

Campaigning Against our Cultural Heritage

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There has been much written about how Australia's national character emerged from a bush ethos: the idea that a specifically Australian outlook emerged first amongst workers in the Australian pastoral industry. The recent, big environmental and animal liberation campaigns, however, challenge key assumptions from this history. They portray Australian agriculture as harmful to the environment, and the animal liberationists suggest that our farmers are inhumane. Maybe it is time to abandon the bush, and embrace a vegan future!

Banjo Paterson, perhaps more than any other writer, created and defined our cultural heritage. His story about the shearer and his jumbuck in outback Queensland remains our most popular national song. Renditions of 'Waltzing Matilda' dominate when Australians gather at major international sporting events, including the Olympic Games and Rugby Union matches. But People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are, at the moment, campaigning against the wool industry. They are against live export and they are against mulesing. Mulesing involves the cutting away of skin from the crutch area to reduce the susceptibility of individual sheep to fly strike. PETA wants the practice stopped or sheep to be anaesthetized during the procedure. As part of the campaign against wool products focused on US consumers, PETA campaigners have also suggested that the Australian climate is too hot for sheep.

'The Man from Snowy River', also by Paterson, is about bushmen and their horses in the High Country. The man from Snowy River chased the brumbies 'down the mountain like a torrent down its bed' through open country and mountain scrub before 'turning their heads for home' with his pony covered

in 'blood from hip to shoulder from the spur'. Now the NSW and Victorian Governments are intent on banning grazing and brumbies from the High Country on the basis that they have an adverse impact on the natural heritage of the Alpine region.

The Victorian mountain cattlemen recently sought an emergency cultural and historic heritage listing with the Federal Environment Minister to counter the Victorian Government's proposed ban on grazing.

No-one has a monopoly on the future. Is it, perhaps, time that Australians moved beyond 'Waltzing Matilda' and 'The Man from Snowy River'? The PETA Website explains that there are alternatives to wool, including

polyester fleece, synthetic shearing, and other cruelty-free fibres. Tencel—breathable, durable, and biodegradable—is one of the newest cruelty free wool substitutes.... Choosing to buy these non-wool products not only helps the animals, but can also reduce or eliminate many of the consumer problems and inconveniences that go along with wearing or using wool.

But what about a replacement for lamb chops? While the animal liberationists and environmentalists are against the farming of exotic animals, they are also intent on preventing the development of any industry based on the farming of Australian native animals, including kangaroos. PETA is even against the drinking of milk.

Not surprisingly, rural and regional Australia feel under siege. There are many other campaigns, including ones against the use of our native forests for bee-keeping, against recreational horse

riding in National Parks, and a campaign to ban line fishing in the Murray River. The timber industry has long struggled, and mostly lost, against campaigners intent on closing down their industry. But stopping the logging of native forests has not reduced the demand for wood products. Mahogany and teak cabinets and tables from Indonesia are crammed into warehouses across Australia.

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Although the general perception is that forest cover in Australia is reducing, the reality is quite the opposite. Since 1995, the area of old-growth forests in reserves has increased by 1.2 million hectares and is now 3.7 million hectares. This constitutes a tiny percentage of the 165 million hectares (and growing) of native forest in Australia.

The poem 'My Country' by Dorothea MacKellar is also central to our bush heritage and she refers to Australia as 'A land of sweeping plains'. In 1904, when the poem was penned, large areas of western New South Wales and Queensland were open, treeless plains. Over the last century, however, many of these areas have become covered in trees. Forest encroachment is a consequence, at least in part, of reduced burning-off and increased grazing pressure from sheep and cattle.

Although Aborigines kept the landscape open through the use of fire, graziers have come to rely

on chain pulling (dragging a chain attached to two bulldozers) to knock down re-growth and keep the landscape productive from a grass perspective. The bottom line is that increasing tree cover reduces the productivity of the land and reduces stocking rates.

