentially severe stress on governments is the coming decline in oil production. Although world oil production has exceeded new oil discoveries by a wide margin for more than 20 years, only Sweden and Iceland actually have anything that remotely resembles a plan to effectively cope with a shrinking supply of oil.

This is not an exhaustive inventory of unresolved problems, but it does give a sense of how their number is growing as we fail to solve existing problems even as new ones are being added to the list. Analytically, the challenge is to assess the effects of mounting stresses on the global system. These stresses are perhaps most evident in their effect on food security, which was the weak point of many earlier civilisations that collapsed.

Several converging trends are making it difficult for the world's farmers to keep up with the growth in food demand. Prominent among these are falling water tables, the growing conversion of cropland to nonfarm uses, and more extreme climate events, including crop-withering heat waves, droughts, and floods. As the stresses from these unresolved problems accumulate, weaker governments are beginning to break down.

Compounding these problems, the United States, the world's breadbasket, has dramatically increased the share of its grain harvest going to fuel ethanol –

from 15 percent of the 2005 crop to more than 25 percent of the 2008 crop. This ill-conceived U.S. effort to reduce its oil insecurity helped drive world grain prices to all-time highs by mid-2008, creating unprecedented world food insecurity.

The risk is that these accumulating problems and their consequences will overwhelm more and more governments, leading to widespread state failure and eventually the failure of civilisation. The countries that top the list of failing states are not particularly surprising. They include, for example, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Chad, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Haiti. And the list grows longer each year, raising a disturbing question: How many failing states will it take before civilisation itself fails? No one knows the answer, but it is a question we must ask.

We are in a race between tipping points in nature and our political systems. Can we phase out coal-fired power plants before the melting of the Greenland ice sheet becomes irreversible? Can we gather the political will to halt deforestation in the Amazon before its growing vulnerability to fire takes it to the point of no return? Can we help countries stabilise population before they become failing states?

We have the technologies to restore the earth's natural support systems, to eradicate poverty, to stabilise population, and to restructure the world energy economy and stabilise climate. The challenge now is to build the political will to do so. Saving civilisation is not a spectator sport. Each of us has a leading role to play.

** Adapted from "Entering a New World," in Lester R. Brown, Plan B 3.0: Mobilising to Save Civilisation (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).*

But it is business as usual in New South Wales



Macquarie Generation and Delta Electricity have both submitted development applications for new power stations in NSW. Coal fired power is a likely option for both developments.

Together the power stations would increase carbon pollution emissions in NSW from stationary energy by a massive 34 per cent. That is the equivalent of four million extra cars on our roads.

You can view the documents (STEP web site electronic version only):

* [Click here for Bayswater power station](#)

* [Click here for Mt Piper power station](#)

If undelivered return to: STEP Inc, PO Box 697, Turrumurra, NSW 2074.

