

# Why we need Rick Farley now more than ever

Max Bourke AM

I want to begin by tracing a personal life trajectory and my interest in what I have learned to call 'biodiversity conservation' in that time. I do this not to 'credential' myself but just to point out how quickly ideas and ideology changes. My 50 years in the field is not even a nano-second in 'biodiversity time'.

As a young person, I truly believed that *good* science, *good* laws, and *good* administration would 'save the environment'.

Fifty years ago as a young agricultural scientist working in far western New South Wales, I was persuaded by three radical environmentalists – The Duke of Edinburgh, (Sir) Garfield Barwick, and Malcolm Fraser – that the collapsing farming landscape I was working in required rapid changes in management. I joined their (and Francis Ratcliff's) new organisation, the Australian Conservation Foundation.

Forty years ago with a researcher in the Parliamentary Library, Peter Ellyard, I helped organise a tour by two European intellectuals, Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King to promote their then radical new book *Limits to Growth*<sup>1</sup>. Despite unrelenting hostility from much of the media we managed to get them in front of various politicians and ministers to consider the possibility that the planet had finite resources. Recent research by Dr Graham Turner of CSIRO seems to show that the forecasts of the Club of Rome were, very unfortunately in many respects, quite correct (Turner 2008).

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1 This best-selling ever environment book has now sold over 12 million copies in 30 translations.





Ephemeral billabong in a prior stream of the Warburton Creek, with desert coolibah riparian woodland in dune fields. Kalamurina Station Wildlife Sanctuary, South Australia.  
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Thirty-five years ago, as Director of the Australian Heritage Commission, I contracted Henry Nix to assist us in defining the idea of wilderness places. We believed identifying such places for the Register of the National Estate could preserve what was just beginning to be called 'biodiversity' (a term first used in 1971 – see Farnham (2007)). Sadly we were wrong: the age of the Anthropocene means that there is no wilderness *except in our minds*. Also at that time, along with David Yencken and John Mulvaney, I was involved in setting up the World Heritage Convention, drafting several of the first nominations and representing Australia on the Committee at various times.

Fifteen years ago I teamed up with a long-time friend David Thomas, one of Australia's relatively unknown environmentalists, to assist him in trying to do something about biodiversity loss. David is not a biologist but he is passionate about biodiversity, the threats to it, and what might be done about it. He represents in many ways the great goodwill that exists for Australians to put their own funds to use in biodiversity conservation; but for that to be realised, people in the land management business will have to think like business people. It will require a big change of attitude.

The Thomas Foundation has been one of the largest single investors in biodiversity conservation in the private sector over the last 15 years. Aware of the work of the Trust for Nature, Bush Heritage Australia and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Thomas assisted in bringing The Nature Conservancy to Australia. Why? Because 62 years ago it tried, driven solely by ecologists initially, to do something big – really big – for conservation. To some extent its work has influenced all of the organisations I mentioned. But The Nature Conservancy still searches for innovation and has pulled off a number of great initiatives we have not yet tried in Australia.

Democratic capitalism created the environmental issues we have in the United States, Australia and other Western countries, and we have to fully use the tools of our polity to repair and better manage the environment.

There is actually a long history of public, intertwined with private, conservation of biodiversity in Australia. I cite some of the many precedents in a recent paper (Bourke 2011). To move from private land conservation pioneers like Thistle Stead in New South Wales and Reg Sprigg in South Australia, to Bob Brown in Tasmania and Martin Copley in Western Australia, is a leap in scale but not process.

Private philanthropists hope and expect that the private land managers might do as well as or better than public land managers, though the jury is still out on this. As a director of a large investor in private land conservation and as an investor myself, I know that we approach the business of what we do differently from the public sector, *because our constraints are not political, but economic*. Essentially we look, through philanthropic means, for the same indicator we look for in business, namely return on investment: what is the likely bang for the buck? We expect to see evidence of that return before actions, and reporting that reflects the investment as a form of biological balance sheet or profit and loss statement. This is something still not fully understood by the recipients of the funds. Private philanthropists are different from public investors in that way.

Public expenditure on conservation land management (currently greater than one billion dollars) is likely to keep reducing for some time to come. Governments are cutting outlays, not increasing them. Private expenditure on land conservation is likely to be tough over the next five to ten years – the so-called Global Financial Crisis is not over or even halfway through.