In early 2003, the Wilderness Society, supported by the World Wildlife Fund and the Australian Conservation Foundation, launched a final campaign against tree clearing, warning that

'The scale of commitment to land clearing and woodlands protection issues from national state and local (environment) groups has now reached a high level, comparable to the native forest protection campaigns of the eighties and nineties'

I live in the leafy Brisbane suburb of Chelmer and during this campaign, which coincided with the State election, my letterbox was continually filled with information, mostly from the Wilderness Society or the Labor Party, telling me about the need to ban broad-scale tree clearing.

The campaign slogan was 'Land clearing, turning Queensland into waste land' and the TV campaign included graphic advertisements showing koalas in trees and trees being bulldozed. At the time, I sent the Courier Mail an opinion piece explaining that graziers would not bulldoze trees with koalas in them and that there had actually been a 5 million hectare increase in native vegetation cover in Queensland over the previous ten years, with 26 per cent of all the clearing done in 2000–2001 on land that had no trees in 1991. The then Opinion Editor suggested that my piece was offensive and that the idea that there had been a net increase in tree cover unbelievable—never mind all the supporting information.

Soon after the election it was decreed that there would be a complete ban on broad-scale tree clearing starting in 2006.

Late last year, Environment Min-

ister Senator Ian Campbell restated Australia's commitment to meeting its Kyoto target and praised the 'tremendous effort by governments, industry and the Australian community' in cutting carbon emissions. He should really have thanked Queensland's pastoral industry because this is where most of the emissions savings are coming from at a

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cost of approximately \$1 billion dollars to the industry.

This has come about because the 'Australia Clause' (Article 3.7) in the Kyoto Protocol allows countries for which land use change and forestry was a net source of emissions in 1990 to include the emissions from land use change in their 1990 baseline. The Australian Greenhouse Office consequently exaggerated the extent of the clearing in 1990 to give an inflated baseline value and at the same time did not record carbon sinks resulting from forest growth and woodland thickening. The Federal Government then supported the Queensland Government's introduction of controls on tree clearing. So now we are "on-track" to achieve the Kyoto target for 2008–2012 and without even having to turn off our air-conditioners.

A more sensible approach might have been to acknowledge that trees regrow. Ecologist Bill Burrows, writing in the international journal *Global Change Biology* in 2002, explained that if we could include woodland thickening and forest encroachment as carbon sinks in our National Greenhouse Gas Inventory, then nationally net emissions would be reduced by 25 per cent. This would then create the potential for Australians to choose between carbon credits for more trees or open grassland that supports a pastoral industry, kan-

garoos and granivorous birds.

Instead, our State and Federal Governments have denied that trees regrow. Then again, to do otherwise would jeopardize the Government's current bizarre strategy for meeting Kyoto targets. Indeed the Federal Government has perhaps already rejected our bush ethos heritage—a respect for the truth and a fair go.

To be sure, trees don't regrow everywhere and some parts of Australia have been over-cleared, and large areas of once native grasslands have been sown to exotic grass species. But there has been no potential for honest discussion of these issues. Do we want more trees or more native grasses? Do we want brumbies in the High Country or a landscape free of exotic (non-native) animals? Metropolitan Australia has seemed largely uninterested in these important issues, or appears to take the side of the campaigners against our cultural heritage and in apparent ignorance of our natural heritage.

So what might a sheep-free, PETA-future be like? Our land of sweeping plains may become a vast expanse of thick forest. This may reduce the amount of surface water running off into our catchments, but we can build desalination plants to do away with the need for catchments altogether. There will be no bushmen, or brumbies or even trail riders in the High Country which will also become a vaster and thicker expanse of forest. There will be no logging of all this forest. We will sit on chairs imported from Indonesia in our polyester fleece manufactured in China. We will worship the environment but we will never visit wild places because National Parks are only for nature. We will be concerned about Kyoto but not understand what it means. We will sing 'Waltzing Matilda' and remember the now extinct sheep—saved from mulesing.

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