

# User(p) friendly science?

*Working from 'within' is the preferred option for most scientists and provides them with some satisfaction with their contribution to environmental debates without risking their careers or impinging on their personal lives. Isla MacGregor relates her view of some experiences working on the 'outside' with United Scientists for Environmental Responsibility and Protection (USERP) scientists.*

**I**N JUNE 1988, Tasmanian and federal governments ignored the recommendations made by scientists on the future of Tasmanian forests (Helsham Inquiry). The results of the Helsham Inquiry and recognition of some members' experiences of intellectual suppression were the two driving forces behind the inauguration of USERP. Additionally, the proposed Wesley Vale pulp mill in northwest Tasmania loomed as a major threat to unprotected areas of Tasmania's National Estate. Other Australian states had pulp mill proposals waiting. Tasmania would be the test ground for scientific scrutiny of the first Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for a new Kraft pulp mill.

The Latin word *usurpare* means 'seize for use'. When USERP was first set up the name inspired much debate. Many thought it was too radical, a name that did not sit well with the self-image of many scientists. Before agreeing to become a patron of USERP, Dr David Suzuki posed some questions:

It is far too late for band aid solutions to our global problems. Is your group radical enough to accept negative growth? Is it based on an ecological perspective? You see, if conflict resolution is just a matter of satisfying economics and job demands and minimising environmental hazards, it's not good enough.

USERP's founding members thought that it was 'not good enough' for scientists to remain silent or be silenced amidst the world's deepening environmental crisis.

Some members of USERP had worked in the mainstream conservation movement but were critical of its strategies and image and of the constraints of the group processes of grassroots organisations. Most members came into USERP with no hands-on experience in voluntary organisations although some were members of Scientists Against Nuclear Arms (SANA). SANA had shown that scientists can play a significant role in public education and debate on the scientific, ethical and political implications of the nuclear

arms issue. USERP would provide another approach to the public and policy makers for the environmental debate. USERP knew of other scientists' organisations internationally and of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science in Canberra but had little knowledge of their experiences.

USERP was set up in a non-hierarchical style; it did not want to imitate 'leader-led' conservation groups. Working groups were set up to work on specific issues and a consultative committee established with the primary role of approving any public comment. Unlike SANA, whose membership is restricted to scientists and technologists, USERP did not wish to support the concept of a group restricted in membership to a professional élite. Furthermore, if scientists want to democratise science then they would need to involve the community directly. Only in providing an open membership can USERP satisfy these principles. (The open membership is still a contentious issue for some members and for potential members.)

Other branches of USERP quickly sprang up in Victoria and South Australia. Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane soon followed.

USERP Tasmania and Victoria launched an intensive campaign criticising the Wesley Vale EIS. Wesley Vale was yet another case of a state government attempting to fast track a major resource consuming/polluting development. USERP Tasmania held many press conferences and lobbied dozens of politicians and its members worked very long hours outside of their normal jobs. For several months, USERP Tasmania scientists exposed themselves to political, peer group and public scrutiny over their outspoken position on Wesley Vale. For some, this was their first venture into 'politics'.

There was little time for discussion on important issues that related to the campaign, such as negative growth and the terms of reference of the EIS, particularly in relation to sustainable resources. Neither was there open discussion on the attempts at intimidation and suppression which some scientists experienced. Several resident action



and conservation groups campaigned vigorously against Wesley Vale and it was interesting to observe the competition between organisations to have internationally reputable scientists speak on their behalf. USERP's work on Wesley Vale was, essentially, a catalyst in Tasmania for debate on the implications of scientists' involvement in environmental debates.

The outcome of the Wesley Vale debate was the establishment of a CSIRO Pulp Mill Guidelines Committee. When the report from this committee was made public, USERP made no public comment. Individually, the reasons varied from 'the marine science in the new Guideline is good',

'lack of comfort with other affiliations' and 'lack of time'. Some believed that there was no sinister aspect to this lack of response from USERP scientists, while others thought, to put it simply, that self-censorship had prevailed.

There are similarities here with the experiences of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science (ACT). In a letter to USERP shortly after it was set up, Mark Diesendorf said:

many members of the former SSRS Committee wanted only to represent "the facts" (e.g. the basic chemistry and physics of environmental pollution; the biology of hydatid cysts), without coming to

grips with the social, political, economic and ethical aspects of the issue, which were often more important than the "pure science". This meant that, on many issues, SSRS failed to come to grips with the whole problem and so wasted much of its efforts.

For some members of the public, USERP's silence was seen as tacit agreement with the new guidelines and maybe more importantly, agreement to any similar, large scale pulp mill development. For Tasmanian USERP members who worked on Wesley Vale, the aftermath of the debate would be a deciding factor in their future activism. Most joined mainstream government committees but are no longer active within any conservation organisations. Those who remained working in USERP continued to maintain the organisational infrastructure or maintained support for the group.

After the flurry of activity with Wesley Vale and the initial administrative tasks associated with the organisation's national development, USERP Tasmania worked on smaller issues. USERP applied for and received \$2,000 funding from the Grants to Voluntary Conservation Organisations (GVCO) program through the Department of Arts, Sports, Environment, Tourism and Territories (DASETT). Up until this time the administrative work for USERP Tasmania was mainly done by women - students or non-scientists. In fact, without these people it is doubtful whether USERP could have run any campaigns at all. Only one male professional scientist had worked briefly on administrative tasks.

