TASMANIAN FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB INC.

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January 2000 BULLETIN

Editor: Don Hird.

http://www.tased.edu.au/tasonline/tasfield/

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The Tasmanian Field Naturalists Club encourages the study of natural history and supports conservation. We issue our journal The Tasmanian Naturalist annually in October. People with a range of age, background and knowledge are welcome as members.
Contact Genevieve Gates (6227 8638) for further information or write to GPO Box 68, Hobart, 7001.

Programme

General Meetings start at 7.45 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month, in the Life Science Building at the University of Tasmania. Outings are usually held the following weekend, meeting outside the to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery entrance in Macquarie Street. Bring lunch and all-weather outdoor gear.
If you are planning to attend an outing but have not been to the prior meeting, phone to check as to the timing of the excursion, unforeseen changes sometimes occur.

Thurs. 3 February. 7.45p.m.: Patti Virtue, a former President, will talk on a surprise subject to start the year's program.

February Excursion. TBA: Your committee had planned to visit Betsey Island for the weekend of Feb. 4-6 (Friday evening until Monday). Because boat bookings and short notice make this problematic, the excursion will be deferred. We will arrange an excursion to a coastal marine locality for rock-pooling and related activities. Details at meeting, or from Don Hird (62 344 293).

Thurs. 2 March Kevin Bonham will deliver the traditional Presidential Address to the AGM, on the subject of Land snail Biogeography.

Sat 4 March 9.00 a.m.: We will visit Reuben Falls in the Huon valley, a fine venue for snails, fungi and etc. Relatively easy walking is involved.

Thurs. 6 April 7.45p.m.: Alan Mills from Plant Science at the University will speak on Fungi.

Sun 9 April 9.00 a.m.: We will the Maydena area, yet another fine venue for snails, fungi and etc. Relatively easy walking is involved.

Thurs. 4 May 7.45p.m.: Caleb Gardner from Tasmanian Fisheries and Aquaculture Inst. will speak on the Tasmanian Giant Crab.

Federation of Field Naturalists Clubs of Tasmania. The next meeting of the Federation will be at St Helens on the weekend 24–26 March 2000.
David Leaman's new book on walks in SE Tas and their geological connections is out. Details to follow.

Tasmanian Marine Naturalists Next meeting: Wednesday 9 Feb at 6.00 p.m.: Jack Denny will speak on Underwater PNG. Excursion Sun 13 dive to be decided. Contact Jane Elek 62 298 264

Conservation Notes: Don Hird
Part of my training to be an Australian Volunteer Abroad was an introduction to "cultural difference". There are many ways of solving most issues; different cultures may use unfamiliar methods to achieve similar outcomes or just have different priorities and modes of expression. Immersion in a different culture also results in looking at one's own culture in a fresh light upon return. This is especially the case when moving between a relatively simple society and the technological complex of the western world.

For many naturalists the impact of modern technology and the global economy is disheartening. In Tasmania, Epping Forest's effective disappearance in recent decades is just one small example. Technologies also potentially better inform us of the wealth of our natural world and possible ways of repairing it. Communication is almost overwhelming; both informing and entertaining us on the one hand and apologising for, disguising or distracting us from the destruction on the other.

Visitors to summits in the Hartz Mountains or Mt Field National Park can these days hardly avoid the view of thousands of hectares of public forest cleared and replanted in recent decades. On a visit to the area tourists may take in scenic and informative forest drives, but so often just beyond the green façade will be wastelands of "1080 laid" signs and bare earth. The wet forest habitats in Tasmania are generally well reserved, but the scale of destruction and the lack of adequate reservation of other habitats remains a serious concern.

Ritual conflict seems to be the Tasmanian way of dealing with such conflicts. The main response of forest industries to public outcry appears to be television advertisements where wallabies peer cutely around forest trees, and industry-dedicated educational centres, each designed to reassure the public. While their primary agenda is economic and they want to put the best spin on their industry, this is hardly full and open debate, especially when the 1080 poison targeted at browsing and grazing mammals also results in collateral damage to several other species including some of high conservation priority. Another concern is the loss of accessible nesting sites for birds as older forests are cleared or maintained within younger age classes.

