

Opening Address: Should There Be a Contemporary Role for Societies Such as ASFB?

W.A. Chamley

*Director
Fisheries Management Division
Department of Conservation and Environment
240 Victoria Parade
East Melbourne VIC 3002*

I would like to thank the organisers for the opportunity to speak at the opening of this workshop. As you all know this is one of two workshops which will run in conjunction with the 17th Annual Meeting of the Australian Society for Fish Biology.

Before formally opening the workshop I would like to make just a few brief comments about the role of societies such as this one. I hope that after you have considered my opening address, members might give due consideration to this question.

If a questionnaire were to be circulated amongst current members, about the role of the ASFB, I would suggest that the bulk of responses would probably describe the ASFB, as a body which brings together persons with a common interest in fish biology, and which essentially organises information exchange. Some responses might recognise a training role for the more junior members and might in fact see a workshop such as the one which will begin in a moment, as a demonstration of that training role.

I would hope that a few of the responses might see a role of the ASFB as one which also focused upon community education and active participation in public debate about issues which do, or might at some future date, impact upon fish biology, dynamics, distribution etc.

I wish to suggest that the small number of professional/technical societies whose members' interests are with aquatic resources, habitat etc, ought to give more consideration to assuming such a role and working through a longer term strategy to develop and achieve this.

Currently there are a range of inquiries and debates going on in this country and indeed even tactical responses being worked out by governments.

My list is not exhaustive but included in such a list would be:

- the House of Representatives inquiry into protection of the coastal environment;
- a proposed inquiry by the Resource Assessment Commission into coastal planning;
- the Southern Bluefin Tuna debate;
- the Greenhouse Effect and responses by governments both state (territories) and federal to this issue;
- in Victoria, a Parliamentary inquiry into commercial and recreational fishing in bays and inlets;
- the Commonwealth Sustainable Development Paper;
- proposed large scale pulp and paper manufacture in this country;
- the Commonwealth Policy Paper on Commercial Fisheries Management and the proposal to establish a Statutory Authority to manage commercial harvesting of a common property resource;
- a proposed reduction in Commonwealth research funds for fisheries research by at least 50%.

From where I sit, the input by the various aquatic societies to these inquiries and their contributions towards these debates has to date been a deafening silence. I wish to suggest that

societies such as this one must begin to become active in these debates and inquiries and this should become one important contemporary role.

The members of course have every right to decide that this should not be a major role of such a society. If they come to that conclusion then I think there is a real risk and, collectively they ought to be aware of that real risk. The real risk, I suggest, is that the discipline ceases to be seen as one which is important and relevant to contemporary society and the institutions which govern it.

While such a situation may not pose a threat to the more established members who will attend the next few days of meetings, there is a possibility that the more junior members will find themselves on the same endangered species list as some of the fish species which will be discussed at these very meetings.

Let me finish with a few brief remarks about a contemporary role for societies such as this as a community educatory. I don't believe that anyone would deny the fact that the general public are fascinated by aquatic biology. Television has exposed them to aquatic biology through a range of programs put together by pioneers such as Jacques Cousteau and later by David Attenborough and David Suzuki as well as organisations such as the National Geographic Society and others. These have usually depicted marine species in their habitats and raised issues about the impact of mankind. The same degree of focus on freshwater species and habitats has yet to be achieved.

The more recent development of highly sophisticated public aquaria and the clear demonstration that thousands of people are prepared to pay to enter and experience these facilities, suggests to me that this public interest is not declining. Despite this the very professional and technical people who investigate, monitor and analyse so as to produce the data and descriptive information about what is exhibited to the public are currently in what I

call "bunker mode". The symptoms of "bunker mode" are:

- a steady decline in financial support which has now been evident across Australia for several years;
- a serious and widespread de-skilling problem the end of which is not yet in sight;
- ageing infrastructure in many of the institutions where work is being carried out;
- an inability now of the discipline to capture many of the nation's top-scoring students be they school leavers or graduates.

The various societies must collectively address the following question. Despite clear public interest and a wide range of public concerns (look at the number of government inquiries) why is financial support of the aquatic disciplines so far down on the priority list? I suggest furthermore that the time has arrived when collectively, the societies must do something about it.

Ten or so years ago I was working in medical research. At that time in Australia, medical research was in exactly the same situation as I am suggesting the broad aquatic discipline is in now. The various specialist groups such as cardiology, diabetes, etc, pooled their efforts and over ten years they have essentially reversed that situation. Last week was medical research week in Melbourne and the various societies no doubt held their individual meetings. However, running in parallel with these was a series of popular talks about medical science, public health, etc. These took place in Melbourne's Concert Hall and they drew in city commuters who had just finished a working day. The chairperson at each session was not an eminent scientist. Indeed media personalities like John Jost took up the challenge.

The importance of this community education process and its ability to generate public support should not be overlooked.

Finally I am delighted that the ASFB is running these workshops and I wish you all the best over the next few days of conference.