

Private vs Public Good Research: The Unequal Contest

CSIRO's reliance on substantial income from external sources is preventing it from fulfilling its statutory obligation to do research for the public good, says Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe.

The recent redirection of CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems research away from wildlife ecology to agricultural industry is one manifestation of a deep-seated quandary about CSIRO's responsibility to Australians. In his 50-year history of CSIRO, *Fields of Discovery*, Brad Collis quotes founding father Sir David Rivett: "It has become necessary at times to plead for greater opportunity for our people to freely seek knowledge in a spirit of ultimate faith, rather than in a spirit of immediate profit-seeking".

Parliament established CSIRO as a statutory body with broadly defined aims and a great deal of freedom to pursue them. Its primary functions were "to carry out scientific research to assist Australian industry, and to further the interests of the Australian community".

Over 20 years, federal governments have changed this by requiring CSIRO to obtain 30% of its finance in addition to budget allocations. Under its current leadership, the drive for even greater external income has led CSIRO to mimic a public corporation. Its senior officers now carry management, rather than scientific, titles and use the language of business by describing users of its research as "clients" while some senior and still-productive scientists are discarded as "surplus to requirements".

But CSIRO is not a company. It does not have directors answerable to shareholders, nor can its Board hire or fire the Chief Executive. Its de facto shareholders – the taxpayers of Australia – have merely token power over its

performance, indirectly through Parliament.

Increasingly CSIRO gets external money through consultancies for "clients" and by "co-investments". Both are short-term. In consultancies, clients pay 100% of CSIRO's costs (salaries, research and administration) and get 100% of the research time of participating scientists and technicians, who then cannot tackle core tasks.

In co-investment, the user provides some of the costs, usually for research, while CSIRO provides salaries and administration in-kind. Thus, the co-investor gets 100% of the time of scientists and technicians for a 50% investment in the research.

If the co-investor is an Industry Research and Development Corporation (IRDC) it contributes only 25% of the costs because IRDC funding is raised on a dollar-for-dollar basis between the relevant industry and the government. Thus, a co-investing IRDC partner gets 100% of the CSIRO research time for a 25% investment, the balance being contributed by taxpayers. This is a very substantial leverage for their contribution, and it is largely hidden from public view.

Because contractual obligations to external clients and co-investors generally take precedence when determining priorities, they drastically diminish the opportunities for CSIRO scientists to undertake long-term research on the highly complex problems besetting this country. These seldom attract external investors but undoubtedly "further the interests of the Australian community".

Thus CSIRO researches timber production from indigenous forests but



Dr Tyndale-Biscoe has researched and published widely on wildlife biology and control of pest animal species.

Photo: Paul Tyndale-Biscoe

not its huge impact on the long-term survival of the forest biota. This is the nub of the problem: public good research is what the taxpayers are entitled to get from a statutory body yet CSIRO predominantly now does research for private benefit, with a heavy subsidy from taxpayers.

Another disturbing consequence of the restrictive "corporate" ethos is that senior scientists with specialised knowledge seldom now speak publicly on matters of national importance. Those that have done so, including divisional chiefs, often find themselves "surplus to requirements".

Three scientists with international expertise in climate, water and biodiversity, as well as several other chiefs, have left CSIRO involuntarily in the past 2 years. It seems that Rivett's aspiration for CSIRO no longer matters.

Dr Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science and chairs its Fund for Research on the Conservation of Endangered Native Animals. In 1995 he retired as Deputy Chief of CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology. From 2000 until 30 June 2005 he was an honorary Fellow at CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems. *conScience* is a column for Australians to express forthright views on national issues. Views expressed are those of the author.