

HOW MUCH LONGER WILL OUR BUSHLAND LAST?

(alternative title:- GUIDELINES FOR USING
OUR PUBLIC LAND)

Captain Cook first sighted Australia exactly two hundred years ago. All before him was untouched virgin land - a whole continent of it.

Eighteen years later, Captain Phillip brought the First Fleet to Botany Bay and Sydney Cove, and the only way they could survive was to fell the trees, clear away the bush, turn the soil and grow something to eat. Thus started the process of transforming the continent.

Not that it all happened straight away; Perth did not hear the ring of the axe for another forty-one years and Victoria remained inviolate for sixty-four years after Cook landed, when Captain Dutton ploughed his first tiny field at Portland. But on it went with gathering momentum, clearing and burning, felling and turning, the official policy of governments and the private ambition of settlers. Ten years ago, it had reached the point where Victorians could say with just a touch of pride that nearly all of the developed land, amounting to somewhat less than two-thirds of the total land of their State, had been partially or wholly cleared for farming. Now, that remaining untouched third is being invaded by roads, nibbled by pines and pierced by helicopter pads.

In 1788, the nation's survival depended on transforming the untouched land. Is this still so in 1970? I think not, and believe that there are three basic reasons for calling a halt to the destruction of our bushlands and landscape.

1. MATERIAL BASIS.

The first argument for looking critically at the further alteration of public land is the unashamedly materialistic one of the efficient use of our resources.

In terms of acres, the chief form of land-use which had caused the defacement of active land is agricultural or pastoral development. For one State, Victoria, as already pointed out, the half to two-thirds which has been given over to this form of land-use includes most of the economically-developable land. The rest, still held by the Crown, is largely marginal for agriculture because of steep slope, poor soil, low rainfall or a combination of these factors, and agricultural production there is usually not

as economical as on the existing farmland, particularly as on the cleared farmland which has not been developed yet to its full capability. The reason that such marginal land is still being "developed" for agricultural use is that some of the costs can be offset by taxation benefits; this, however, is only shifting the cost from the "developer" to the taxpayer at large. Generally-speaking, and from the national viewpoint, the clearing of native land is now an inefficient means of pastoral production, compared with alternative means of such production. In fact, if the aim is to produce more food for an underfed world, then the marginal virgin land is the very last type of area to tackle, at least in Victoria. Similarly, establishing plantations of pines on public land of marginal productivity, with the large sums of Federal money which have been provided on the grounds of National self-sufficiency, may be looked at askance so long as the established efficient pine-industry in New Zealand can supply our needs.

By contrast, some other forms of land-use - for example, parkland, water supply and hardwood production - rely greatly on relatively untouched land, and their alternative means of production are low on land which is being used in other ways.

On these grounds, it would seem sensible to seek any required expansion of agricultural production and of the softwood industry in the already-cleared areas, and to reserve the untouched land for those industries for which it is suited.

Furthermore, even when we know the capabilities of an area of land for the various kinds of production, together with the alternative means of production, and the costs, this is not the only information required to determine how the land should be used. It is important to know also the needs for the various kinds of production, the hazards involved and the compatibilities. Let us look at these in turn.

The needs for the products - it would seem obvious enough to have to consider these, for no one is so foolish as, say, to build a well-equipped school in the outback simply because the soil is of the type to ensure firm foundations and there happens to be a plentiful supply of clay nearby for making bricks; No, we build the school only where a lot of children are without proper facilities. Yet we continue to create problems for the farming industry by making more farms out of virgin land, simply because we have found out which trace elements to apply, or because there are machines around big enough to handle the scrub.

Hazards are often difficult to foresee, but will become real none the less for that. For example, the erosion and salting of

pastoral land in southern Australia (still widespread and severe in some areas) have been triggered off by clearing the land and grazing it in what seemed reasonable ways to do so. When trees (which are deeply-rooted perennials/plants) are cleared to make way for pastures with which to feed stock, the plants which replace them are usually more shallowly-rooted and are often annuals. What was not realised was that such a vegetation, particularly if grazed short, uses up much less water than did the original tree cover in the general climate of southern Australia. According to the precise climate of the various localities, up to twelve inches more of rain-water has to be disposed of each year, on the average, as a result of clearing and grazing, than previously. The disposal of this extra water, depending again on slope, soil and rock-type has resulted in the erosion and salting of the land and the salting of the streams. This could not have been foreseen, and the precise consequences for untouched land still cannot be predicted unless adequate information is available about various features. Erosion and salting are only two particular forms of environmental pollution, and the lesson to be learnt from them is that quite unexpected consequences may stem from interference with the landscape and may be harmful to the resource.

The compatibilities of different forms of land-use are relevant. If an area of land can be used at the same time for several purposes without detriment to the land - for example, water-supply, honey-production and conserving wild-life - then its value for any one of these compatible ways of use is enhanced by its capability for the others also. By contrast, some uses are not compatible - that is, it may not be possible to use an area in a particular way without preventing its use or lowering its value for other purposes. For example, it is not feasible to grow pines and pastures on the same area at the same time; also, one form of production may cause a hazard for another feasible form, as ^{when} clearing ^{causes} producing more salty water supplies. With compatible forms of use, no restriction is imposed and no choice is required of the use to be made of the land, all benefits being available; with incompatible forms of use, the eventual use is restricted and a choice must be made.

