

How the environment figured in the 2001 Federal election

“PM enlists emus, kangaroos to save Jackie Kelly’s hide” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 25 October 2001) was the only headline that mentioned Australian fauna during the 2001 Federal election campaign. Although it was a front-page item, there was little of Marian Wilkinson’s piece that would excite a student of animal behaviour. The only zoological interest of the article lies in its anthropomorphic imagery and its demonstration of the iconic potency of large native animals, albeit drafted for political ends. Nevertheless, the article is illuminating because it links native fauna to remnant native vegetation, emphasizes the relevance of the local community, describes the process for listing land under the Heritage Act and gives a sketchy impression of a biodiverse site. The opening paragraphs of Wilkinson’s article read as follows: “Behind the mesh wire, the kangaroo mobs and a stray emu stared aimlessly about the bushland of the old defence site at St Marys, unaware that John Howard had signed them up to campaign for his favourite MP, Jackie Kelly. Saving the hides of the local fauna, the Liberal Party concedes, may be necessary to save Ms Kelly’s hide in the marginal seat of Lindsay. After months of protests by western Sydney residents, Mr Howard and Ms Kelly will announce a deal later this week to preserve at least 178 hectares of heritage bushland within the old ADI site”.

The article identified that almost half of the 1500 ha site was listed by the Australian Heritage Commission for preservation in 1999 because of its uncommon plants and animals, including 110 bird species and an endangered patch of Cumberland woodland. The article also covered other views: “Indeed, the candidate for Save the ADI site party, Geoff Brown, went toe to toe with Ms Kelly’s chief of staff yesterday outside her Penrith office, labeling the deal as ‘an election stunt to get you over the line’. He warned that Ms Kelly would not get his party’s preferences unless the development is stopped”.

This article encapsulated some of the key issues of the contemporary environmental debate, such as the clash between development and retention

of remnant bushland; the future of urban wildlife; and the importance of identifying endangered communities, in this case a woodland. The pivotal role of politics in the environmental land-use decision-making process is manifest in this article. One notes the verb “enlist” in the title, an echo of the September 11 rallying cry, as well as the subtle comparison of the phrase “saving the hides” which links threatened native species with Ms Kelly’s endangered political future. It is clear from this article, however, that the environment is not a major issue. The fauna is merely iconic, the Australian Heritage Commission listing carries only modest weight in the argument, and the article implies that it is reasonable for patches of endangered communities to be carved up for housing development.

This review examines the environment debate in the lead-up to and the wake of the Federal election of 10 November as reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH). The SMH was selected because it provided a major record of events and statements that were read by the largest state population in Australia. The period examined was 15 October 2001, near the beginning of the Federal election campaign, to 23 November 2001, when the election post mortem had waned.

The environment did not emerge as a significant issue in the televised debate between Prime Minister and Coalition leader John Howard and Opposition leader, the leader of the Labor party (ALP), Kim Beazley. The main topics discussed during that debate were, as identified by David Marr (SMH 16 October), the GST, leadership, education and border protection. During the course of the campaign, in fact, the environment emerged only as a minor theme, irregularly mentioned and with a limited scope of issues. There were so few articles that a reference to every one of them could be incorporated within the scope of this review.

Under the major headline “Labor vows to put an end to land clearing”, Michelle Grattan and Andrew Clennell (SMH 16 October) wrote the most extensive article on the subject of the

environment to appear in the SMH during the election and it is worth reporting it in detail for that reason. Grattan and Clennell reported that, "Labor has made another bid for the green vote by promising \$165 million in new spending to halt land clearing – a strategy it claims will help solve Australia's salinity problem. The four-year package...came after Labor's promise to ratify the Kyoto agreement on climate change by next year. It includes a package to 'put an end to land clearing'. They noted that, "the promised new funding to counter the bulldozers does not kick in until 2003-04 and 2004-05, when \$50 million and \$85 million will be allocated respectively". Further, "The Queensland Government has demanded \$103 million from the federal government to compensate farmers for a halt to land clearing, which occurs at the rate of 400,000 hectares a year in the state". Grattan and Clennell also pointed out that, "an ACF-National Farmers Federation report called for \$60 billion over 10 years". The article identified that, "Mr Beazley's salinity plan reallocated more than \$450 million of Natural Heritage Trust cash and supported the Government's National Salinity Action Plan, worth \$700 million over seven years". In the accompanying box, entitled "Policy at a glance", and subtitled "Salinity", four dot points highlighted the following allocations: \$4.5 million over four years for an office of sustainable development within the prime minister's department; \$165 million for a system of national standards governing land clearing; \$428.7 million over three years in Natural Heritage Trust Funds to continue programs such as Bushcare, Landcare, Farm Forestry and River Health; and \$10 million over three years to pilot a catchment liaison officers program, with up to 20 officers working with catchment bodies. The journalists reported Greens Senator Bob Brown as saying that, "Labor has made only 'tiny toddler steps' and, before his party would agree to a preferences deal, it would have to put distance between itself and the coalition by committing to stop logging and provide more education". Grattan and Clennell also quoted Environment Minister Robert Hill as saying that "Labor wanted to rip money from community groups and give it to bureaucrats" and that Queensland's Labor Premier Peter Beattie had "allowed the clearing of 2 million hectares 'without a single word of protest' from the Opposition Leader in 5 years".

