

2023 - 2024 AGM 16/09/24 PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Welcome to the EcoNetwork 2024 AGM, the end of a busy and productive year. Way too much has been accomplished this year for me to go through, but Allison has produced an impressive Annual Report covering all the activities of the past year which is available on our website. But, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those that have generously provided their time and energy to achieve these great results.

There is one aspect I would like to highlight and that is the regular production of the Eco Update, a publication that is on a par with any national or international publication of its kind. This takes considerable time and effort to compile and edit the contributions from across the membership and community. Eco update provides cohesion and focus on local and wider environmental issues and are also available on the website. If you haven't already, I suggest that you have a look at the website for the Annual Report and to catch up on current and previous Eco Updates.

While the report addresses local issues, today I would like to look at a wider perspective. Sometime in the mid 1980s the concept of economic evaluation of habitats became more mainstream – it was thought at the time that this was going to be a game changer for conservation. With an economic value for ecosystem services, surely politicians and communities would start to pay attention.

By the early 1980s, mangroves considered “wastelands” all over Asia were being converted to shrimp and fish farms, highly profitable for some. But towards the end of the 1980s early 90s, economic and ecological models demonstrated that the ecosystem services provided by intact mangroves, including fish nurseries and coastal protection were of far greater value than the short-term profits from the shrimp farms, that usually brought little real value to the community. That was back in the 1980s and things haven't really changed much. Today, in 2024, conservation remains a low priority for most politicians whatever they may claim.

The recent 2022 State of the Environment report to the Government, states that 49 % of the Australian annual GDP has a direct dependence on Nature – and that does not include the air we breathe or the water we drink, yet the Biodiversity Council an independent expert group from 11 Australian Universities estimates that we only spend 0.1% of GDP on nature including conservation. Pretty poor when compared with 0.8% of GDP spent in the EU, or the approximately 2% of the annual GDP spent on the military. Nonetheless, with at least 50% of the GDP being directly dependent on nature, clearly the economic future of Australia is intrinsically linked to a healthy environment. Nature is our greatest asset.

This same report highlights the continuing decline in the health of nature and biodiversity in Australia. We are the global leaders in species extinction, with an unbelievable 2,224 species threatened, a growing number that has increased in Australia by 8% since 2016. In 2021 a CSIRO report described 19 key Australian ecosystems as showing signs of collapse. This will have major social, cultural, economic and ecological consequences.

Adding to this, The World Economic Forum has ranked biodiversity and conservation in Australia as one of the most underfunded in the world. Meanwhile spending on biodiversity conservation projects have declined by almost 40 % since 2013.

This chronic underfunding and piecemeal approach to biodiversity conservation is catastrophic. It has been estimated that if 0.3 % of the budget were to be spent on nature, this situation could be

rectified. This is less than the GST collected from current spending on pets – while many endemic species are close to extinction and receiving little or no funding.

The marine environment is faring no better. Marine conservation action in NSW is managed by DPI Fisheries – the fox in charge of the hen house. In 2018, 31 % of the total MPA were downgraded and rezoned, opening them up to fishing. This left only 7.4% of the NSW waters fully protected in Sanctuary Zones and the system remains dysfunctional. The PSGLMP the largest in NSW currently has 2 full time staff and no manager. For whatever the reason Marine parks in NSW are being ignored by the government.

Yet the combined marine industries contribute 5.2 % of GDP and after Oil and Gas, domestic tourism, for nature-based recreation is placed at the top of the list – not including recreational fishing. This is not surprising with 85% of the population living within 50 Kilometres of the coast. The intrinsic value of a healthy marine environment is directly linked to the national economy and general wellbeing. Yet there is little or no conservation effort in this sector.

The famous GBR receives considerable government funding and attention, while the less well known but equally important 8,100 kilometres of the Great Southern Kelp Reef is less known, and despite being listed as endangered under the EPBC Act receives considerably less funding while facing similar threats as the GBR. Sea temperatures in the east and South East of Australia are rising at 2 – 4 times the global average, making this another (global) environmental hotspot being quietly ignored by the Australian Government who have responsibility for the stewardship of these ecosystems. Successive governments seem to be incapable of grappling with this catastrophe and the various drivers.

Yet on June 21st 2024, the Australian Government signed up to the Convention on Biodiversity target of 30 X 30 committing to protect at least 30% of land and sea by 2030 apparently with little understanding of our current predicament. However, we should do everything we can to help them hold to that commitment.

Despite the dramatic and amazing advances in science and technology supporting conservation we seem to remain politically in the school playground, driven by agendas, greed, NIMBYism and apathy. Clearly there remains a lot to do, but this should dispel any lingering doubts about the value and need for organisations like Econetwork.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the entire executive committee for their support over the past year, and their unrelenting work towards fulfilling our vision for the future and a sustainable environment for future generations.

As always, I would like to thank our secretary, the backbone of any organisation, Alison Rogers for keeping it all together. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Kathy Brown for standing as the returning officer and for attending to the official business of this meeting. Thank you.

Finally, would someone like to move and second this report:

I would now like to ask our Treasurer Nigel Dique to present the Financial Reports, Thank you.