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Viewpoint

Hallmarks of an effective non-governmental organisation: the formation and management of Australia's Wentworth Group

Jerome K Vanclay

Australia's Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists has been highly effective in advancing policy solutions for Australia's land, water and biodiversity. The success of this group relies not only on high-profile individuals and clear communication, but also on organizational support and influential connections. The group's influence was maximized because membership was carefully selected, well-funded, and skillfully managed by a full-time campaign manager who was well-connected to key media and political decision-makers. This article offers evidence countering the emerging popular view that the Wentworth Group was spontaneous, and it offers lessons for other environmental NGOs seeking to influence government policy.

SARAH BELL (2006) EXAMINED some of the communication strategies that have contributed towards the success of Australia's Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, an independent group of scientists concerned with advancing solutions to secure the long-term health of Australia's land, water and biodiversity (Wentworth Group, 2010). However, the success of this group relies not only on high-profile individuals and clear communication, but also on their organization and influential connections. In 2002 when the Wentworth Group was formed, I was teaching natural resource policy and followed their progress closely. The notes I made at the time (Vanclay, 2003), contrast with the some of the views now promulgated. The differences are instructive, and offer further insights in how non-government organisations (NGOs) can be effective. This commentary on the formation and management of the Wentworth Group seeks to provide guidance for other NGOs seeking to influence government policy. It also illustrates how 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and may vary according to temporal and philosophical viewpoint.

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Popular notions of the Wentworth Group

My recollection (Vanclay, 2003) is that the membership and timing of the early meetings of the Wentworth Group were carefully crafted, but the view commonly promulgated is that the meetings were spontaneous, and there is a danger that this romantic notion may become more embellished with time.

In 2004, Wentworth Group member Peter Cullen (2004) wrote:

> The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists was formed at the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney on Thursday 10th October 2002. We had been invited by the World Wide Fund for Nature to gather to discuss some of the amazing things being given prominence by radio commentators during the drought … The WWF invited us to a meeting starting at around 5.00pm to discuss these issues and to develop some counter arguments. A spirited discussion took place, and there was broad agreement about the main points, although as might be expected, there were many differing views on the emphasis and priority that could be given to various aspects of the issue. At about 7.00 pm we adjourned into an adjacent room for dinner, where we were joined by three invited journalists, Nick

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> Grimm from the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation's] AM program, Anthony Hoy from the Bulletin and Asa Wahlquist from The Australian [newspaper]. Asa Wahlquist described the dinner in an article in the Weekend Australian Magazine of May 31 2003. *'Desert eaten, the discussion continued to take many energetic, if undisciplined turns. The evening was threatening to collapse under the weight of so many fine ideas, when one of the journalists present banged the table. "What are you going to do about it?" he demanded'* … It was not difficult, and in 15 minutes we had agreed the five-point plan that was the foundation of the Wentworth Group's *Blueprint for a Living Continent*. I read the statement straight from the computer screen, since we had no printer handy. It was recorded by Nick Grimm, and went to air next morning on AM. As Asa Wahlquist reports in the Australian article, 'the astonished journalist applauded', 'Their statement hit the media like a drought-breaking storm.'

By 2006, Cullen (2006) offered a different emphasis:

> A group of experienced scientists from a variety of disciplines, who had spent their careers trying to understand the Australian landscape, came together in some despair at the widespread community misunderstanding about our landscape and the variability of rainfall that characterizes it.

Bell (2006) offered a different slant:

> With philanthropic funding from a little known millionaire, aged-care businessman Robert Purves, the World Wide Fund for Nature in Australia (WWF Australia) invited a group of leading environmental scientists and advisors to dinner. The purpose of the dinner meeting at Sydney's five-star Wentworth Hotel was to discuss how best to respond to the Farmhand Appeal, Jones, and the ecologically dangerous ideas about drought-proofing that were getting so much media coverage. Taking their name from the hotel where they were dining, the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists emerged from that meeting to transform public discourse about drought, water and natural resource policy in Australia.