The usual response of the highest profile conservation groups appears theatrical, the latest being attempts to gain a place in the Guinness Book of Gimmicks. The propensity of these groups for infighting and lack of coordination is legend although useful work is also often produced. Because conservation can be approached from several angles, prioritization is also an issue; for example, campaigns against roadkill of vertebrates is of little long-term benefit if habitats are being substantially or entirely lost. As Field Naturalists we have preferred to take a lower profile approach to many conservation issues, but more interaction and feedback between conservation groups would be useful.

For a long while this club has advocated prioritisation of progress towards a more representative reserve system. More comprehensive surveys of little known elements, e.g. faunas of heathland are also needed. For too long the cry of "too much land locked up" has distracted from the need for further detailed conservation measures. The other central players in conservation are Parks and Wildlife and other agencies with land or aquatic management roles. Caught in the budget squeeze, their job is not easy. In recent years we have had to encourage them to push the envelope of conservation in "difficult" areas, for example brochures on threatened species like the bettong formerly failed to acknowledge their insufficiently reserved habitat. Even though that has been rectified they still repeat the "needs monitoring" by-line even a decade later when little monitoring or additional reserved habitat has been achieved. Another current example is their Swift Parrot brochure which implies that endangerment is due to a falling population(!); the subject of habitat loss and ongoing destruction apparently being unmentionable. Another tension is between "traditional recreations" like driving on beaches, and the inherent destructiveness involved.

Tasmania certainly has natural assets worth celebrating but we also need careful and critical evaluation of priorities and shortcomings. A recent Bulletin criticised aspects of the State of Environment reporting; it was heartening to subsequently receive a call encouraging feedback for the next edition of these five-yearly reviews.

Another recent trend is the inception of new "conservation organisations" sponsored by industry and government. Clearly, they are well funded, judging by the shopfronts, the staffing and frequency of television advertising. Rather than advocating systematic conservation the thrust is often on remedial works, which, while usually having some value, often appear unsustainable and not prioritised according to accepted principles of conservation ecology. The longer history of conservation is one of cooperation between volunteers and government, with regular tension over some issues and between some parties.

Recently we have written to the responsible authorities requesting basic facts on the 1080 situation which a basic search of the public record doesn't reveal. What reporting is available on the extent and quantity used? What precautions and assessments (e.g. prior surveys) are taken, especially as to those marsupials subject to collateral damage? To be continued …

Basic information about the on-the-ground use of 1080 is sparse. Three marsupial species are the primary targets due to their acknowledged damage to young trees; others have been shown to be susceptible but it is difficult to know the extent of this collateral damage. Our data on mammal distribution and specific habitat utilisation is poor compared to that of at least some other states, partly as a result of there apparently being no affirmative duty to objectively assess the risk to other species before imposing damage.

The main response of forest industries to public outcry appears to be television advertisements where wallabies peer cutely around a young forest tree to reassure the public that all is well. Never mind that the same species are poisoned wholesale and that many related species are innocent victims. The public is also encouraged to take educational forest drives through examples of living forest but so often just beyond the forested facades are wastelands of "1080 laid". The poison is also used in other forest types of high conservation priority.

It can be argued that most mammal victims of 1080 in wet forests, intended or otherwise, are secure in Tasmania. This may be correct although our information base, especially with

regard to "non-economic" species is poor. If nothing else, the large-scale use of 1080 should at least mean that an additional royalty should be paid for the wildlife resource and applied to improving our knowledge of the basic biology of species affected and their areas of reserved habitat where currently inadequate. Finding an honest broker to assess and apply the appropriate resources is an issue in itself; in some other states museums have taken on this role.

Calls to ban 1080 have been frequent and loud. Often, they have been accompanied by simplistic assertions regarding the adverse impact of browsing and possible alternatives to poisoning. It seems to be another "waiting for the revolution" approach to conservation that rouses emotions while the steamroller rumbles on.

In its impact on wildlife, 1080 is consuming a public resource that is usually protected by law. Normally this would be subject to public accountability and reporting. Indeed, if the victims of 1080 were being harvested and sold that industry would normally be regulated and explicitly taxed on its turnover. In recent preliminary investigations public reporting on 1080 use, information has been difficult to find, including in the State of Environment Report which might have been expected to be reasonably comprehensive of conservation issues including threatening processes. The poison is also used in other forest types of high conservation priority.