

Australia's choice: back from the brink

A new form of environmental capitalism must emerge if Australia's way of life is to continue, argues Associate Professor Corey Bradshaw.



Australia is the lucky country. It's lucky not simply for the immense resources at its disposal, but because the country still has an opportunity to invoke radical change in how those resources are used.

TEXT
Jason McIntosh

PHOTOGRAPHS
Courtesy
Corey Bradshaw

Associate Professor Corey Bradshaw has just spent an hour talking about a subject close to his heart: the actions that are needed to save the planet from human destruction.

It's a sobering assessment in which much of the world's population spends the bulk of the day trying to survive, while for the lucky few energy can be and is directed to the creation of wealth.

Dr Bradshaw's research interests concern the dynamics of animal and plant species and their implications for extinction, and population management covering psychology and ecology, conceptualised within a broad understanding of politics, economics and, dare I say, a comforting grip on reality.

Many Australians relieve their environmental guilt by cycling to work or taking their reusable cloth bags to the supermarket, but most of us know that this is simply not enough in the face of the larger forces that are contributing to the demise of the planet.

Dr Bradshaw argues that hacking away at the world's lungs — the forests — represents one of the most significant and disturbing contributors to the destruction of the earth.

And these carbon banks, which he argues are worthless now under the western world's current economic structure, must be viewed and valued as prime commodities by future world economies if the worst ravages of climate change and ecosystem degradation are to be avoided.

In that perfect world, the farmers of forest-rich countries would tend their forest as they now do their cows, while other markets could sell solar, geothermal or other non-biological energies to the global market.

On top of this, greater consideration needs to be given to the calculation of carbon expenditure when determining the true cost of goods and services. Until carbon expenditure is tied to a product in all its phases, including development, transport and use, exploitation of so-called environmentally friendly products would continue, he said.

In Australia, consumers often prided themselves in filling their new (relatively) fuel-efficient cars with "bio"-enriched fuel, even though it is sourced from tropical lands that were once covered by some of the most expansive carbon-sucking forests in the world.

Dr Bradshaw encourages the forced marriage between economics and the environment as a fundamental and necessary step in addressing the cancerous situation the planet is in.

"Carbon-trading markets are a good first step, but the frightening pace of climate change makes concepts like 'carbon-neutrality' simply not enough. We need to incorporate the very value of biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides into a workable economy."

**OPPOSITE**

Corey Bradshaw with two southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) pups at Macquarie Island station, Southern Ocean, where he is researching the consequences of environmental degradation in regions least affected by humans.

He sees himself as a constructive scientist using empirical principles to maximise “conservation benefits and find trade-offs to work toward this goal”.

Curbing and eventually reducing human population growth, once the domain of disease and drought, is another fundamental problem which is exacerbated by economic policies geared towards population growth, Dr Bradshaw said.

While Australia’s population is constrained through choices made by individuals, he points out that this country cannot point its fingers at our northern neighbours as the sole source of our own destruction.

Australia still cherishes an identity delivered from the sweat of farmers’ brows as they modify landscapes with species such as cattle, sheep, cotton and rice, even although these animals and products are completely unsuitable for Australia’s low-yield soils, variable climate and sensitive hydrology.

Is he concerned when Australians who, amongst the pressures of interest rates, bills, work, worrying about their children, sometimes make a token effort in their purchasing and consumption habits?

“We have to contextualise a drive to self-betterment within the systems that we have,” he said.

Defining himself as a realist “most days”, Dr Bradshaw’s accent suggests an upbringing beyond Australia’s shores. He grew up in the Rocky Mountains in western Canada and as a youngster dined regularly on moose and black bear.

“It’s an ironic way of getting into this business, but I learnt the precariousness of living off the land and maintaining a sustainable and healthy lifestyle as what you might describe as a passive conservatism,” he said.

A passion for science eventually led to research positions in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. A career turning point, however, came while he was working in the Antarctic.

“It was there that I realised the true value of and my passion for strong empirical science as I was forced to consider the consequences of environmental degradation in the regions supposedly least affected by humans,” he said.

And what would he like his lasting legacy to be? “I want to be seen as someone who provided the sound basis to make constructive, positive policy decisions for politicians, industry leaders, and visionaries who have the ability to create real political and economic change,” he said.

“Empirically supported scientific evidence is the only way to do this because it’s difficult to argue with numbers.”

**ANTENNAE**

Corey Bradshaw was a Senior Research Fellow with CDU’s Institute of Advanced Studies until recently. He is now Research Director of Marine Impacts at the Research Institute for Climate Change and Sustainability at the University of Adelaide.