



**THE FUTURE EATERS  
SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON POPULATION POLICY**

■ **Tim Flannery**

*The history of the land of Australia and her near neighbours and the history of the peoples of these lands has much to tell us about our environment: both its potential and its limits. Tim Flannery's book The Future Eaters draws on these lessons with skill and insight. We reproduce an excerpt here and then invite the author to tell us about the reactions to his work, especially in the context of the recent Jones report on Australia's population.*

**CHAPTER 14: GLORIOUSLY DECEITFUL, AND A VIRGIN**

*The chapter begins with a Greek myth about a deceitful maiden, Hypermestra, and draws an analogy between her and the so called 'new' lands of Australasia...*

Like Hypermestra, none of the 'new' lands had 'known man' until very late in their histories — and each has been, in its own way, gloriously deceitful to its new colonists. As each of the 'new' lands has lost its virginity, it has suffered frightful ecological disruption. Over time, some sort of ecological balance has usually been restored.

The deception experienced by each wave of human immigrants into the 'new' lands is one of the great constants of human experience in the region. To the earliest Aborigines, it must have seemed as if the herds of diprotodons stretched on forever. To the Maori, the moa must have appeared a limitless resource. European agriculturalists saw what they imagined were endless expanses of agricultural land of the finest quality. Early Chinese immigrants to Australia saw *san gum shaan* (new gold mountain), and now each new immigrant sees an opportunity to prosper in the land of plenty. In short, all have seen a cornucopia where there is in fact very little.

Worse, the new settlers have usually assumed that their new homeland is a virgin, often in the face of the most preposterous contrary evidence. *Terra nullius* is not solely a British delusion. Each new wave of people, arriving from the resource-rich lands to the north, sees in the unoccupied regions of Australia and her neighbours room for development and space to flourish. In part perhaps because of this sheer sense of space, each new wave of settlers can identify some virgin resources — some field untilled, sea unfished, or forest unfelled — with which they can make their future.

Yet these unoccupied spaces and apparent opportunities in fact represent something

very different, for they are the necessary accommodation that each group makes to life in a hard land. For the Aborigines, that accommodation meant foregoing agriculture and hence leaving a very different kind of mark on the land. For the Australians of European origin, it has meant leaving the centre and north largely empty and the creation of vast national parks on what appears to be useable land. It has meant the imposition of what are — by European standards — extraordinarily low stocking rates on rangelands and a low level of utilisation in other areas.

The necessary accommodations have created a sense of paranoia in living Australians. Perhaps because of their own recent use of the concept of *terra nullius*, many fear that people from Asia will perceive in Australia, if not an empty land, then at least an under-utilised one.

In an ecological sense, the history of all of the colonists of the 'new' lands has followed the same trajectory. Their histories look so different to us because we see human groups at different moments: Europeans 200 years, Maori about 800-1000 years and Aborigines 60,000 years, after the time of colonisation. The trajectory, or pattern of development, experienced by each group is as follows. The initial deception leads to a sense of unbounded optimism. But this soon turns to bitter disillusion as resources are exhausted. Finally, comes a long and hard period of conciliation, during which the land increasingly shapes its new inhabitants...

From T. F. Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed, Sydney, 1994, pp. 144-145

#### FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE EATERS

My book puts the case for limiting Australia's population growth. Indeed, the proposition is put forward in it that, given current technology and levels of consumption, it might be desirable to stabilise Australia's population at somewhere between six and 12 million.

Since publication of the book, several important developments have taken place. Foremost among these is publication of the report *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': One Nation — Two Ecologies*, by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long-term Strategies. Often referred to as the 'Jones Report' after the Committee Chairman, Mr Barry Jones, it is important because it recognises the need for population planning in Australia. Indeed, its second recommendation to the Federal Parliament is that:

The Australian Government should adopt a population policy which explicitly sets out options for long term population change ... Population policy is central to establishing national goals and must involve the Prime Minister directly.<sup>1</sup>

The report does not recommend a population target for Australia and has been criticised for it. I feel that this criticism is unfair, as the determination of a population target is a highly complicated process, far beyond the resources of the committee to carry out. The Jones report does, however, recognise the weakness of previous estimates of Australia's 'carrying capacity'. These (including my own estimate of six to 12 million) are frequently the work of one individual or a small group, and tend to emphasise only one or a few aspects of this complex issue.