It is notable that biodiversity does not rate a mention in the article, except by proxy through land clearing and salinity abatement; that the scale

of the dollar commitments is small in comparison with the problem; and that the focus is restricted to a couple of major issues, namely land clearing and the related problem of salinity. Hill's remark about bureaucrats and community groups reveals a deep-seated philosophical difference with the Opposition, and it is a matter for serious concern that he probably includes scientists in the category of bureaucrats. Hill's identification of Kim Beazley's apparent silence on the matter of clearing in Queensland highlights a long-term failure on all sides to deal with the massive problem of land clearing, as well as seemingly intractable state-commonwealth differences, a low financial investment and a soft commitment in this issue. However, that problem is not just one for the ALP as Hill suggested. It is a national issue without a comprehensive resolution, or even a widespread recognition of it as a key problem.

Under the heading "Wooing South Australia. Nuclear promise to marginals", Michelle Grattan (SMH 16 October) describes another of the ALP's environmental promises: "Federal Labor, which needs to win three key marginal seats in South Australia, yesterday offered its voters a \$65.3 million carrot and promise that it will not store nuclear waste in the state". Although the ALP's promise is an environmental matter, neither the Labor Party nor the journalists raise the closely related matters of an energy policy and climate change.

By 18 October (SMH), psephologist Anthony Green was able to write with confidence that "Tampa and terrorism have destroyed Labor's chances". Environmental issues, if they were ever going to be on the agenda, were swamped by the pressing issues of the day as seen by politicians and the media. The next day (SMH 19 October), near the headline "Divided Dems kick a bomb in Mayo", there is a large photo with the caption, "John McLaren, Natasha Stott Despoja and an observer of the political process at the Warrawong Earth Sanctuaries yesterday". The observer is a large kangaroo, but there is no mention of kangaroos or other wildlife in the article. For a second time, kangaroos are used for political purposes in one of only two wildlife photos to appear in the SMH during the election campaign. All those hoping for public recognition of the other 99% of our native fauna (the invertebrates) are in for a very long wait.

A blunt new political message appeared on the front page of the SMH of 19 October under the major headline "Labor pledges GST rollback on

gas, power". There, in a phrase contained in a box with the headline "Inside, the choice 2001", the reporter makes the point that there is "help for farmers to stop hurting the environment", a rare admission to appear in print.

On 20 October (SMH), under the headline, "Surplus shrinks as GST relief takes \$2.2bn slice", Laurie Tingle wrote, "The \$2.2 billion cost of rollback over the next four years means Labor will need to slice \$3.1 billion in budget surpluses to fund its policies over the period... This leaves little room for other initiatives, particularly in two areas nominated as crucial by Labor – education and health". A table of "Labor Election Promises" was accompanied by the ALP's estimate of the cost of each item. Out of a total of \$3175.1 million to be spent over a period of four years, climate change was allocated \$3 million and salinity \$169.5 million, with a one-off allocation for a fisheries academy of \$4.35 million in the first year. There were no other environmental costings. Salinity was certainly a big ticket item, the third in a list of 13 mostly unrelated initiatives, and it will no doubt command attention from federal governments in the future because of its sheer scale. Climate change made an appearance during the election campaign, but conserving biodiversity did not rate even a single mention.

Under the headline "A plea for vision from 10 with a dream" (SMH 23 October), there was a photo of 10 community leaders standing in a straight line with a bubble caption containing a succinct statement from each. The two most relevant comments were from Professor Peter Cullen of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, whose bubble read "We need to be creating exciting well-paid jobs based on emerging areas rather than being content with part-time jobs delivering pizzas", and from Don Henry of the Australian Conservation Foundation, who was quoted as saying "Our increasingly poor environmental performance will weaken the competitiveness of Australia's economy unless we act now". The article noted that all the community leaders "lamented the death of political vision", and the reporters, Stephanie Peatling and Matthew Moore, commented: "Yesterday, over the course of two hours, the 10 community leaders lamented a political system that they say offers mainly 'Band-aid' remedies to huge problems, where spin doctors sell solutions that at best only touch part of the problem. Whether salinity, jobs, education

or Aboriginal welfare, plans were almost never coordinated across all three levels of government and rarely other portfolio areas that might be affected". Don Henry was quoted as saying: "We all love this country and we are not talking enough about where we are going as a nation and it's a fairly barren landscape when you look out there". Zoologists, scientists and conservationists will no doubt identify with Henry's remarks, which give rise to daunting questions. Where is the vision to come from, how is it to be articulated, and how is it to be expressed in the public policy arena?

