

19th CAWS WEEDS CONFERENCE, HOBART, TASMANIA

CAWS TRAVEL AWARD AND CONFERENCE REPORT

My first consideration is to deeply thank both the Council of Australasian Weeds Societies (CAWS) and the Weed Society of Victoria in appreciation for supporting my endeavours to present a poster and a published paper at the recent 19th CAWS conference in Hobart, 1 – 4 September 2014, and for the generous travel award that enabled me to cover the cost of travel via the Spirit of Tasmania and travel costs. Without this financial support, it would have been far more problematical to attend this important conference. I also thank the Tasmanian Weed Society for their hospitality and presentation of such a prestigious conference titled *Science, Community and Food Security: the Weed Challenge*.

Additionally, my appreciation is for the assistance and patience given me by members of the Weed Society of Victoria in terms of latitude in allowing me to express my themed paper with the somewhat confounding title *Weeds, what weeds? Stop weed evasion now!* Many grateful thanks to Max and Fiona in editing the piece to satisfy publishing protocols.

As an 'on ground' operator in the Nelson Coastcare (NCC) volunteer group (which I convened in November 2010) and its project co-ordinator, I became aware of anomalies that quickly became apparent when trying to deal with newly emerging regional weeds on a funding requirement basis. My research of the various Acts, such as the Victorian *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*, the *Flora & Fauna Conservation Act 1988* and to a lesser degree, the *Environmental Protection & Biological Conservation Act 1999*, indicated that unless a weed was already listed as noxious, funding for removing aggressively invading plants such as Italian Buckthorn, Cotoneaster, Mirror Bush, and others was not approved. Worse, native plants that have moved out of their original endemic habitats, such as Sweet Pittosporum, Coast Tea-tree, Coast Wattle and creepers such as WA's Bluebell Creeper are stated as protected, despite their massive avalanche of invasions taking over not only threatened regional habitats but a whole ecosystem such as is found along the Discovery Bay Coastal Park where, for instance, Coast Wattle now extends amongst High Ecological Value Aquatic Ecosystems recently earmarked for Ramsar nomination.

Additionally, with most NCC members being retirees, many suffering ailments that constrain the duration of physical effort required to remove woody weeds from around the township and Glenelg River frontage, the common sense approach is to use bush removal contractors, but with funding grant requirements requiring at least a 25% volunteer physical input, removing large areas of woody weeds such as Italian Buckthorn is a physical impossibility for us oldies. Yet the township still continues weed removal (with the additional use of herbicides on thistles, Buchan Weed, Polygala etc.) on a constant basis, one that doesn't require regular funding input.

Recently, Nelson Coastcare achieved a Victorian Coastal Awards for Excellence 2014 for 'Being ecoliteracy advocates and Ramsar-worthy workers' in recognition of achievements as winner in the category 'Community Action and Partnerships'. One of our members, Graeme, writes revealingly:

"Congratulations Nelson Coastcare. This is a great thrill for us all, who plant and water and pull and spray and hack and dig and rake and chainsaw and poison and drag and collect and pick up, all the while laughing and joking and generally enjoying ourselves for the greater good and an admirable quest."

Yet recently, an even further funding anomaly has now arisen: government funding to the Victorian Departments of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) and Parks Victoria has been put on hold now and for the next two years involving weed management programs. With funding grants to volunteer groups such as Coastcare, there is a provision for an 'in kind' complement by a government

agency as the relevant public land manager. Effectively, this means that weed management, remedial and restoration works on public lands advocated by Coastcare groups is also on hold for another two years.

Weeds, if they had a voice, must rejoice exceedingly at the generosity of our governments giving them a free hand, unhindered, in overwhelming even further natural and cultivated environments, and unlike us humans, doesn't cost them a cent to do so!

So, what insights, benefits and take-home knowledge did I derive from the Hobart CAWS conference? First things first: I found the venue of the Hotel Grand Chancellor and the food equally glorious, especially that Chicken and Leek pie – scrumptiously yummy. The Conference Handbook was a first-class compilation of the conference program's sessions, presenting a range of equally prestigious Speakers and Chairs. The conference managers, Leishman Associates, too, are to be much congratulated on presenting such a well-organised program which was very efficiently and effectively run.

