

# Conservation, Development and Environmentalism: Historical Perspective and Future Imperatives

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About ten thousand years ago, when men began to turn from hunting to farming, they had first to cut down the trees. It was a painful task: the spirits of the trees had long been kith and kin. The cleared fields gave back harvest; the hamlets clustered into villages; the villages circled into cities. From those first cities would come the written word, the beginnings of mathematics and science, new gods, new technologies.

Far beyond the city walls, that first urban man could see the forests of his origins, and he looked on them now with fear, and with longing. Those dark woods hid plundering hordes that ever threatened to overrun him. At the same time, he had inherited what the poet T.S. Eliot would later call "an inconsolable memory of something lost in the forest". Perhaps it was the freedom of the wild – or some nostalgic memory of it – far from the confines and congestion of the city. Whatever the reasons, he was torn between the city and the forest. He still is.

That painful passage from forest dweller to urban man was first told in the Epic of Gilgamesh, dating from about 2000 years before Christ. Gilgamesh was the king of the Sumerian city of Uruk, and the epic recounts his struggle, and his reconciliation, with the forces of nature and civilization.

I do not raise this to amuse with historical trivia. This is one of the oldest written myths of Western Civilization. Four thousand years ago, when men first sat down to write about what troubled them, they wrote about the conflict they felt between the city and the forest, not only as environment but as idea.

So the first lesson of history is this:

Current feelings and fears about nature and civilization are not simply recent phenomena. They may be in modern guises, with modern causes and components appended, but there are ancient ideas and emotions involved.

The second lesson, I suggest, is that we went astray.

The Epic of Gilgamesh may have said that city man is incomplete without the wilderness. But it also said that the city and civilization were man's destiny. Indeed, it offered an understanding of them as partners. Gilgamesh's companion, his alter ego, was the wild man, Enkidu. In essence, Enkidu represents nature; Gilgamesh, civilization. Each was incomplete without the other.

Unfortunately that has not been the prevailing view. It is the conflict that has been the recurring theme through history. Alexander conquered half the world to spread civilization beyond Greek cities. Ghengis Khan conquered no less an empire to eradicate the city culture he abhorred. In the Judaic-Christian tradition, the biblical emphasis is on the evils of the city and the purity of the wilderness: the slavery of Egyptian cities, for example; the decadence of Sodom. Christ's first days were a flight from the city and its dangers

As a man he went often into the wilderness, seeking purification there.

It is forgotten that Christ also went to the city for knowledge and learning.

In more recent centuries, since the Industrial Revolution, it is technology and its impact, rather than the city itself, which has become the symbolic antithesis of nature. The pull between them has continued and there have been distinct changes in the Western man's preferences for one or the other.

The Australian historian, Geoffrey Blainey, has recently presented a detailed analysis of those changes. He has dubbed it, accurately if inelegantly, the Great Seesaw. In his words: "Love of nature sits at one end of the seesaw, love of technology at the other. Sometimes the one end is heavier, sometimes the other; betwixt the beam is balanced more or less, but ever rocking back and forth".

The causes and effects of the tilt on that seesaw are complex. Intellectual, cultural, technological and economic factors all influence it and are influenced by it. Sometimes one factor leads, sometimes another. They influence each other.

The prevailing tilt has a profound effect on the attitudes of the day. For instance, a tilt towards nature is invariably accompanied by an increased respect for primitive peoples. They are seen as living closer to nature. A tilt against technology brings fears of famine and diminishing resources. Technology embodies man's skills as a problem-solver and supplier. When faith in those skills is lost, concern develops over future supplies and security.

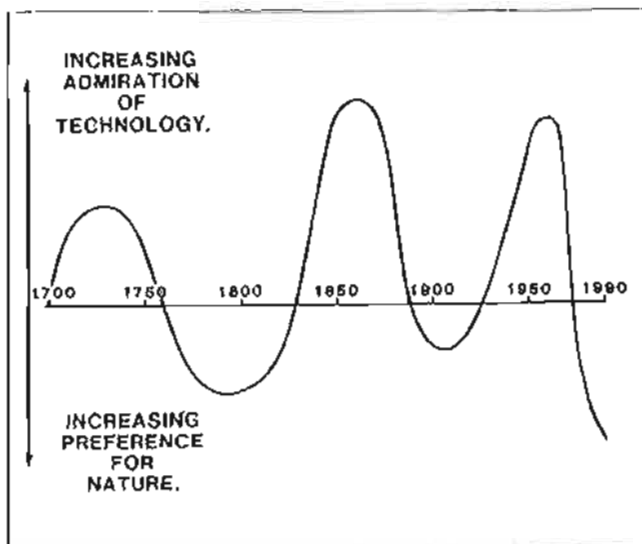


Figure 1

The alternating swing, between nature and technology over recent centuries is shown diagrammatically in the figure below. The cycles are discussed briefly in my paper and elaborated in Blainey's book. There is the sharp tilt to nature in the decades near 1800. This was the Age of Romanticism