I suspect that the Wentworth Hotel was deliberately chosen to align the group with the then Prime Minister (John Howard), who customarily celebrated his election victories there, and that this choice of hotel reflects the careful planning and attention to detail that underscores the success of the Wentworth Group.

Formation of the Wentworth Group

In early 2002, businessman Robert Purves, the President of WWF Australia, made a donation of Australian $1.5 million[1] to start the 'anti-land-clearing campaign', a major, national, four-year campaign to reduce land clearing in Australia.[2] Peter Cosier, previously the senior environmental policy advisor[3] to Senator Robert Hill, was hired as campaign manager for this campaign.[4] Cosier knew that this would be a tough campaign, and it was made tougher by the drought — but the drought also provided an opportunity.

The Farmhand Foundation[5] was launched on 3 October 2002,[6] apparently with the aim of selling Telstra and using some of the proceeds to turn coastal rivers inland to 'drought-proof' Australia.[7] Cosier would have been well aware this, because in September 2002, Senator Meg Lees[8] had been trying to arrange a:

> cooperative effort between various green groups, steered by Peter Cosier — a former staffer of former environment minister Robert Hill — to put together a 'wish list' of spending priorities for Telstra money.

Cosier knew that 'turning rivers inland' would be a disaster for the environment, but seized the opportunity created by the media attention, and contacted ten respected scientists[9] and hastily arranged[10] for them to meet over dinner. Within a week (on 10 October 2002) the group convened (without expectations[11]) at the Wentworth Hotel to respond to the Farmhand proposal and advance the 'anti-land-clearing campaign'.[12] In addition to the ten scientists, Cosier invited three journalists to report the event: Nick Grimm from the ABC,[13] Asa Wahlquist from *The Australian*[14] and Anthony Hoy from *The Bulletin*.[15]

Grimm reported on the meeting in the ABC's AM program the following day,[16] quite an achievement since the same program aired the news that the US Congress had given President Bush authority to attack Iraq. Grimm subsequently received the 2003 Eureka award for his story[17] that:

> a small group of scientists gathered in a Sydney hotel to share a meal and their concerns about

> the directions the national discussion on the environment had taken

and that:

> It had been the photo on the front page of a Sydney newspaper of a young girl standing in the drought-ravaged paddocks of her parents' farm, which initially stirred the group of eminent scientists to gather at short notice.[13]

Sadly, the major Sydney daily newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, is strangely devoid of photos of drought-stricken girls throughout September and early October in 2002 (Vanclay, 2003). Miranda Devine[18] from the *SMH* seems to have been the only reporter who observed at the time that the Wentworth Group were the 'respectable face' of the WWF, convened to counter the Farmhand Foundation, the respectable face of the push to privatize Telstra.

At the Wentworth Hotel, there had apparently been a vigorous discussion about the issues, but it was reputedly a journalist[19] who said discussions were not enough; that a few specific points were needed to create a story, and they were needed now, so that he could write his story before the news deadline later that night. Grimm claimed[16] that it was he who suggested that:

> they needed a statement, one that would advance the national environmental debate.

The same day, a statement from the group appeared on the WWF website,[20] and the next morning there was a response from the Prime Minister.[12] Grimm[16] claimed that:

> The result was *Blueprint for a Living Continent*, which prompted Prime Minister John Howard to call a scientific summit to look at ways to respond to Australia's drought,

but the blueprint was not published until three weeks later, and it seems unlikely that the Prime Minister would arrange such a meeting within a few hours during the early morning …

> Nevertheless, three weeks later first blueprint, *Blueprint for a Living Continent*,[21] was published[22] (3 November 2003). It had gone through 'about 20 drafts',[19] most of them worked over carefully by a 'really good media wordsmith from WWF'[22] to make it more accessible to the general public.