Under the witty headline "Policy a day keeps the critics at bay", Laurie Tingle (SMH 24 October) stated that, "Labor has made spending promises worth \$4 billion and the Coalition \$1.3 billion as the federal election campaign reaches the half-way point". The accompanying table, which compared Government and Opposition spending promises, showed an absence of environmental entries in the Coalition table. No clear conclusions can be drawn from this table except that in Labor's larger budget, the environment gets a mention. An explanation of this lack of concern for the environment may be evident in another article in the same edition of the SMH.

Under the headline "The world plunges into despair and we count our lucky stars", Kelly Burke (SMH 24 October) stated that "Australians have become sadder since September 11, but we've also become more satisfied, the nation's first well-being index has found". The research was conducted by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU, with Deakin University and the private health care firm Australian Unity also participating. Burke reported that, "In two polls, in April/May and late September, more than 2,000 randomly selected adults were asked to give their views on Australia's economic, environmental and social conditions, and aspects of their personal lives. In the interim we became more grateful that we live in Australia, expressing increased satisfaction with the state of the environment and our economic and social conditions. The main gripes are the state of the country's health services and the unequal distribution of wealth, results that came as no surprise to Bob Cummins, a professor of psychology at Deakin". The accompanying table provided numerical values (percentage) of our level of satisfaction under two columns headed by the dates April/May and late

September. The two values (rounded here to whole numbers), which appeared next to the line item "Life in Australia", were 70% and 74% respectively. The level of economic satisfaction had increased from 54% to 58%, while environmental satisfaction had increased from 58% to 60%. These figures may contain an explanation of why the vision was fading, why the environment was declining as an issue and why there was an apparent political indifference to conserving biodiversity. There is now a pressing need to seek an explanation for a growing satisfaction with environmental issues when the evidence is clear that biodiversity is continuing to decline and new and difficult issues, such as climate change, are emerging.

Under the catchy heading, "Angling for pivotal votes on the coast", Claire O'Rourke's piece (SMH 20 October) is accompanied by a large photo of pelicans being fed with fish, with the caption: "Rising to the bait...at Terrigal Beach, in the marginal seat of Robertson, local Richard Williams shares his catch." The photo was eye-catching, but the birds and fish were just decorative and not of electoral concern. Neither the fauna nor the environment was mentioned in the article.

A small amount of coverage was given to the environmental policies of the Greens Party. In a report of the party's environment policy launch, under the heading, "Polluters the big target of Green's \$9bn strategy", Claire O'Rourke (SMH 25 October) reported that, "A tax on carbon polluters would raise billions of dollars under the Greens' environment policy, which was released by the party yesterday". There was no further comment on this matter. The short article quoted the Greens policy that "All remaining old growth forests would be conserved, and a World Environment Organisation would be established" and reported ACF Director Don Henry as saying that it was "a bright and bold package of measures", and that "As the recent Saulwick poll into marginal electorates has demonstrated, the environment...[is] considered important by voters around Australia...". O'Rourke also reported that the Greens' policy stated that, "The diesel fuel rebate would be abolished for miners and woodchippers, generating \$2 billion to help fund the policy, while \$3.7 billion would be allocated for land, water salinity, biodiversity and exotic pests." Biodiversity as a subject made a rare appearance and exotic pests its only appearance, although a forestry matter, woodchipping, attained a prominent mention,

but mining as a general issue gained its only mention in the election campaign.

On the amusing letters page headlined "Why pick on one pollie and not the other?" (SMH 25 October), there was a letter entitled, "Kyoto is the first step". It read, "From a green perspective, Labor's removal of the GST from energy may not be hypocritical but it is certainly inconsistent with its global warming policy. This was accompanied by a Wilcox cartoon – the only cartoon in the election with an environmental theme – in which a reporter asked Kim Beazley: "Won't cheaper energy and fuel be at odds with your global warming policy?" His reply was, "Only in the unlikely event that we get elected". This suggestion of an inconsistency between two ALP policies deserved to be explored more thoroughly and would have yielded some telling results. Certainly there is an argument for an earlier release of science and environment policies prior to an election because of their complexity and the importance of their interrelationships. There is also a need for our cartoonists to develop environmental themes, employ animals as envoys and advocate a better vision of the future.

The token koala to make an appearance during the election campaign was in the article by Claire O'Rourke (SMH 27-28 October) under the headline "Kelly's 250-hectare grab for votes". The caption under the accompanying photo was: "Going green... Jackie Kelly and her faithful, including a koala, at yesterday's announcement at the ADI site". The koala was a political koala, a person in a koala suit. The article opened with: "The Tourism Minister, Jackie Kelly, has moved to shore up her vote in Lindsay – the seat she holds by just 3 per cent – by announcing that the Government would conserve a further 250 hectares of the former defence land at St Marys". A real local faunal representative, even a threatened snail, would have been more authentic than a fake koala, since koalas do not live locally. But then, authenticity is not a feature of election campaigns when fauna seems to be used mainly as a political lure to attract votes.