I suggest that the reasons lie in the difference between conservationism and environmentalism. The conservationists' argument may be about trees or trout or whatever. The environmentalists' argument is about development and growth; specifically about stopping them.

Some of the key points of the environmentalists' ideology and their agenda are shown below.

Belief	Solution
Western religion and culture are based on man's dominion over nature and lead to its destruction	New ideology of environmentalism
Our finite resources are being exhausted by global population growth and rising living standards	Individual liberties need to be sacrificed to social needs
Industrial development progressively destroys the environment	Political and legislative control
Uncontrolled technology is the main threat, consuming resources and generating waste	Need to change social values and restructure social and economic institutions
Poverty and pollution are linked	Need to change political power system to international basis and redistribute wealth.

Clearly the enemy is not the miner or logger per se. They are only the enemy agents. The real enemy is the entire complex of our culture.

The environmentalists themselves have made this quite clear. A former chairman of the Australian Conservation Foundation has described environmentalism as "a revolution challenging most of the fundamental tenets of Western industrial capitalism".

I'm not suggesting for one minute that the gentleman has no right to that view. What I am suggesting is that, as an industry – or as individuals, for that matter – we must be aware that that is his view; and that when he is talking about the forest he is working on an agenda that goes far beyond trees. That agenda obviously involves protection of the natural environment – I agree – but it clearly includes major social, economic and political reforms.

It is those reforms, and the ideology that underwrites them, that constitute the main impediment to a rational and necessary reconciliation of conservation and development.

It is precisely that reconciliation which lies at the heart of the new and increasingly popular concept of sustainable development. Sustainable in that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future. In essence, a balance between conservation and development.

The concept of sustainable development is inherent in the Federal Government's National Conservation Strategy for Australia. That document, prepared in the early 1980s, declares, by way of its opening remarks, that conservation and development are equally necessary for our survival. It offers the insight that they are different expressions of the one process.

That is a powerful thought. Development and conservation are not inherently in conflict. They are part of the one

process. Indeed they are. That process is the human endeavour to sustain and improve life on earth. Development is the use and management of the biosphere to provide for the present; conservation is the use and management of the biosphere to provide for the future. They are the same process on different time scales.

These new concepts may mark the beginning of a return to optimism. Perhaps that "Seesaw" is beginning to tilt back. It is still too early to tell and there are powerful forces at the far end.

So what other lessons can we learn from this history, ancient or recent?

We have said that the current environmental debate is not a new theme. Those ancient roots and historical precedents are not cause, however, to trivialize the present. Rather they are a warning of its complexity.

They are also a caution against over-reaction. Widespread belief does not necessarily constitute truth, whether the issue be immovable continents or global warming. Twenty years ago, scientists were concerned that cooling earth temperatures showed the approach of a mini ice-age. That doesn't disprove current concerns about rising temperatures, but it is a warning to scientifically consider the data.

We have seen that there are scientific and emotional components in the current perspective. The scientific component is a newly focused appreciation of the ecology of the planet and the need for greater care in future social and industrial initiatives. The emotional component is more an anti-technology mood, and is cyclical.

The present cycle draws its intensity from the conjunction of several cycles: the swing towards nature; the swing against technology; the historical unease at the end of a century; indeed at the end of the millennium. For centuries, Western man believed the world would end in the year 2000.

This conjunction might make the current cycle a relatively long event continuing well into the next century, unless other influences come to play.

Information is the main influence on public opinion and mood. A key factor in the prevailing anti-industry perspective is the one-sided argument the public has heard for decades. Environmentalists speak on prime-time television; industry, with some exceptions, responds by internal memo or discrete political lobbying. That is changing – and needs to.