One anomaly among all this is the Foreword to the *Blueprint*, which was written by Tim Flannery on 'Australia Day 2002'. Australia Day is 26 January; perhaps the blueprint was not the product of the dinner at the Wentworth Hotel, but may have had a much longer gestation …

Soon after, Premier Carr asked the Wentworth Group for advice on land clearing. Their advice quickly appeared in draft form on the CSIRO website early in February 2003,[23] and a more presentable form appeared on the WWF website two weeks later.[24]

A little later (31 July 2003), there was a second blueprint, *Blueprint for a National Water Plan*.[25] The Wentworth Group are extremely productive, because although they met 'only two or three times'[19] during their first year, they produced three influential documents within that first year, all of which adopt a standard WWF format. More recently, they have produced several other reports in a range of formats (Wentworth Group, 2010), and initiated a mentoring program supported by the Purves Environmental Fund.[26]

Why have the Wentworth Group been so successful? Their success has been helped by a good sense of timing, careful planning and behind-the-scenes management, sufficient funds and a full-time campaign manager who was politically astute and well-connected. In addition, a competing story (Jones–Farmhand–Telstra and turning rivers inland) helped to generate the polarisation of issues that the media love. The group has also had a carefully directed advertising campaign, with half-page and full-page advertisements in prominent newspapers.[27]

It is reasonable to ask whether the Wentworth Group really are a truly independent 'group of concerned scientists', or are merely the respectable face of WWF. A search of published literature suggests that all of the individual scientists have remained true to their earlier academic research, so it does appear that the Wentworth Group has maintained scientific credibility, even as they harnessed political opportunity.

Cullen (2004) has suggested that:

> Giving three senior journalists an exclusive turned out to be very powerful … We were clearly lucky with our timing in that the Blueprint was released at a time that caught the window of interest when the media was looking for an answer to all the drought stories that had been being aired in previous weeks. A key part of building this media momentum was our 'staying on message' rather than having it develop in unplanned ways. We had made it plain that we were delivering the Blueprint to the Prime Minister and the State Premiers before its public release on the Web and in hard copy. This probably added to the media interest. There was also media interest because we were taking on a very well known and influential radio shock jock in Alan Jones who had been proposing to turn the rivers inland to 'drought proof our country. This element of conflict with a well-known figure stimulated interest. The other factor was some mystique surrounding the Wentworth Group — Who were we? Why

> we were speaking out? Why were scientists acting as advocates? Why were we named the Wentworth Group?

However, in my view, the Wentworth Group succeeded because of other political and media connections: few scientists are able to grab the media headlines and elicit comment from the Prime Minister on the same day that the USA commences a military conflict!