On 26 October (SMH), under the headline "Howard revs up for final rush", Michelle Grattan wrote, "Beazley had no choice but to start the campaign with a plethora of policy, although even before the peculiar circumstances of this election emerged, Labor always intended to adopt a policy-a-day approach... The war, and the boat people issue, were killing Labor when the campaign started, and Beazley had to

generate momentum by sheer activity – the man waving ‘Hey, come over here’, hoping his issues would resonate when there was a lull in the war interest. The coalition, by contrast, went into the campaign aboard a battleship... Howard remains convinced that the war and the economy are the decisive issues for him”. The lead editorial two days later (SMH 27-28 October) presented the campaign in even starker terms: “No issue in the federal election – not even the commitment of Australian forces to the United States-led ‘war on terrorism’ – is more heavily charged with emotion than immigration. The drowning of 350 or more men, women and children on October 19 has powerfully emphasized this”. There is little sense of a concern for the conservation of biodiversity in this national picture.

Stephanie Peatling (SMH 29 October), under the heading, “Greens branch out and join hue and cry over refugees”, wrote, “The Greens detoured from their traditional environmental message at their national campaign launch at the weekend, concentrating on asylum seekers and the GST”. Environmental issues were indeed receding when even the Greens gave priority to other matters.

Only three environmental issues were listed in Peatling’s SMH article of 29 October. Under the heading “The family man tends his brood”, Peatling wrote, “In his speech yesterday, the Prime Minister outlined his vision for Australia for the next three years, highlighting the importance of strong families”. Under the subheading “Environment”, the text was brief: “The Natural Heritage Trust has been the largest and most successful environmental restoration in Australian history. On top of that we have an agreement with the states and the Commonwealth to do something about the problem of water quality and salinity. Australians want a global agreement on greenhouse gas emissions. But we are not going to ratify the Kyoto Agreement until the full cost to Australia is known”. No critical comment is included in Peatling’s direct report of the Prime Minister’s words.

By supporting the Natural Heritage Trust, the government appears to be supporting biodiversity conservation. However, the mid-term review of the NHT program in 1999 (see the web page of Environment Australia) gave an “A” pass only to the “People” aspect of the program, while the “Environment” was given a “C” grade. This is because the emphasis in the NHT program is on

communities as the provider of solutions, despite the fact that such communities are incapable of providing the research required for biodiversity conservation.

Only one strong critic of this approach was reported during the election campaign. That critic was emeritus professor Ian Lowe (SMH 31 October), whose article was presented under the striking headline of “Major parties have failed the science test again” and the subheading of “Australia will pay a steep price for the cheap politics robbing its scientists and innovators of a viable future”. Lowe was appalled by the debate, organized by the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, between the federal Science Minister, Nick Minchin, and his shadow minister, Martyn Evans. He wrote: “The debate was not reported, simply because nothing of any importance was said”. Lowe bemoaned the “disarray from the accelerating decline in funding” at universities and followed with the challenging statement that “research and innovation are crucial to our economic future, for three reasons”. These were crucial, he said, because the “continuing competitiveness of our commodity-based industries rests on solid research investment”; because “research and innovation are increasingly the basis of new economic activities”; and because “The growth industries of the 21st century are totally mobile”. Since “those [research and innovation] industries will tend to locate where it is easy to attract capable workers, Australia is extremely well placed to be in a preferred location if our natural advantages of material lifestyle are complemented by dynamic intellectual and cultural lifestyle”. Lowe’s frustration was apparent when he stated that, “For anyone who cares more about these long-term issues of Australia’s future than the short-term trivia of petrol prices and baby bonuses, this election campaign has been profoundly depressing”. This view would find favour with many in the science community, the universities and environment movement, but it was not on the political agenda during the election campaign as reported in the SMH. It does, however, lend weight to the growing concerns that the NHT program will never fulfil its aims and the biodiversity of Australia will continue to decline.

“It’s academic, says Beazley” was the banner headline in the SMH of 1 November. The subheading was, “Labor unveils \$3.1bn Knowledge

Nation". Michelle Grattan wrote, "Kim Beazley promised to spend an extra \$1 billion on universities as part of lifting education 'to the top' of a Labor government's agenda". In the section of the SMH dealing with the Labor Manifesto, the text under the subheading "Environment" was brief: "We will protect our environment, signing up to the Kyoto protocol on climate change, and tackling salinity, and other threats to our fragile water systems, and to soil and air quality". No mention of protecting biodiversity here. The SMH editorial of 1 November highlighted the same inconsistency in the ALP's environmental policy that had been noticed by a correspondent to the SMH on 25 October: "The promise...to remove the GST from electricity and gas charges hardly sits well with the promise to sign the Kyoto protocol on climate change, with its implied commitment to lower energy consumption". Journalist Andrew Clennell added that: "The Opposition has also pledged to cut land clearing in Queensland...with a \$165 million package...and... also promised to reallocate some of the widely-criticised Natural Heritage Trust into addressing salinity". He did not elaborate on these matters. Elsewhere in the SMH of 1 November, Tom Allard, under the heading "Shot in the arm for ailing CSIRO, research bodies", reported Beazley's comments that "Labor would boost funding at Australia's pre-eminent public science institution – the CSIRO – and offer business tax incentives to pour more money into it and other public sector research bodies". Allard wrote that, "Scientists and business groups warmly welcomed the changes, which underscored Labor's commitment to double R&D spending over the next 10 years". Science, which is an essential tool in conserving biodiversity, gained support in the ALP's Knowledge Nation policy, but the spin-off for conservation was confined to basics such as soil and water, which is as much an agricultural issue as anything else. The conservation of biodiversity, probably one of the most difficult of conservation issues to deal with, was not specifically mentioned.