Industry must communicate more openly and more effectively with the public. Otherwise, a poorly informed public will hold very counter-productive views. A recent poll showed that 90% of Australians considered future oil sufficiency to be vitally important. But, only 15% believed that any problem with self-sufficiency exists. Hence, oil supply was ranked last of the 16 problems listed for this nation. That is not only against our industry's interest, it is against the national interest.

Education is the imperative.

Industry must ensure it is fully educated and properly informed about environmental matters, beginning at the boardroom and continuing through to employees and shareholders. National and international liaison is essential.

The public must be re-educated about their dependent relationship with the primary producing and energy resource industries. The WA Government's booklet, Mining

and Rousseau. The mood swung back to great faith in technology and optimism in the mid 19th century. Then back towards nature – though in moderation – once again coincident with the end of the century. Finally the sharp swing to technology in the 1950s and 60s, and an equally sharp swing to nature in recent decades.

Blamey has labelled the preference for nature versus technology as, respectively, pessimism and optimism. These are labels which reflect man's view of himself and the future, and his influence in it. Some of the main aspects of these two views are shown below.

Optimists	Pessimists
Man is intelligent	Man is not as clever as he thinks
Industrial civilization is good	Industrial civilization is bad
New technology is good	New technology is bad
City life is noblest	Primitive life is noblest
Reason is the highest virtue	Instinct and emotion are the highest virtues
Modern man is the ideal	The noble savage is the ideal
Nature must be harnessed	Nature is bountiful if left alone
Science will provide	Nature will provide
The golden age lies in the present and future	The golden age lies in the past and a far-away utopian future

Both views obviously exist today but it is the pessimistic view which dominates. The social attitudes and values that characterize that view are widespread. Fears of population explosions and depleted resources, widespread discontent with urban society; the 'native' is everywhere the noble savage again.

But, if the mood and values prevailing today were equally common 200 years ago, there are also factors and aspects today that are unique:

- acid rain, atmospheric pollution, soil degradation
- The population of the earth has trebled since 1900.
- The consumption of fossil fuels has increased thirty-fold.
- Industrial production has increased fifty times this century, forty times since 1950.

Regardless of any cyclic component then, today's concerns about population growth and diminishing resources do seem better founded.

The lesson, then, is that current convictions about nature and civilization have both a rational and an irrational component. The rational component has a scientific basis. It is the recognition that our care of the environment has often been inadequate in the past and that better care is essential in the future. That much is simple enough and is to be applauded and encouraged. In simplest terms, we might say that the rational component is the pro-nature; conversely, the irrational component is an anti-technology/anti-industry bias. It is this irrational component I am concerned with here, for it is this component which is responsible for the current pessimism about technology. Its origins can be simplified to three main factors: • public concerns, social dynamics intellectual trends.

Public concern about the environment had its beginnings in the 1950s with the concerns about atmospheric pollution. It was stimulated by books – Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, for instance – and by colour television. Media coverage of environmental accidents such as the Santa Barbara oil spill made local events into international disasters. In 1972, the Club of Rome predicted global collapse within a century. The Greenhouse Effect emerged in the late 1970s as the fundamental environmental issue.

Not all the information was accurate. Some of it was deliberately inaccurate. It raised awareness, and some of that was good – but it also falsely alarmed the community. The public became increasingly nervous about the future. A doomsday mentality developed. Technology, which should have offered security, seemed to blame.

Changes in social structure and affluence were occurring over the same period. In 1950 most Australians were anxious for security and material well-being and they were staunch advocates of industry and technology. In the relative affluence of 1990 things look very different to many people.

During those decades, post-war technology greatly improved production methods, and progressively moved people out of the primary sector. Over two-thirds of the population now work in the service sector. They live in urban centres remote from, generally unaware of, and not very sympathetic to, the resource industries that ultimately support them.

These social dynamics had their most profound effect at the middle and upper middle-class level. Generally well-educated, professionally employed, this group proved receptive to various emerging intellectual trends.

These trends, all critical in one way or another of Western society, were simply the latest version of age-old intellectual discontents but they proved popular with this newly emerging intellectual class, and they did much to tilt the seesaw, and to shape the new ideology of environmentalism.

In that context, the most influential trends were the opposition to industrial expansion and population growth. Both were definitely cause for concern – and remain so – but they were wrongly generalized into an attack on Western technology, and on Western society itself.

