

Australian environmental scientists face mounting censorship

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A report released in September outlined the increasing bullying and censorship that environmental scientists in Australia are facing from governments and the authorities.

This has gone hand in hand with the refusal of successive governments, Labor and Liberal alike, to take any measures to address climate change, and their subordination of all environmental questions to the dictates of the corporate elite. The federal Liberal-National government, for instance, recently introduced legislation for streamlined environmental approval of business developments, paving the way for even greater degradation of nature.

The report, “Consequences of information suppression in ecological and conservation sciences,” was conducted by a team of scientists headed by Don A. Driscoll from the Centre for Integrative Ecology at Deakin University. It surveyed 220 scientists working in universities, government departments and industry.

The report stated: “Australia has globally significant biodiversity, with high degrees of endemism (fauna and flora unique to a given area), but also one of the world’s worst contemporary records.”

Some 34 percent of environmental scientists working for governments said that their reports had been modified, while the figure was 30 percent of those in the private sector. Indicating pervasive censorship, 52 percent in government were forbidden from making the results of some or all of their research public. Many of the respondents stated that the situation had become more restrictive in recent years.

“Government staff are rewarded or penalised on the basis of complying with opinions of senior staff regardless of evidence,” a scientist commented anonymously.

Areas where scientists were “constrained” related to

threatened species, native vegetation clearing and climate change.

“I wasn’t surprised it’s happening, but I was surprised by the extent and range of ways it’s happening. It was quite disturbing to see that even internal communication, sharing of information within organisations was being suppressed,” report co-author Euan Ritchie told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The constraints have had a major impact on scientists and their work.

One scientist explained: “A project... clearly had unacceptable impacts on a critically endangered species... the approval process ignore(d) these impacts... Not being able to speak out meant that no one in the process was willing or able to advocate for conservation or make the public aware of the problem.”

Scientists are prevented from even commenting as private individuals on social media platforms. This censorship was upheld by an Australian High Court ruling in 2019, which declared that the Australian government is within its rights to sack a public servant for making “anonymous, out-of-hours social media posts that were vitriolic and scathing of government policy, because the action was contrary to codes of conduct.”

The suppression of scientists is expanding as governments, regardless of which big business party heads them, serve the interests of the corporate elite. After decades of government funding cuts, universities are increasingly reliant on commercial partnerships that are incompatible with scientific freedom and the independence of research.

While the report points to the severe consequences of the suppression, it ends up making an appeal to the

authorities that are responsible for it.

“These severe personal consequences, alongside the civic and conservation consequences, demand a strong and urgent response from universities, government, and industry,” it stated.

This plaintive appeal, which will fall on deaf ears, is connected to the “apolitical” character of the report, which studiously avoids reference to the class interests and political issues underlying attacks on the sciences.

Due to the censorship they confront, few scientists have spoken publicly about the curtailment of their research. Those cases that have emerged in the media, however, demonstrate that the restrictions on research are the result of bipartisan government policy and the demands of big business.

Climate science has been particularly targeted for government funding cuts.

In February 2016, the federal Liberal government of Malcolm Turnbull cut approximately 200 positions from the Oceans and Atmosphere (O&A) division of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). This amounted to 80 percent of climate scientists at the preeminent government research body.

The job cull was accompanied by the censorship of research that exposed the scale of climate change. Sea level rise expert John Church, who was sacked in 2016, stated that the CSIRO was “missing in action” at critical times, with the organisation failing to comment on areas that impinged on government policy.

According to climate scientist David Karoly, CSIRO management has tended to take “a risk-avoidance approach... They don’t want to risk being perceived as providing government with advice that is inconsistent with government policy.”

The curtailment of research also occurred under the previous federal Labor government. A peer-reviewed paper by senior CSIRO environmental economist Clive Spash, opposing the government’s carbon trading policy, which did nothing to address climate change and provided a bonanza to sections of business, was censored.

In one of the worst examples of the suppression of scientific work, in May 2016 an entire chapter of a UNESCO report on the Great Barrier Reef was deleted at the insistence of the Turnbull Liberal government. The missing chapter highlighted the detrimental impact

of global warming, which had caused widespread coral bleaching and the general degradation of the reef.

The government was concerned that the report threatened the World Heritage status of the Great Barrier Reef, which could have a negative impact on the lucrative tourism trade, and exposed its failure to protect the world-famous attraction.

Will Steffen, emeritus professor at the Australian National University and head of Australia’s Climate Council said the censorship was “frankly astounding... I’ve spent a lot of my career working internationally... And it’s very rare that I would see something like this happening. I haven’t seen it happen before.”

The current COVID-19 pandemic is being used to subordinate the universities ever-more directly to corporate interests, including through the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. Hundreds, if not thousands, of research positions are among those to be culled.

At the same time, the federal parliament is currently discussing *Environmental protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Streamlining Environmental approvals) Bill 2020*. It will enable major corporations to more rapidly proceed with large scale projects, without the hindrance of already-threadbare environmental restrictions.

The devastation of the environment and the suppression of science go hand in hand. Both demonstrate that the subordination of society to the profit interests of a tiny financial aristocracy is incompatible with social need, including a habitable environment, as well as scientific inquiry and independent research.



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