Under the headline, "Howls of anger as PM paints himself green", Cynthia Banham (SMH 2 November) reported that, "One billion dollars of money already allocated in this year's Budget for a restructured Natural Heritage Trust formed the centrepiece of the Coalition's environment policy, announced yesterday". She also reported that "the policy was immediately denounced by green groups as the worst environmental policy since the 1970s", but did not elaborate on the reasons why they were critical of the NHT funding program.

There was a short item in the SMH of 3-4 November, in which Marian Wilkinson returns to the ADI fray under the headline, "\$300m guesstimate clouds ADI land deal". She reported that "Ms Kelly's efforts to save the additional 250 ha of the heritage estate is a popular move" and that "Ms Kelly dismissed the estimate...saying it would not change the Government's decision to save the heritage areas". There was no commentary on the environmental aspects of the deal. The next day, Monday 5 November, in an article headed "Labor vows to save ADI site but locals want proof", Stephanie Peatling reported on promises by the ALP candidate for the western Sydney seat of Lindsay, David Bradbury, that a Labor government "would guarantee to preserve heritage-listed land within the Australian Defence Industries site". Like the koala, the ADI site became a political football throughout the campaign with both sides promising to preserve a comparatively small area. This was, of course, because the site was contained in a marginal seat, which both sides were fighting to win.

Tom Allard (SMH 3-4 November), under the headline, "Greens, Labor in preference deal", reported that, "The Greens will put Labor ahead in key marginal seats in a preference deal to be announced within days". Further, "Concessions from Labor on land-clearing, the commitment to ratify the Kyoto climate change treaty and the Coalition's environment policy released on Thursday secured the agreement". Again there was nothing raised by even the Greens about one of Australia's most pressing environmental problems, the rapidly declining biodiversity of the continent.

There were repercussions from the preference deal between the Greens and the ALP. Under the headline, "Howard vents anger at Greens 'sell-out'", Andrew Clennell and Tom Allard (SMH 5 November) reported that, "Labor's election hopes were boosted yesterday when the Greens announced they would direct preferences to the ALP in 37 of 51 marginal seats". The editorial of the same day, titled "Labor goes green", stated that "The environment initiatives unveiled by Labor's Kim Beazley on Saturday were designed to boost his party's primary vote among the green-minded or, failing that, to secure their preferences. On preferences, the ploy has succeeded. Australian Greens senator Bob Brown announced yesterday that the Greens would direct them to Labor in 110 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives". It continued: "Perhaps the most controversial of

Mr Beazley's announcements – bitterly denounced by the Prime Minister, John Howard, as a politically expedient blow to Australian cancer research – is a promise to try to block construction of a new nuclear reactor at Lucas Heights in Sydney to replace the existing 1950s model. Yet Mr Beazley's undertaking is highly conditional". This point is developed in Andrew Clennell and Tom Allard's piece "Cancer patients drawn into nuclear battlefield". The main point to emphasise here is that despite the lack of debate about green issues in the press, the green vote was nonetheless considered an important factor in the election. A minor point, as noted by the SMH editorial of that day, is Labor's ambiguity on nuclear policy. An adjacent article carried a sobering comment by Anthony Green, who considered that, "At best, the preference deals arranged will turn a devastating defeat into a bad defeat for Labor..."

The only extended piece of environmental journalism in the campaign was that by James Woodford (SMH 5 November) under the headline "Rising temperatures, hot winds fan high fire danger". Woodford wrote, "It may not be an issue that is registering on the radars of city voters, but in some of the nation's most marginal and important seats the issue of using native forests timber as a fuel source for power stations is generating a lot of heat". He noted that "As an environmental issue it is nowhere near as sexy as the Great Barrier Reef, rainforests and endangered species, but green groups see biomass burning [the term for burning native forest for power] as a proposed industry every bit as hungry for forests as woodchipping". Woodford was the only journalist to raise this issue during the campaign. He was also the only one to report on the Jabiluka uranium mine: "On a national nuclear front, Kim Beazley's announcement that he would stop the Jabiluka uranium mine could have traction with the electorate because it has been a long-running source of tension". Woodford reported Harry Recher's related comments at the Nature Conservation Council conference the previous week. Recher said, "Objections to mining uranium at Kakadu need to be put in the context of both global warming and the invasion of Kakadu by cane toads, either of which poses greater threats to the region's flora and fauna". Harry Recher was the only ecologist to be mentioned by name during the election campaign. (His speech to the NCC is published in this edition of the *Australian Zoologist*, with a raft of responses, including one by James

Woodford.) The Woodford article, in being the only lengthy and informed coverage of environmental issues during the election campaign, served by contrast to highlight the lack of a sustained debate on environmental issues during that period. It seems that Recher was on the right track in his iconoclastic NCC speech, namely, that there has been an inadequate and increasingly irrelevant public debate, especially by conservationists, on environmental issues for some time, and not just during the election.

