

The Great Green Debate: urban myths, risks and alternative opinions

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Since the first hominid stood up and took a long, hard stare across the tall grass of the African savannah, humans have been on the lookout for trouble. It's a four million year habit that still resonates in today's media headlines: "POLLUTION SCARE" "WATER CRISIS" "FRANKENSTEIN FOOD" or "GREENHOUSE THREAT" (Cribb 2002).

That humans came out of the trees in the first place suggests we happily embrace risks. That we have evolved a society that does its best to combat and limit them speaks for itself: most science today is, to some degree, propelled by our wish to live longer, safer, more predictable lives. And the media hype, often unscientific and emotive, is an important way a democracy calibrates one risk against another and prioritises its actions to limit them.

In the past forty years the environmental debate has been driven, with explosive energy and no little acrimony, by the twin poles of human nature: risk acceptance and risk aversion. Both are key to progress. Some argue that human ingenuity, technology and adaptiveness can rise to meet any threat. Others prefer to know more about the risk before consenting to wear it.

The problem for science is that it frequently finds itself on both (or many) sides of the debate, and in places where passion and opinion outweigh data. The problem for politics is that can seldom be sure where majority opinion resides, yet it must take critical decisions. And the problem for the public is that they rarely know whom to trust or what to believe. All are anxiously on the lookout for trouble.

With humans, trouble's never far away. Salinity, greenhouse, chemical contamination of land, air and water, loss of species and new pandemics have been among the milestones on our march into the future in the last 40 years. Most of these debates began with a scientific observation – but were soon hijacked by other groups and interests as they rose to prominence in the media.

Scientific debate has ground rules which deal in data and how it is collected, how trustworthy it is before one can base assumptions on it. But when it emerges into the public eye the scientific view often finds itself competing with a welter of values-based perspectives - ethical, commercial, social, local, cultural and political.

“Greenhouse is not a simple scientific debate,” states Associate Professor Bob Beeton of the University of Queensland. “It is the application of many scientific and some other paradigms to establish strongly held and contested belief systems. The problem is on contested ground in which the battle for funding, policy, management supremacy and economic dominance is waged. We divide between nationalists and globalists as well as into many contesting groups who apply all the models of control available to ensure conformity of thought within the group. The irony is that good science demands the opposite.” (Beeton in press).

But as former Antarctic Cooperative Research Centre Chief Executive Officer Garth Paltridge points out, science sometimes does itself no favours. When he challenged the validity of a dubious analogue for global temperature based on tree rings at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Paltridge found himself the target of a vitriolic response from some researchers. Science, in this instance, had shown itself as intolerant of alternative views as the groups it sometimes charges with lack of objectivity (Paltridge 2004).

Yet even when science, passionately-held opinions, politics and interests collide with a messy, histrionic public exchange, stoked with obvious delight by the media, it is rarely without value in terms of society moving forward. It just doesn't move as fast as some might wish.

The public are aware of the tendency of scientists to shift paradigm, and that – not so long ago – ice ages were the vogue rather than warming. The public's version of the precautionary principle is not to go overboard for the latest scientific fad until it has undergone hard, public scrutiny from a number of perspectives, including the time-honoured “what's in it for me?”

It was the talismanic 1970s image of filmstar Brigitte Bardot standing amid the carnage of the Canadian seal slaughter clutching a cub – the woman, the baby, the blood, the snow – that helped gel the character of the contemporary environmental debate more than 30 years ago, (Lyngé 1992) and the formula of simple, emotive yet powerful visual imagery has endured into the twenty-first century. Fuelling the debate in recent years has been a tendency by non-government organisations (NGOs) to range ahead of the scientific data in presenting environmental issues to the public. Understanding their audiences perhaps better than scientists, environmental NGOs oft-times pitch in emotive rather than purely factual terms.

The power of the NGOs - social, industrial and environmental - is a rising factor in modern democratic decision-making, applauded by some, bewailed by others. Leading journalist Greg Hywood describes them as “the unelected strata of influence and patronage that lies between voters and their government” (Hywood 2004).

“These organisations have, over the past generation, crept into the very fabric of government. They have moved beyond mere lobbying to become, in many instances, official advisers to government, heavily funded from the public purse and often given privileged information.” Hywood cites rising concern that NGOs increasingly purport to represent public opinion while in fact pressing their own interests (Johns and Roskam 2004). They sometimes conduct their business with government in a secretive way that excludes the very communities affected (Chapin 2004). Despite this, some opinion research suggests that NGOs have higher credence with the public on environmental issues than either scientists (almost as high) or governments (much lower) (North 2005).

In such debates science increasingly finds itself astride the barbed-wire fence of competing interests. For one thing, it holds many differing views or interpretations of the same data and there is never complete consensus on anything – a fact that the public and politicians, looking for certitude, often find confusing and frustrating. Greenhouse has been a case in point, with a comparative minority of scientific sceptics holding the fort against the might of the IPCC and its supporting bureaucracies in most of the world’s governments – to the unconcealed delight of some industrialists who are by no means persuaded that greenhouse is good for their share price, and a media which always enjoys a good stoush.

The issue remains that for democracy to survive and progress, it must have facts to go on, and objective, impartial advice on which to found its debates and ultimate decisions. A democracy founded on “junk information” is as out of touch with reality as the most self-delusional of dictatorships - and riding for a similar fall (Cribb 2001). The real challenge, says Bob Beeton, is to devise means of providing objective advice to governments, industry and the community in ways that encourage them to heed it - even when it may be unpalatable.

The phenomenon of the Wentworth Group of concerned environmental scientists, <<http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006/emerging/water-debate/index.html>> has been a touchstone in the evolution of Australia’s environmental awareness. Its protagonists were all eminent, most nearing the ends of the careers, had nothing to gain and little to lose by speaking out. As experts, they simply saw it as their duty and were ready to wear the flak.

But they, and other scientists, fear that the climate in which objective, impartial advice can be offered to governments, industries and the public is chilling. Many researchers in publicly-funded organisations now claim they are gagged from speaking out in the way that once brought issues like salinity or species loss to the attention of Australia years ago. Some attribute this to attempts by governments to control media debate and minimise political surprises – but others say the suppression of scientific free speech is primarily due to the fawning of scientific managements on “stakeholders” in their eternal quest for funds.

“I’m buggered if I know how Australia will identify and head off its next big environmental crisis,” comments Wentworth land and water scientist Dr John Williams. “Someone has to be prepared to tell it the way it is. Government must have impartial information. The maturity of Australia’s governments in the 1940s was that they were prepared to heed that kind of advice. We need to regain that.”

The Australian State of the Environment Report is conceived in such a spirit of providing an objective, independent and factual bedrock to the national discourse on our future, on how we live and work as Australians in an Australian landscape, on where the opportunities and the challenges may lie.

Sustainable solutions do not come from science, lobby groups, industries or governments. They are the product of a society-wide dialogue, untidy and value-laden though it may be, and the consensus it negotiates.

Environmental, social and economic progress cannot now advance independently of one another, but only together. New scientific insights must be given voice, even if they offend or challenge existing views or politics.

Discussion of them must be open and free.

Our stewardship of the continent must adapt and evolve constantly in the light of new knowledge as we come to understand it more intimately.

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