The first grant was used initially to employ an administrative co-ordinator for four hours per week. As with all voluntary organisations, once paid employees are taken on, other volunteers tended to decrease their input.

The Toxics Working Group began its marathon campaign (currently still going) on the controversial and serious chemical contamination from the Exeter Tip in the north of Tasmania. Like other USERP branches, Tasmania made submissions to enquiries and was invited by state government depart-

ments to make comment on management plans and attend seminars. On one occasion, it was suggested by a state government politician that a USERP member be invited to participate on a scientific advisory council. A Liberal politician castigated the proposed USERP scientist as being a 'green' and therefore 'politically biased' even though he agreed that he was 'a good scientist'!

On 29 June 1991, USERP Tasmania published a signed petition against resource security legislation in the Hobart *Mercury*. Some of the 116 scientists who signed the petition were state public servants and were later censured for their actions. National President of the Australian Civil Liberties Council,

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June Factor, put out a national media release opposing suppression of scientists and the lack of public debate over the proposed legislation.

In August 1991, after a special USERP Tasmania meeting on intellectual suppression, which attracted the largest number of participants since the inaugural meeting, the Intellectual Suppression Working Group (ISWG) was set up. The ISWG joined a national network of individuals working on the issues of scientific censorship and intellectual suppression. Although the ISWG has focused on amendment of state service acts nationally, to allow freedom of speech, this will not solve the problem of intellectual suppression and its repercussions in environmental

debates.

Suppression is basically about government *corruption* in environmental management. Nevertheless, USERP can provide a forum for discussion, personal support and encouragement to resist suppression. The ISWG plans to produce a pamphlet on intellectual suppression as well as an audio-visual education kit for national distribution.

The issue has encouraged a great deal of debate. Comments have included, 'I don't think it's an issue for USERP to be working on', 'It doesn't happen to me ... although I can see it does affect others', 'I can find ways of working round it', 'If someone did come to USERP for support on intellectual suppression, exactly *what* could USERP do?', 'If intellectual suppression did not exist there would be no need for USERP at all!' and finally 'intellectual suppression touches the core of the moral/ethical dilemmas facing many natural scientists today!'

Organisationally, USERP's key problems have been lack of active participation and funding. Mainstream conservation organisations can draw on the resources of the 'grassroots' and also receive reasonable grants through DASETT's GVCO program. USERP is only just developing its grassroots and it is hoped that as a result of the review of the GVCO program, USERP will receive funding commensurate with its fledgling needs. Mainstream conservation organisations are heavily dependent on paid employees to maintain media profile, long term campaign strategies, membership and public support. Interestingly, there has been a major increase in the number of scientists employed by major international and national conservation organisations but these groups cannot stretch themselves to deal with the politics of science in environmental debates, let alone develop policy on *science*.

On several occasions resident action and conservation groups have contacted USERP requesting support for campaigns. Due to lack of members prepared to speak out, USERP has been unable to assist these groups. On a few occasions USERP has received leaked information but has been unable to put



the information out, due to lack of spokespeople. In some cases, other conservation groups or politicians will take the issue to the media but in other cases, nothing happens.

Ironically, at times USERP itself is silenced because of the need to protect sources and individuals' jobs and in some cases their continued ability to work from 'within'. In 1992, when USERP went public about supporting whistleblowers, one distraught member cancelled membership saying that if government officials found out, then the member's employment could be threatened.

USERP would like to be able to employ a national liaison/administration officer (to be based in Canberra) to lobby as well as develop organisational infrastructure and policy. USERP branches in Canberra and Sydney folded shortly after they were established. Individuals' reasons varied from 'I'm working from within', 'working with other conservation organisations', 'too much work involved in establishing a branch and no funding to assist with such', 'USERP is an élite organisation', 'USERP doesn't have sufficient *really* concerned scientists', 'lack of leadership' and 'too far to travel across town'. In these states, there are still scientists acting as contacts for USERP, in the event that enthusiasm is revitalised.

USERP South Australia and Victoria still have a solid core of individuals participating in energy and agriculture working groups. USERP SA has made submissions to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Science and Technology's report on release of genetically modified organisms and the EIS on the Multi-Function Polis. Additionally, it holds public forums and has regular guest speakers.

On 16-17 November 1991, USERP Victoria and the Monash University Geography Department jointly hosted the *Victorian Rainforest Symposium – Definition and Management*. A new definition for Victorian rainforests was presented by David Cameron, a scientist working for the Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment. For over a year this department prevented public distribution of his paper. The symposium was an outstanding success and USERP Victoria continues to lobby on the issues of rainforest conservation in Victoria. USERP Victoria has also campaigned for the establishment of an independent science council. USERP Brisbane is starting to document case studies of censorship and suppression and will host the 5 July 1993 'Social Responsibility in Science' symposium at the Ecopolitics VII conference.

Although USERP Tasmania only

has a small core of active individuals, there is enormous support from the community and some conservation organisations. In retrospect, considering the impediments facing scientists to be active in USERP, the organisation has achieved and is recognised for its successes. For those people who continue to work with the USERP network, learning about and challenging the power structures of science will provide a very constructive contribution to the environment movement. Considering continued trends in the privatisation of science, cuts in science funding and an increase in contract employment, it can only be hoped that scientists will be motivated with a greater sense of inter-institutional solidarity combined with environmental responsibility.

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