The word "Wildlife" appeared in only one headline during the campaign, "Wildlife farm funds for a 'mate'" in an article by Linda Doherty (SMH 7 November). Doherty wrote: "The National Party's latest mascot, Harley the saltwater crocodile, bit the hand that feeds it yesterday with the damaging revelation that his owner – Capricornia election candidate John Lever – received an \$18,000 Federal Government grant to improve his business". The piece was accompanied by a photo in which there was a juvenile crocodile, the only reptile to appear in the campaign and the third of only three fauna photos. The emphasis of this article was, of course, on the particular political, rather than environmental, aspect of the story.

Among the letters published in the SMH on the Wednesday (SMH 7 November) prior to the Saturday election, were three letters with punchy messages. One written by David Smith, read: "What are the Greens' preference decisions in Lindsay? I am interested to know what value Bob Brown puts on the ADI site... To date both Labor and Liberal have committed to protecting half the site... We want the whole of the ADI site... What do the Greens want?" This was accompanied by a sketch of a mock coat of arms whose centrepiece was a display home with the subscript "ADI".

The letter by Noel Ryan (SMH 7 November), entitled "Felling figures leave PM out on a limb", is forthright: "When I heard John Howard say his government had proved itself environmentally responsible, I nearly choked. The 1996 State of the Environment Report stated that land clearing was the biggest threat to Australia's wildlife. That same year, the Coalition promised to reverse the loss of native vegetation in five years. That deadline elapsed with about a half a million hectares of bush still being cleared each year. By 1999 the rate of loss had increased by 22 per cent. We see lots of

commercials for the Government's Natural Heritage Trust but as far as the Auditor-General and others can tell from the lack of records being kept on NHT projects, it has revegetated a fiftieth of the land cleared in that time". This letter was the only published challenge to the Coalition's core environmental policy, the NHT program, and the only published objection to the Coalition's stand on land clearing throughout the entire election. It was a good letter, revealing the lack of debate on such fundamental issues.

The brief letter by the third correspondent, David Eden (SMH 7 November), was printed under the headline "Land clearing is still tax deductible in Australia. But planting trees is not". These two sentences formed the first sentence of Eden's two-sentence letter. The next read, "I will vote for the party that removes the tax incentive for land clearing". No doubt the tax system is more complex than implied by his letter, but it does seem that land clearing had been missed in policy statements by all the major parties, and had not been raised by any reporters during the campaign.

Some letters challenged Labor's nuclear policies. Associate Professor R. Cooper (SMH 7 November) wrote: "Kim Beazley's announcement that Australia does not need a replacement research reactor takes the Knowledge Nation a giant leap backwards...All the universities in Australia in collaboration with the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, through the agency of the Australian Institute for Nuclear Science (AINSE), are training students and staff to develop and apply nuclear techniques to the widest range of topics, including archaeology, environmental analysis, radiopharmaceuticals, material science, geology, marine science, radiotherapy and zoology. AINSE applauds the stimulus promised via Knowledge Nation to the general study of science, medicine and technology in this country. To eliminate the replacement research reactor is at best ill-advised; more certainly it is greatly damaging to our national and international standing in scientific research excellence". This letter reveals the poor grasp by those participating in the political debate of the vital contribution of research in repairing the environment and conserving our biodiversity. It also exposes the unresolved policy difficulties in relation to nuclear matters but, most importantly, it shows that the relationships between science and technology and the environment and industry are not well understood at a policy level. This letter contained the only mention of zoology in the

election and, most importantly, it put zoology in a research context, which is its heartland.

"An election without vision" was the headline of the editorial in the SMH of 8 November. This extended piece opened with, "The unusual circumstances of the Federal election – against a background of a war in Afghanistan – has enabled the major parties to avoid serious scrutiny on many of the challenges Australia must have the determination and ambition to resolve if it is to prosper as a modern, progressive community". Immigration was the only issue mentioned in the editorial that was immediately relevant to the environmental debate, but this was not the slant given. The editorial did note that, "Other important areas closed off for discussion or simply neglected in this election campaign are reconciliation and the republic. Mr Howard's success in suppressing debate within his party is formidable, but hardly praiseworthy. Not that this has mattered politically; Mr Beazley has shown scant interest in taking up these issues". The final statement of the editorial was: "Leadership requires ambition. And ambition needs vision. Sadly neither has been prominent over the last five weeks". With respect to an ecological outlook on the environment, or a research-based interpretation of the problems and solutions, one could only agree with this.