Notes

1. President Robert Purves, WWF Australia, <http://www.wwf.org.au/content/profile_robpurves.html>, last accessed 27 August 2003.
2. Now called *Save Australia's Endangered Bushlands*, new campaign for WWF Australia, <http://www.wwf.org.au/default.asp?p=campaign_endangered_bushlands.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2003.
3. One of his press releases was *Australia's First Endangered Bushland Listed*, Media Release, 23 September 1998, <http://erin.gov.au/minister/env/98/mr23sep98.html>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
4. *What is Needed to Reduce Landclearing*, WWF Australia, <http://www.wwf.org.au/content/campaign_endangered_bushlands_wwf.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2003.
5. Farmhand, <http://www.farmhand.org.au/>, last accessed 27 August 2003.
6. Georgia Bateman, *Farmhand Foundation launched by big-end of town*, NSW Country Hour, <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/nsw/stories/s692350.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2003.
7. The aims of Farmhand are not clear, but the Telstra link is evident among Farmhand's sponsors (see Note 5), as revealed by ABC's Media Watch a few days after the launch on 7 October 2002, *Telstra & Jones water Australia*, <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/071002_s2.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
8. How Meg Lees was converted, *The Age*, 11 September 2002, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/09/11/1031608270699.html>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
9. Professor Peter Cullen (Australian Environmentalist of the Year 2001); Professor Tim Flannery (Director, South Australian Museum); Assoc. Professor Ronnie Harding (Chair, WWF Australia Scientific Advisory Committee); Dr Steve Morton (Chief, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems), Professor Hugh Possingham (Chair, Commonwealth Biological Diversity Advisory Committee), Dr Denis Saunders (formerly CSIRO Chief Research Scientist), Professor Bruce Thom (Chair, 2001, Australian State of the Environment Committee), Dr John Williams (Chief, CSIRO Land and Water), Professor Mike Young (Director, CSIRO Policy and Economic Research Unit), Mr Peter Cosier (WWF Environmental Policy Specialist), and Ms Leith Boully (Chair, Murray Darling Basin Community Advisory Committee) – this not-quite alphabetical order with 'heavyweights' first is the order used in the first Blueprint.
10. Professor Ronnie Harding, a member of the Group, confirmed that invitations were made during the days immediately following 3 October 2002 (personal communication, 27 August 2003).
11. Tim Flannery, Dean's Lecture, University of Melbourne, 13 October 2003, <http://www.gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/docs/AST/dean%20lectures/Transcript%20Dean%27s%20Lecture%202003.pdf>, p. 7, last accessed 17 March 2010.
12. WWF Australia meeting prompts PM to call drought summit, *WWF Australia Campaign News*, 11 October 2002, <http://www.wwf.org.au/content/campaign_endangered_bushlands_pm_response.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
13. Nick Grimm, *Scientists condemn drought-proofing of continent*, AM, Friday 11 October 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/s698876.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
14. George Megalogenis and Asa Wahlquist, Water reform will cost $20bn, *The Australian*, 2 November 2002, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/printpage/0,5942,5407366,00.html>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
15. Anthony Hoy, *Watering a Continent*, *The Bulletin*, 16 October 2002, <http://bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/bulletin/eddesk.nsf/printing/7EBD6A719BE3483DCA256C56000A36CE>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
16. AM Program Archive, 11 October 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/indexes/2003/am_archive_2003_Friday11October2002.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004; but Flannery (see Note 11) claims that it was Wahlquist who asked, 'Where's your manifesto?'.
17. The birth of the Wentworth Group, Australian Museum Eureka Prizes, <http://www.amonline.net.au/eureka/environmental_journalism/2003_winner.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
18. Miranda Devine, Drought relief sceptics must be hung out to dry, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2002, <http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2002/10/12/1034222635512.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
19. Professor Ronnie Harding, personal communication, 27 August 2003.
20. A way forward from concerned scientists, WWF Australia, <http://www.wwf.org.au/content/release_02_wentworth_group_preliminary_statement1110.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004. (Although the URL contains the date 11-10-02, the internal date within the document is 10 October 2002; quick work on the part of the WWF Webmaster.)
21. The blueprint is available at <http://www.wwf.org.au/downloads/blueprint_for_a_living_continent.pdf>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
22. *Wentworth Group delivers blueprint to rebuild Australian landscape*, WWF Media Release, 3 November 2002, <http://www.wwf.org.au/default.asp?p=release_02_wentworth_blueprint0311.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
23. Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists Report to Premier Carr, A New Model for Landscape Conservation in New South Wales, 3 February 2003, <http://www.clw.csiro.au/publications/consultancy/2003/Wentworth2_NSW_Land_Clearing_Report_Public_Document.pdf>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
24. WWF press release of 18 February 2003 at <http://www.wwf.org.au/content/release_03_land_management_plan1802.htm>, last accessed 27 August 2004; and report at <http://www.wwf.org.au/downloads/new_model_for_landscape_conservation0203.pdf>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
25. <http://www.clw.csiro.au/new/WWF0703-02%20A4%20Horiz.pdf>, last accessed 27 August 2004.
26. Established August 2004, <http://www.purvesenvirofund.org.au/>, last accessed 21 June 2010.
27. A quarter-page ad in the *Weekend Australian* (30 December–1 November 2002, p. 15) explaining how to obtain their blueprint and carrying the simple message: 'our generation can leave a legacy of living rivers and healthy landscapes, not drains and dustbowls' (<http://www.awa.asn.au/news&info/news/1dec02.asp>, last accessed 27 August 2004), and a full-page ad in the *Australian Financial Review* on 12 August 2003, calling on the Council of Australian Governments to implement a national water plan which would create a nationally consistent system of water entitlement, licensing and trading (<http://www.awa.asn.au/news&info/news/17aug03.asp>, last accessed 27 August 2004).

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