

IT'S TIME TO STOP TALKING AND START ACTING

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Ever since Rachael Carson dropped her political bombshell – Silent Spring – in the United States in the 1960s, highlighting the damage DDT was causing to the environment, we have been struggling with how to control development from causing environmental damage.

We even came up with a new name for it – sustainability.

Our response has been to apply higher and higher environmental standards to new development and to bring in new pollution control laws. We've now got ourselves bound up in so much red tape that you can hardly breathe without having to get some licence or other. Yet with all these controls, the environmental indicators keep getting worse.

There are two simple reasons for this:

Firstly we keep making the same mistakes by failing to understand that small, almost imperceptible actions, by many people, can cause large scale damage.

Secondly, whilst planning and regulation can be effective in limiting damage caused by new development, it can do nothing to overcome past damage.

We were not addressing the fundamental causes of degradation – the overclearing of the landscape decades ago, when we didn't know better; and the continued extraction of water from our rivers when we should have known better.

The overclearing of the landscape has unleashed a wave of extinction processes across our continent that will, in many cases, take another century to play out. It also released the salt lying dormant under our landscape.

These mistakes were made in ignorance – people thought they were doing the right thing developing our continent and building a new nation. And they were. That's what the Snowy Mountains Scheme was all about – nation building.

When it comes to our rivers, history will judge us less kindly. It beggars belief that it wasn't until 1997 that most – I emphasise most – states agreed to cap extractions in the Basin. The application of basic common sense should have told our governments that taking 80% of water out of a river would wreck it.

In the 1990s we tried a new approach – working with local to begin repairing the damage. We called it the Landcare movement. And it was profoundly successful. Within 7 years, 1 in 3 farmers has become a member of a Landcare group.

So we thought, we're finally on the right track. We set up the \$2.5 billion Natural Heritage Trust and then invested another \$1.4 billion into the National Action Plan for salinity. But after 7 years and billions of dollars invested, something went seriously wrong. We invested all this money and we are not getting results – certainly not at the scale necessary to address the problem.

The reason is that we have allowed the bureaucracy to take control of the process. We spend all our time and money drafting new policies, writing report after report after report. You could fill Sydney harbour with reports we've written about the problem. But we're not planting trees and we're not putting water back into the river.

In NSW alone, we had a bureaucracy managing a \$500 million budget, yet only \$3 million was delivered as grants for planting trees. This is madness.

Then late last year, something really interesting happened. In the middle of the worst drought in living memory, a group of powerful businessmen led calls to drought-proof Australia by diverting coastal rivers inland. More engineering solutions to a biological problem.

But instead of being hailed as a great idea, the debate turned dramatically green. The Australian newspaper's economics editor called in Australia's first green drought.

The Wentworth Group said you can't drought proof Australia. We said the only long-term solution is to live in harmony with the extremes of droughts and floods. But instead of just criticising what these people genuinely thought was a good idea, we felt we should put up a better solution.

So we released a statement setting out what we believe are the key changes that need to be made now, to deliver a sustainable future for our continent and its people.

We said that to live in harmony with the environment, there is a need to:

1. Clarify water property rights and the obligations associated with those rights to give farmers some certainty and to enable water to be recovered for the environment.
2. Restore environmental flows to stressed rivers, such as the River Murray and its tributaries.
3. Immediately end broadscale landclearing of remnant native vegetation and assist rural communities with adjustment. This provides fundamental benefits to water quality, prevention of salinity, prevention of soil loss and conservation of biodiversity.
4. Pay farmers for environmental services (clean water, fresh air, healthy soils). Where we expect farmers to maintain land in a certain way that is above their duty of care, we should pay them to provide those services on behalf of the rest of Australia.
5. Incorporate into the cost of food, fibre and water the hidden subsidies currently borne by the environment, to assist farmers to farm sustainably and profitably in this country.

This blueprint attracted the imagination of Australia. It told me that we are now beginning to feel comfortable with our land: that we no longer saw ourselves as conquerors, but as a society determined to stay. It told me that in a space of just 10 generations, our continent had imposed itself on us. We are now becoming part of it.

In historical terms, this is a profound change. The environment is now mainstream. Political leaders of all persuasions are now fully engaged in the debate. It is no longer a debate about the problem, it's a debate about how to fix it.

Of course we need strong laws to protect the environment from further damage, but we are all responsible for land and water degradation and we must therefore all become part of the solution.

It's easy to blame farmers or the irrigator, but it's a cheap shot. We all eat lettuce, tomatoes, grapes, we all drink wine (well I certainly do!). We all wear cotton shirts and jeans. Ultimately it's all of us who use the water, it was the government who we elected who made the bad policy decisions, so ultimately we are all responsible.

Our institutional arrangements for managing water were successful while the resource was plentiful, but they have not been able to manage our rivers in a sustainable way under the current pressures.

The drought has shown that urban and rural dwellers are all in the same boat. There is not enough water to keep going the way we have been doing in the past. If we are going to build a sustainable Australia we need to fix our rivers and we need to restore our water catchments.

The good news is that politicians are beginning to listen. Earlier this year, Premier Carr agreed to fundamentally overhaul the existing land and water institutions in NSW. We told the Premier that "fundamental to the success of a new model for landscape management is simplifying the overwhelmingly complex structures that exist at present, to empower the farming community to take control of the problem, to back them with first class science and provide them with adequate public funds to deliver on-ground solutions on the farm".

We told the Premier that these reforms will fail unless he radically overhauls the institutional arrangements for managing land and water in NSW and to his great he accepted this challenge. Ian Sinclair is now finalising a report ...

Other states should watch this experiment closely.

I am also becoming increasingly confident that the Prime Minister and Premiers are treating calls for a national water plan seriously. The Council of Australian Governments meets at the end of next month and I hope they finally get serious about water reform in Australia.

Everyone has been looking for the easy solution – the one where there is no pain and everybody wins. There is no such solution and whilst we refuse to face up to this fact, our river systems will continue to degrade. Australia desperately needs a national water plan because the solutions need a national effort.

And that means establishing a new, nationally consistent water entitlement and allocation trading system that integrates runoff, river water and groundwater:

- so that the environmental needs of the river have a guaranteed, first priority call on water to keep them healthy;
- so that water users will have greater security on which to base future investments; and
- so that water markets can then be created to encourage private enterprise to trade water to maximise economic development in a way that does not cause further damage to the environment.

A national water plan must also begin buying back environmental water, so that when the rains come we can open the Murray mouth and begin restoring wetlands up and down the length of the basin's river systems. It's time to stop talking and start acting.

Whilst all the talk has been going on, a single, pathetically small diesel dredge is trying against all odds to keep the Murray mouth from closing and in the process destroying one of the world's great wetlands.

My message to you today is that we are at an extraordinarily critical period in our nation's history. The choices we make over the next few months may well decide whether we have a sustainable future on this continent.

George Megalogenis, in his Australian newspaper article last October said: "The scared brown land is provoking a debate different to the one we are used to. Farmers are not agitating for more dams or for rivers to be turned inland, as they have in the past. They want politicians to better protect the environment."

We owe it to future generations to seize this historic opportunity while the rest of Australia is watching.

I'd like to thank you for listening to me this morning, congratulate this Association and its members for the years of dedicated work for the basin and the communities that it supports, and conclude by reading from the Wentworth Group's Blueprint for a Living Continent:

"By giving power back to our communities, valuing the ecosystem services provided by native vegetation, recognising the importance of environmental flows in our rivers, and rewarding people for environmental stewardship, our generation can leave a legacy of living rivers and healthy landscapes, not drains and dustbowls."