The potential for the debate to have been thorough and profoundly stimulating was seen in the article by Linda McSweeney (SMH 8 November) under the headline, "Oil giant tells Australia to back Kyoto". The piece opened with a blunt message: "One of the world's largest petroleum companies, BP, called on the Government to ratify the Kyoto protocol to cut greenhouse gases. It also dismissed the Government's warnings of job losses and economic hardship if Australia ratified the protocol. The world was going to have to change its energy use patterns and governments must quickly ratify the protocol, BP's South Asia and Australasia president said." The article continued: " 'I think insulating people from the realities means that when you have to change you change with a much greater shock, and that's much harder to be digested by the public, and you cause too much social upheaval,' Mr Bourne told ABC radio". What is striking here is that it is an industry leader making this statement, not an environmental advocate. The article supported the idea that change imposed by environmental constraints is better made

gradually. This important concept did not appear until two days before the election even though it will certainly occupy the central ground of the environmental debate for years to come.

One day out from the election the only environmental piece was a letter to the editor under the alliterative heading “ALP filibustering on fission”. Dr Robin Walsh (SMH 9 November) argued, “Perhaps Mr Beazley has been too busy trying to stitch up Democrat and Green preferences to notice that at least four inquiries into a new nuclear reactor and radioactive waste have been held...[and] all four Labor members of the second enquiry supported the committee’s recommendation that a replacement research reactor be built at Lucas Heights...Mr Beazley has abandoned an honourable position...[which was] Not the behaviour of a leader or a statesman”. The nuclear issue was an environmental matter that had much currency in the lead-up to the election, but the debate was unresolved. It has had a long half-life and remains in need of a firm policy that canvases the issue thoroughly in the public arena. Perhaps a radioactive tracer could be employed for the task, at least in a metaphorical sense, to examine the interactions and the linkages among the participants in the debate.

On the day of the election there was a brief message from each leader in equal-sized boxes in a line-by-line comparison (SMH 10-11 November). With respect to environmental issues, the Coalition statement by John Howard included the phrase, “create a better environment by implementing the first national plan to combat salinity and improve water quality”. Labor’s Kim Beazley did not mention an environmental item, and the Greens, unusually, devoted only a small proportion of their space to environmental issues, as they had taken up the cause of asylum seekers. Democrats’ leader Natasha Stott Despoja stated that, “the Democrats provide a voice for...the protection of our unique and fragile environment”. And the Greens piece read: “This year 150,000 log truckloads of Australia’s wild forests will go to woodchip mills to supply Japan’s paper trade. The logging involves firebombing and poisoning of wildlife. The Greens will save the forests...We Greens propose...World heritage nomination for Western Australia’s Ningaloo Reef”. The Greens small piece here contained the major political statement on forests published by the SMH during the election.

On election day, under the damaging headline, “Campaign that leaves nation tarnished”, and subhead, “Playing the boat card has resurrected the dark side of Australia”, Michelle Grattan (SMH 10-11 November) wrote: “It has been a fascinating but depressing and fundamentally unsatisfactory election campaign, which has left the nation diminished. The anti-terrorism war and the boat people have competed throughout with the domestic agenda...what has been distinctive about the 2001 election has been the appeals to our fears of foreigners who try to breach our borders”. In the accompanying table, entitled “Greatest impact on vote”, the environment did not rate a mention in the list of nine items. It was not an issue, it appears, that was likely to affect votes.

By the Monday after the election (SMH 12 November), under the headline “How a single-issue party held on to power”, Robert Manne concluded his piece with the view that it was the “Howard style of populist conservatism which now seems certain to prevail”. On Wednesday, Ross Gittens (SMH 14 November) observed that: “On the two biggest issues of the campaign – our response to the boat people and the war on terrorism – there was an eerie bipartisanship. John Howard set the policy and Kim Beazley said: ‘Me too’”. In his aftermath piece, Mike Secombe (SMH 15 November) took the view that: “The federal election was Labor’s to win until two days before the vote, according to ALP internal sources...but Labor lost...after the boat people re-emerged to dominate the agenda”. Michelle Grattan (SMH 22 November) noted that “Gary Morgan, whose poll a week out from the election showed a big Labor win...said the change was due to the boat people and the perceived superior economic management by the Coalition”. None of the political journalists in the period mentioned the environment as an issue, nor did they write about any single environmental issue. It appeared to be a subject retreating from the political stage.

Environment writer, James Woodford (SMH 23 November), under the headline “Australians go a paler shade of green”, wrote that, “Concern for the environment has fallen from three-quarters of the population in 1992 to just over 60 per cent. A new survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows only 62 per cent of Australians are concerned about any environmental issue – the lowest level since ABS surveys on green issues began in the 1990s. Not even one in 10 of those who said they were concerned actively contribute to the cause, even by writing a letter or telephoning a protest.