I feel that the next step in the process of dealing with the population problems highlighted in the Jones Report is clear, although it is not explicitly identified in the report itself. A population target must be determined for the nation. That determination must be based upon an exhaustive analysis of current technology, levels of consumption, environmental trends and of the economic situation. This complex task can only be achieved if the Federal Government briefs the Australian science community to undertake a major investigation.

It is critical that scientists be asked to determine a population target based upon the

current situation, even though this target may not be reached for centuries. This is because the future is essentially unknowable. Any determination of population carrying capacity which relies upon predicted new technology and so forth is bound to be wrong.

In order to determine a population target for the continent, Australian scientists and economists would have to work together to determine how we make our living at present, and what impacts this has on our environment. It would be, in essence, a nation-wide stock take of our current situation. Armed with this information, a determination of how many people the continent can support sustainably in the current situation can be made.

The determination of this figure and its review should, I believe, be the sole input from science into the development of a population policy for Australia. This is because I believe that the methods used to reach the population target, and how long is taken doing it, are issues for the Government and people of Australia to decide.

I will now offer a few speculations about how events might unfold if Australia develops such a population policy. Because of the slow nature of change in human populations, Australians will probably aim to achieve any population target some time in the distant future, say by 2200 AD. While Australia will still add some growth from natural increase, fertility has now stabilised at slightly below replacement. Consequently population policy will mainly focus on immigration. Because of the long time frame involved, the impact of the policy upon annual Government decision making would be small. It may mean, for example, that immigration intakes need only be trimmed slightly, or expanded slightly, on average over a decade, depending upon the target figure decided upon.

Because setting of the immigration intake would be determined within the context of long-term planning, greater flexibility in setting the annual immigration intake will doubtless occur. Thus Australia may be able to respond to emergencies overseas by taking in large numbers of refugees in a given year. The limits to this flexibility must be determined by demographers, who can decide where the 'point of no return' as regards staying on target for the optimum population

size is. Thus, if a large intake occurs in one year, it may be necessary to trim the intake for the rest of the decade to stay on track.

It is clear that in order for any population policy to succeed, it needs bipartisan political support. This support (which should only be for an overall policy and population target) is considerably less than that enjoyed by the current immigration policy, where the actual annual intake remains undisputed. Thus, debate about how the population target is achieved would be broader than the debate about *de facto* population policy (immigration) is at present.

I feel that there is now a new understanding of Australian ecosystems and recognition of the enormous ecological damage done to Australian environments in the past two centuries. This has led to growing public debate on the issues of per capita consumption, technology and human population in Australia. There is a growing popular perception that Australians could benefit from a population policy.

The main fears concerning the development of such a policy are that, on the one hand scientists may hijack the humanitarian and other interests of various community groups; and on the other that such interest groups may overwhelm informed scientific input in the development of such a policy.

It is possible, however, to develop a policy which caters for the interests of all while still delivering a firm population target. The key to this is the recognition that desirable changes in human population can

only occur slowly. We are after all an extremely long-lived and slow reproducing species.

Finally, it is my feeling, derived from a diversity of responses to my book, that tardiness in developing a population policy is due more to political than to popular perceptions. I say this because the public response to the population issues raised in my book has been overwhelmingly positive. Positive responses have come from academics, the rural community, environmentalists, industrialists and the public at large. With few exceptions, however, the response from politicians has been one of extreme caution.

During the more frank discussions I have had with politicians and their advisers, it has become evident that politicians fear that a population policy informed by science might result in a loss of power and control. They see science as setting the agenda for them. This, however, will clearly not happen. Whatever the recommendations of science concerning carrying capacity, politicians will always be able to determine the rate at which such a target is approached. And it is within that prerogative (of determining time scales for change) that all power resides.

#### Reference

- <sup>1</sup> B. Jones, *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': One Nation — Two Ecologies*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p. 147