In other words, I can see nothing discernible on the horizon, and I include the famed 'wealth' flowing from carbon offsets, that is going to enable a doubling or trebling of the protected area estate over the next ten years.

But is more private and public investment in biodiversity conservation, 'wilderness', landscape-scale conservation or even specific habitat protection, a good investment? Writing a few years ago about the salinity issue, the economist Alastair Watson (2001) said, "When the 'salinity tree' is given a shake, many proposals to tackle problems of dryland salinity fall out, ranging from recommendations based on well-researched scientific and economic analyses to the more common, apparently simple solution from salinity fixers that could be summarised as: 'Dear Taxpayer, Send Money'".

I think the same might now be said about protected areas, at least in so far as new acquisitions go.

While private and public land managers have secured some very large areas for conservation, 73% of land (plus a significant percentage of Indigenous-owned land) is in private management and may not be managed for conservation outcomes now or into the future.

When Harvey Locke, champion of the US-Canada connectivity initiative Yellowstone to Yukon, was visiting Australia as The Thomas Foundation lecturer a few years ago, I was certainly convinced that we had to think more broadly. On the last night of the 'Linking Landscapes Summit' at Kingscliff, New South Wales, in October 2009, at which Harvey spoke provocatively, all of us with scientific training in land management or ecology know that what he said was right – that ten or 20 or even 50% of the land protected will not protect sufficient biodiversity to keep ecosystems going. The area of the National Reserve System is of course important as both an exemplar of what might be possible and as the core refuge for many species. But the huge majority of the continent that is in private ownership or management seems to me where we really need to innovate.

There may still be ways of uniting the activities of private land owners (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in better conservation outcomes, but it will take a lot more goodwill and effort than currently exhibited, hence I believe a new 'Rick Farley'<sup>2</sup> is needed.

We live in a robust capitalist democratic society, but the gulf between some sectors (e.g. farmers and conservationists), private entrepreneurs, and the public sector still seems wide.

The *Draft National Wildlife Corridors Plan* (NWCPAG 2012) clearly offers one way of dealing with this as the Hon Bob Debus AM wrote in his letter of transmittal to the Minister:

*The draft Plan reflects our conviction that biodiversity conservation and sustainable land uses can be better integrated across Australia's landscapes in ways that will improve the connectivity and resilience of our natural ecosystems. It recommends a framework for conservation planning, investment and management which, we believe, can bring enduring benefits to our natural environment. Natural resource land managers, local communities and government at all levels can work together with industry to harness resources in ways that strengthen the social and economic fabric of our regions.*

This is good stuff but can it be sustainably funded for a decade or more?

I keep reading about 'foreigners' and 'corporates' taking over Australian farmland, though that is a story that goes back to the nineteenth century. It might just be that a true large-scale takeover of agricultural land by the feared (but not actually present) corporate or large private conglomerates, could be the best thing for conservation going around. Small landholders make up the vast majority of Australia's land owners (and still do despite recent media stories), but they are also largely undercapitalised, cash poor, unable to attract further investment and, like me, elderly. Yes, I worked in corporate agriculture but we probably did much more work on biodiversity conservation than any private farmers I know and the pressures on corporates to do so are much stronger and robust than widely acknowledged. For instance, the Australian Securities and Investments Commission's reporting requirements, plus the pressure of shareholder expectations and the input of more sustainability-conscious younger staff, combine to promote more environmental accountability than is required of most private landholders.

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2 Rick Farley (1952–2006) was a major figure in the 1980s and 1990s in Australian land management. Rick Farley had many public roles, from head of the National Farmers' Federation to campaigner for Aboriginal land rights, and is credited with bringing together the agricultural sector with conservationists to successfully argue for the Landcare movement.

A robust, whole-of-farm, externally verified environmental management system might also be a major new direction in sustainable land management. I think the implementation of a system like this could be the most important 'innovation' for the conservation of biodiversity in Australia. This might sound 'out of left field' but unless the 'licence to farm' into the future is secured there will be many more urban/rural disputations. The public are increasingly demanding demonstrable accountability in the food chain for clean, healthy and importantly for livestock producers, humanely managed farms. Farmers would do well to actually see that the majority of Australians want well-managed land for food and fibre production as well as its products.