All sessions I attended were useful in adding or revealing new knowledge. Some, such as Biosecurity South Australia's Michaela Heinson's *Community engagement for reviewing declared weed policies: how South Australia encourages input into decision making processes*, was entirely relevant from my Coastcare issues perspective, likewise several other presenters on a similar theme.

I gained valuable insights from Yarra Ranges Council, Kym Saunder's presentation in Session T3.13, regarding multi-agency, strategic weed control achievements and learning; also Department of Primary Industries NSW's Birgitte Verbeek on her use of social science methods to improve community participation in weed management programs.

Professor Daniel Simberloff's oration on the human cultural aspects of weed histories was illuminating in that, apart from narrating the changes in historical attitudes and concepts about weeds in terms of understanding their ecology and evolutionary biology, he was also pointing out how human cultural attitudes are formed, but do change over time and what indicators such as increased knowledge influence human activity that can alter concepts of what are considered weeds or otherwise.

The best sessions attended were those engaging dialogue in the three interactive panel discussion forums covering current issues relating to future weed research needs, the biosecurity approach, and importantly, community engagement and weed surveillance. However, to be blunt, an ignored topic, the very elephant in the room was left unspoken and not discussed. Very disappointing, but understandable in consideration that out of 240 delegates present only three (myself included) were not employed by either the three tiers of government, those representing university faculties or corporate presenters and sponsors.

This elephant in the room was that of government policies being driven by political ideology which are being imposed on government agencies throughout the three tiers of government. I asked this question but it was passed over without discussion; another person later raised the same question on shouldn't government policies affecting tight or lack of funding to environmental departments be questioned as to the adverse impacts on effective weed management and control; again this was passed over without further comment.

It seems an almost incongruity that in Victoria, there have been two recent Attorney General Office's (VAGO) reports on 'lack of management' by DEPI and PV, but which criticism undoubtedly largely reflects the lack of adequate and fore-sighted funding from governments dictating policies to agencies whilst often ignoring these agencies recommendations. There also needs to be more skilled ecologically savvy personnel on the ground, rather than departmental administrators in purely managerial roles.

Policies for protecting the environment have recently subsumed the environment to examining it on its possible development potential through the 'no net loss' perspective, rather than that of a 'net gain' to increase, restore and improve habitat capacity. (See: *'Biodiversity assessment guidelines – permitted clearing of native vegetation'*, DEPI, September 2013). Degraded landscapes (with plenty of weeds for instance) give opportunity for development projects to justify exploitation or to use an 'offsets' process to gain access.

There is in the political arena (and corporate world) an apparent non-comprehension of the enormity of environmental problems - a pervasive, enduring culture of deriding ecological literacy as a necessary adjunct and basis to social and economic well-being. There appears to be a denial that the economy depends on healthy, sustainable ecosystems for its continued existence. Weeds top the threats to ecological sustainability and by extension, economic and social productivity. Yet the prevailing political mindset is harnessed to the belief that the economy is in one box and the environment is in a completely unconnected, separate box. This issue was brought into forceful perspective at the conference when the observation that Gorse was noted as smothering considerable agricultural land throughout some areas in Tasmania gave the response from the Speaker with a blunt assurance that Gorse was regarded as only an environmental weed!

Ecological literacy must be incorporated into all levels of curricula as a compulsory subject for understanding how the interactions of human activities impact on the environment, which in turn affects human activity limitations. Equally, for all the advances brought about by Information Technology, there has developed a concerning disconnect between users, particularly children, and the natural environment upon which our civilisation totally depends.

There is an urgent need for a conversation to engage in critical thinking that brings all these prevailing contradictions into open discussion, a frank dialogue that invites on board and engages all parties and partnerships without fear or favour of toeing political correctness.

Although there are numerous other environmental risks to consider, *weeds are absolutely central to this debate*. Is it possible that the Weed Societies might consider a sub-group willing to outline and put into reality the present government and agency partnerships problems about the lack of adequate funding to offset further weed proliferation and other socio-political cultural anomalies adversely affecting the environment?

This 19th Weeds Conference was a resounding success in its own right, but, will the Perth Weeds 20th Conference pick up further on this much needed debate?

Leila Huebner

Nelson Coastcare Inc.

Nelson Victoria 3292