One in five, however, had contributed either time or money to help protect the environment in the past year. While 18- to 24-year olds were the most likely to participate in a demonstration, their worries about green issues appear to be diminishing. In 1992 nearly 80 per cent of young Australians were worried about environmental problems. This year only 57 per cent hold the same fears". A box inserted within the article, contained dot-point data, with the witty title "The meanhouse effect". It showed that, "people aged 45-54 were more likely to be concerned about environmental problems". Woodford's piece continued: "Campaigns director with the Australian Conservation Foundation, John Connor, disputed the results. Fear for the environment among Australians had moved from the general to the specific. Foundation surveys showed that 83 per cent of Australians wanted national landclearing laws and a similar number wanted the Kyoto climate change protocol to be ratified". This succinct article identified a number of key issues, namely that interest in the environment as an issue is falling, that it is an age-specific fall, that few people contribute to protecting the environment, and that a leading conservation group disputes this fall, but points to single environmental issues as dominating the public interest.

In the post-election analysis in the SMH, there was no mention of the environment, except for the clues provided in Woodford's piece. Analyses of the influence in the election of environmental issues requires an interpretation of the material presented in the lead-up to 10 November. In retrospect, it is clear that during the election the environmental debate was dominated by salinity, land clearing and, to a lesser extent, forests, climate change, remnant bush and urban wildlife, uranium mining and a nuclear research reactor. A bleak interpretation of this finding is that concern for environmental issues is mostly confined to an aging cohort. As this group retires, so will the environment as a politically significant issue. The finding suggests that the gains of this fading generation of activists can be re-interpreted or ignored as time passes. Single issues of economic importance, such as salinity, where agreement can be found between farmers and conservationists, will gain a hearing, but a halt to land clearing will not gain support from aspiring leaders because of its clash with economic interests. Replanting will replace cessation of land clearing as the politically attractive alternative, and will be handed over to local interests, via such models as the NHT, whose

reporting on progress has been identified as weak. Biodiversity conservation is no longer an issue that appears at all, and dire warnings of a rising extinction crisis will be met with growing complacency. Indeed, rising satisfaction with our current lifestyle combined with a fading of environmental concerns to a pale shade of green means that complex issues will not be examined, nor will action be taken to identify new problems or seek solutions.

The most optimistic interpretation of these findings might be that the extraordinary external circumstances of this election turned our heads from complex domestic problems to cataclysmic events elsewhere. How could one ever run a detailed debate, such as biodiversity conservation, in the wake of the September 11 horror? How could a reasoned public discussion be conducted with the shrill voices of the Tampa crisis reverberating across the continent? When these events have subsided, it is likely that a more thoughtful period will return. Only then can deep-seated environmental issues be voiced, resolutions debated and outcomes agreed on.

If one is oscillating between the bleak and the bright view of the future, it is a useful exercise to turn to matters highlighted by the election. The first is the woeful lack of vision noted by the 10 community leaders. Environmental issues depend on vision, and it is a theme that is throttled by the lack of it. If the environment is to regain its significance in the minds of the public, it is up to the political leaders to restore that vision of the future in which Australia's environment, and particularly its biodiversity, becomes a major goal. Secondly, it is obvious that a well-turned phrase, cleverly articulated and deftly presented, will gain space in the print media. The SMH journalists were good at their craft, they were blunt, witty and succinct. Those seeking to conserve biodiversity need to develop their writing skills in order to present their ideas in a readable and challenging format. Well-crafted letters to the paper are eye catching and demonstrate that there is a wealth of detailed knowledge and considerable insight among the readership of the SMH. There is also a pressing need to articulate conservation arguments well before any campaign becomes a last-minute sprint to the finishing line. Last-minute flashes are too hard to communicate on the complex topics that make up the list of today's environmental concerns. Finally, the need for research and the acquisition of knowledge as well as its dissemination, needs better recognition.

Here, the time frame can be longer, and long-term resourcing of education and research needs firm and sustained support if it is going to be successful in conserving Australia's rapidly declining biodiversity.

The words chosen, the presentation of material, and the language of science and research are important tools in the conservation of biodiversity. If conserving biodiversity is a priority then there is now a pressing demand to re-appraise how we communicate that urgency. Conserving biodiversity needs a language that will arouse passion and give rise to an evolutionary vision that enlists words that are connected to the senses and give a much more tangible visual, olfactory, aural sense of the rich variety of our native wildlife than

such clinical words as "biodiversity". This visionary language should enlist kangaroos and emus and other colourful and useful animals and plants that both symbolize and are part of a biologically rich world. For this we shall need ideas that link the past to the present and the present to the future and describe the rich diversity of life to provide the stimulus to support, and vote for, the conservation of our natural heritage.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Peter Banks, Irina Dunn, Dieter Hochuli, Pat Hutchings, Brad Law and Harry Recher for their critical comments on the draft of this editorial.