At a recent meeting of people interested in the work of the Australian Land Management (ALM) Group its CEO, Tony Gleeson (2011) said that, "we need to think about land management as the management of our impacts rather than it being the management of the resources themselves. Second, we need to recognise and reward individual land managers for improving verified environmental performance."

Gleeson went on to describe what underpins the ALM Group's Certified Land Management System: "...it ensures environmental considerations are an integral part of the business rather than necessarily being solely restricted to a particular conservation or remedial goal. It is a way to form close links between conservation and production, and it is a way to focus on people and what they can do to improve environmental outcomes" (Gleeson 2011).

I think a widely adopted conservation management system that covers total land management (and incidentally picks up animal welfare), not specific crop production such as we have at present, could be an important mode of 'securing' better land conservation outcomes. Incidentally, it could lead to people believing that farmers are environmental stewards rather than the farmers asserting that they are.

IUCN could play an exemplary and promotional role in promoting such a system, which would give us gains of orders of magnitude greater than we might otherwise achieve through protected areas alone.

My other positive suggestion for the twenty-first century is to encourage greater and better covenanting systems than we have at present. Here too The Thomas Foundation has been assisting in establishing the newly-formed Australian Land Conservation Alliance. This could be a hugely important initiative if we can get appropriate legal systems operating in all jurisdictions. The Trust for Nature (Victoria) is an outstanding exemplar but there may be other models that work.

Off-reserve conservation is absolutely crucial too if we are going to make any headway with invasive species. We cannot make the country a sterilised zoo but we do need to tackle everything from cats and foxes to gamba grass on private and leasehold land.

## Conclusion

The thesis of the symposium which preceded this publication was that 'the future of conservation in a changing world will require innovative thinking and inclusive approaches'. Thinking outside the square seems to me to be about thinking of ways to link what is outside the reserves with them.

There now seems to be a body of serious data emerging that suggests farmers need to be much more cognisant of what city people think, even if they do not want to do so. Both the results of the recent saga about exports of live cattle to Indonesia and more level-headed academic studies of attitudes point to this.

The Thomas Foundation has been a major investor in privately-owned reserves and has been very pleased with the outcomes. But in this chapter I look to the future.

I really did not know Rick Farley at all well.<sup>3</sup> But I read a lot about what he did and we had many mutual friends. It seemed to me that he was forging and had forged something that was truly outside the square. Not every farmer in Australia believed or followed what he did, but boy was he on the right track.

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3 The Thomas Foundation contributed to the Rick Farley Award set up by Bush Heritage Australia some years ago.





Mesas at a stormy dawn, Ethabuka Reserve, northern Simpson Desert/Channel Country, southwest Queensland. ©Photo: Wayne Lawler/AUSCAPE All rights reserved.



Andrew Campbell in his recent review of the biography of Rick Farley asked the questions: “Where are the national leaders of industries and other sectoral interests who can challenge our sense of what is possible, and appeal to our enlightened self-interest, to our better selves, with a clear moral sense of what’s right? When did we last see a peak representative body deliberately and strategically reach out to its perceived opponents, seek to understand their position fully, and commit to work together to find a way through?” (Campbell 2012).

Perhaps I give no answer to the thesis of the symposium, and of this publication, other than asking another question. I hope though that a homage to Rick Farley might provoke someone to take up the challenge. I believe a mighty alliance is called for between those of us who want better environmental outcomes and those of us who manage most of the land in the country. I hope I have suggested that we need more focus on the more than 75% of Australia that is in private management to truly make big leaps of significance in biodiversity conservation.

We have the tools to do the job, you need to look no further than Hugh Possingham’s work to see what we should be preserving, and you need to look no further than David Lindenmayer’s work to see how we might do it on the majority of Australia’s farmlands; we have the smarts, this is a rich country and a biodiverse one. Let’s find that one good person to bring it all on.

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Two scientists have nurtured, though they do not know it, my thinking about these issues over the last decade; they are Professors David Lindenmayer and Hugh Possingham. I have been listening to what they said.

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## Biography

Max Bourke has been a jackaroo, agricultural scientist (who studied history at university), science broadcaster, senior public sector manager, chairman of a large farming company and involved in environmental management and philanthropy for many decades. He was recently Executive Director of The Thomas Foundation ([www.thomasfoundation.org.au](http://www.thomasfoundation.org.au)), Advisory Board Member of The Nature Conservancy's Australia Program and Director of The Australian Environmental Grantmakers' Network.