

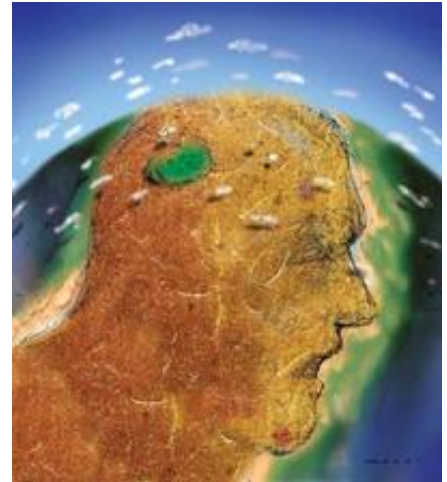
It's a whole new way of seeing green

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The land needs more people and animals, not less, to avoid environmental disaster,

Paul Sheehan writes

The Void Express leaves Central railway station at 7.10 each morning. Platform one. Officially, it is the XPT CountryLink express to the western plains. I caught this train on a recent Tuesday. At 10.42am, exactly on time, the train arrived at Bathurst, where I disembarked. I caught a taxi to the local airport. Waiting on the tarmac was the plane that would take me deeper into the void.



It was a single-engined four-seater, a Cessna 182. The pilot, George King, was ready to go. We shook hands, got into the plane, taxied out onto the runway, and took off. Into the air by 10.55am. That's how it happens at country airfields.

King treats his Cessna like a family car, popping often between his family company's two properties and far afield to the Northern Territory, to buy cattle. It means he has spent a lot of time reading a lot of countryside. And the more he has seen, the more he has moved across the gulf that exists between dominant perceptions and the reality of what is happening to this country. The void. Terrorism is not the biggest long-term threat to Australia.

In the process of studying the fundamental structure of the country, he has become a radical, despite the cockie's uniform of broad-rimmed hat, denim shirt and blue jeans. "Our politicians and bureaucrats are still illiterate about this environment. They have no concept of the foundation blocks of ecosystems. And Bob Brown is one of the worst." (So he's not joining the Greens any day soon.) "We're still treating the symptoms, not the underlying cause. Droughts and water shortages are just symptoms."

Despite the recent rains, which have left the brown land carpeted in khaki-coloured cover, the horizon is covered with brown haze. "We've been in a haze for the last hour," King says. "It's just appalling. In a healthy landscape we wouldn't be seeing a permanent dust haze. But it's coming off exposed soils and scalded country."

He then proffers this mild criticism of our environment's protectors: "The National Parks and Wildlife Service is, by far, the greatest environmental vandal in the country."

King is not one of those hot-air machines who has never run a business, never turned a profit, never revitalised a landscape. He's 32 and since taking over management of the family property, Coombing Park, between Bathurst and Cowra, carrying capacity has increased by 30 per cent, costs have fallen by a third, and it had permanent ground cover through the drought. The 4000 hectare property has been praised in the farmer's bible, *The Land*.

On the day we flew around the state, newspapers carried reports from the Australian Productivity Commission that there are 46,000 fewer farms than there were 20 years ago. Agriculture employs just 4 per cent of the nation's workforce. King believes this is exactly the opposite to the direction in which the country should be headed. He is a member of a growing worldwide movement that follows the Allan Savory method of land management. Savory and his supporters don't like land simply being locked up in order to save it. They want *more* people on the land and *more* animals.

Savory has encapsulated his views in *Holistic Management* (only available from the US). He grew up in Africa, observing the enormous numbers of animals that moved across the grasslands without degrading the landscape. He saw the water cycle, the mineral cycle, and the flow of energy had been in harmony on these plains for millions of years. It is not possible to sum up 500 pages of meticulous argument in a few words, but King is good at distilling the message:

"Ecosystems function as a whole so we need to manage the whole. The role of animals in an environment like ours is critical. The Earth's surface is 70 per cent brittle-tending, and it used to support infinitely more animals than it does now. Australia has lost 94 per cent of its mega-fauna since humans have been introduced...

"In a naturally functioning ecosystem the herbivores are held in tight mobs by predators. When they get onto an area of land they graze it down heavily, trample a lot of grass, which forms a protective mulch on the soil surface; they defecate and urinate. No animal will eat fouled ground, so the plants get both fertiliser and a recovery period before being grazed again. The herbivores move on, in a tight mob for safety from predators. For millions of years, brittle environments have evolved with this herbivore-predator relationship."

This pattern happens in microcosm at Coombing Park, where land is fenced into subsections and stock rotated like a migrating herd. The property now has significantly greater biodiversity, which is critical,

and is covered by a mixture of grasses and weeds. A threatened and beautiful species, the superb parrot, has moved into Coombing Park from other, degraded areas.

"The soil is a living organism, and like all living organisms it needs a skin to survive," King says. "So the earth needs to be covered with mulch and grass to sustain its health. Overstocking has little to do with the number of stock on the land and everything to do with the amount of time stock stay on the land. We need a big paradigm shift..."

"If you could have 100 per cent ground cover all year round, you'd have the soil maintained, good water flow, lower cost of production, no erosion, and much higher productivity. But that's not what the market rewards. It rewards farmers who create a sterile monoculture of wheat with high chemical input. We have a massive toxin load in our food. That's why so many people are getting cancer."

The void between the King/Savory view and many conventional wisdoms is stark. It is the void between seeing the land as a whole and treating it as a patchwork quilt of businesses. When I visited Coombing Park during the drought I became convinced something important has happened there because I saw the void written on the landscape, in sharp relief. I was on a straw-green island surrounded by a sea of brown.

Paul Sheehan SMH 8 August 05

Illustration: *Michael Mucci*