In short, a capability of the land for a particular kind of production does not thereby justify its use in that way; other ways of using the land, the needs for all uses, alternative ways of meeting the needs, the hazards and the compatibilities are also important and to be considered. In this way, a logical approach can be devised to assist in determining how best to use untouched land. It consists of four stages. The first is to characterise the nature of the land and to determine the various

land-types. Secondly, the capabilities of the various land-types are assessed for the different forms of land-use. The third stage is to evaluate the land for each different form of land-use by considering the capabilities plus the information on needs for the products, alternative ways of meeting the needs, costs, hazards and compatibilities. Finally, the priorities can be established by comparing all the information for the various forms of use - a sort of optimisation over the whole broad canvas.

Now the point here is that when we apply this approach to native bushland, we nearly always arrive at one or both of two conclusions. The first is that a higher priority emerges for those forms of land-use in which there is little need to alter the natural environment - for example, conserving wild-life, honey production, and water-supply. The second conclusion is that there is insufficient information on capabilities, future needs, hazards and compatibilities to justify committing the land to any particular use at present. An excellent example of this is provided by the Little Desert in Victoria, for which this approach produced a higher priority for conserving wild-life and the natural environment than for agriculture, but also gave the highest priority (apart from certain minimum parklands) to keeping it in its present form, a "land-bank", until more investigations could be made.

2. MORAL BASIS

The second reason for keeping our natural environment intact has a moral basis - the obligation to other people in the future. This is the essence of conservation - looking after our resources so that they can provide our present and future needs.

Some future needs can be predicted in a generalised way from the trends of present changes in population, technology and social patterns. Thus, the needs to conserve wild-life, for outdoor recreation and to conserve the natural environment are closely interwoven, and depend on the size of our population, urbanisation of our communities and on our ability to change our environment at will but not always knowing the consequences. From the rapid increase in all of these, it is clear that the needs will increase similarly.

However, the needs for the various benefits produced by the land cannot be predicted precisely. Present prices for the products of the land, often the chief factor determining the use of the land, are not a satisfactory guide. This is because by the time they reflect the long-term need, the resource may be irrevocably altered, unable to produce what is eventually required,

and also because many benefits, particularly the intangible ones, are difficult to express in monetary terms.

Furthermore, the nature of our future needs may be unknown at this stage. Who, thirty years ago, would have thought that in Australia today we would be concerned with pollution, the extent and quality of underground water-resources or with plantations of pines,?

Consequently, because we are concerned with future needs which are difficult to evaluate and even impossible to foresee, we are led to the cardinal principle of resource-management and conservation, which is that scarce valuable resources should not be used up unless it is necessary to do so.

Here, untouched public land is the scarce valuable resource. This is because it is versatile. Versatility is a useful and valuable attribute of land, because versatile land can be put to more uses more easily than land which is not versatile. Untouched land is versatile, having the properties which will allow it to be used for "natural" production as well as being capable of being altered for other kinds of production. Unallocated - that is, Crown land or public land, can be as versatile in tenure as may be wished, without legal or personal encumbrance. Land of high capability for a number of kinds of production is more versatile than land at low capability. Untouched public land, especially if of high capability, is, therefore, a valuable resource, and in many parts of Australia it is now a scarce resource also.

Consequently, where no clear priorities for kinds of land-use can be established, or where the need to put the land to some particular form of use now is not urgent, then it would be wise to keep public or Crown land in the form (one may term it a "land-bank") in which it can be deployed flexibly in the future but in the meantime protecting it from easy disposal. It is significant that the most valuable kind of untouched public land to have in a land-bank is that with a high capability; indeed, such land even more than marginal land should not be committed to a particular use now, but kept in reserve. In this way, the scarce valuable resource will not be squandered, but can be used when a valid need arises.

3. SPIRITUAL BASIS.

Mary Magdalene was impulsive and generous enough to pour a whole jar of expensive perfume over Jesus' feet, and evoked a protest from the Treasurer, Judas, over such a seeming waste of their community's resources. Perhaps many of us, with our Western

concern for material gain and strict business management, would be inclined to side with Judas on this matter. But if we do, we miss the point of Mary's action and Jesus' reply to Judas - that the love or reverence which we shew to God is more important than the use to which we put our resources.

At first sight, this seems contrary to the traditional Christian ethic that it is sinful to misuse the gifts which God has given us, or even to allow them to remain unused, as in the parable of the Talents. But is it really contrary? How can resources be said to be "used" when there is no need for what they produce? When we have no need for them, our consumption or alteration of them does not constitute "use" - it is destruction or misuse.

What reverence to God, then, do we shew when we wilfully destroy His creatures without valid reason?-- Is not it blasphemy? By what right do we destroy something which we did not create, when our own well-being does not depend on it? Why do we presume that all things have been put here only for the use of people, and why do we not accord them the right to exist regardless of their use to us?

It may be objected that whatever replaces what has been destroyed is itself a created thing, just as valuable in its own right. Thus, when trees are bulldozed, wind-rowed and burnt, and white clover and ryegrass spring up instead, are these not of the same intrinsic merit? This is so, but it is not just the plants that have been destroyed, but the order that went with them. There is order in our bushland, a quite remarkable created order of landform, soils, plants and animals, interdependent and consistently reflecting and making the infinitely varying factors of the environment - an order which makes every place unique yet all places related. Destroy that order and we replace it with our chaotic sameness of fences, paddocks, electricity poles and azaleas, and Dandenong on a Saturday morning.

One cannot answer the questions above for anyone else, but I do believe that for some people their answers provide the mainspring of their reverence for the natural order, of their conviction that we will be fit to dominate that order only when we approach it with a little of the humility shéwn by its Creator when He hung on the Cross, and of their objection to the thoughtless destruction of our native landscape - destroyed not because we need to do so, but only because we are able to do so.

In the two hundred years since Captain Cook first sighted Australia, we have irretrievably transformed most of the face of

our huge land. There is still time to keep some of what is left, but we must do it quickly.