Intellectuals have always been a dissatisfied lot, and their dissatisfaction has found common expression in efforts to restructure the prevailing social and political systems. The intellectual's role – indeed control – in the current environmental debate belongs to that tradition. They have superimposed a socio-political movement on the conservation ethic. The new product is environmentalism.

This is not simply semantics. These are very important distinctions. Ecology is a scientific discipline. Conservation is an ethical dictate of that science. But the superposition of socio-political reform onto that scientific discipline converts conservatism to environmentalism. It is this merging of the scientific issues and the valid concerns with the political motivations and interests that creates the complexity and confusion for many people.

Why is a reconciliation of conservation and development so difficult? Why does it seem impossible to satisfy many environmental groups?

and the Environment: Balancing the Scales, is a good example. The cover shows a drilling rig being weighed against a tree. The real balance is between people using trees and people using minerals, or enjoying the fruits of national income derived from those minerals.

Education must include the next generation. Education and influence through the school is a main priority with many environmentalist groups. APFA must give it the same priority. Children must learn that a balance between development and conservation is not only possible but imperative.

The concept of sustainable development seeks to restore that balance and to re-establish optimism about the future. Translating that concept into practice is the challenge of the next decade and the future beyond.

Our industry, like others, cannot wait for a fully articulated vision or plan to emerge. Industry must take an active role in defining and implementing this concept, developing Codes of Practice relating to land use and environmental management, and self-regulating to meet those standards. Companies must integrate the concepts of environment management and economic growth in their own organizations and articulate their efforts and success for the public.

Industry has a special responsibility to develop and implement the new and improved technology that sustainable development requires.

We must also be aware that this concept is not the end of the conflict. Indeed, it may trigger an escalation of it.

Many of the principles of sustainable development have been introduced before and are soundly rejected by many environmentalists. Multiple and sequential land use and the principle of sustainability were key elements of the conservation program of President Roosevelt early this century. The concept of wilderness areas was introduced in the 1960s specifically to counter those principles.

There will be some direct opposition to sustainable development and industry's efforts towards that end. However the main threat will come from those who support the concept openly but work towards their own preferred interpretation of it. Remember that for those who believe that ANY further development is ecologically unsustainable, sustainable development means NO development.

Whether or not sustainable development proves acceptable to environmentalists will ultimately reveal whether their main aspirations are with protecting the environment or with restructuring society.

The current trend in increased regulation and legislation will continue and probably worsen. There is an accelerating shift towards greater federal authority over the environment. State control of the onshore land areas is already coming under increased challenge.

USA precedents point towards increasing penalties for infringement of environmental regulations, directed at both the corporation and the managers personally.

US precedents also point to increased use of the courts by environmental groups. The recent action by Greenpeace against Caltex in NSW is one of several early steps in this direction.

On a more positive note, American corporations are responding to this new situation and the environmental manager is moving into the board room, and moving in with class. The American Petroleum Institute allocates almost one-quarter of its annual budget to environmental matters. These are leads Australia should follow.

The Australian petroleum exploration and development industry obviously faces a great challenge in the 1990s. Meeting this challenge will require considerably more time, effort and resources than industry has committed in the past.

It will also require that we be clear in our own minds – and hearts for that matter – about the value of our endeavours.

The environmentalists want us to believe that there is something fundamentally wrong in our technological society. It isn't so. Technology may be the cause of some of our problems. But it is the only hope for their solution. In our pursuit of those solutions, we must be constructive not destructive. There is no future in the intellectual's pessimism. If there are flaws in our technology – and there are – we must develop that technology further, not dismantle it.

As our efforts improve our technology, we are able to do more and more with less consumption of energy and resources. And as we use less and less per unit output, the greater are our available reserves.

That is conservation.

Our role as explorers and producers of petroleum is to be part of that technology. We must minimize our disruption to the environment. We must maximize our energy efficiency. Beyond that, we are simply part of the human process – and we have no less claim to the moral high ground than any other group, green or otherwise.

We are poised, ready to learn, like Gilgamesh long ago, that the city and the wilderness are both essential to man's future and happiness. Conservation and development are really the same process on different time scales, and we must reconcile them within us. Such a reconciliation will be worth our efforts, and worth passing onto the future.

It would be wrong, US President Bush said recently, to pass onto future generations a world tainted by present thoughtlessness. It would be wrong too, to pass on a fear of the future.

The future needs our dreams, not our despair.