

## Preface: Background and Context

In the early 1990s, the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES<sup>1</sup>) Human Ecology Group's Fundamental Question program explored how to achieve the cultural transformation, or 'biorenaissance', to an ecologically sustainable human society. They produced a book, *Our Biosphere under Threat* (Boyden, Dovers et al. 1990), and a series of monographs.

The 2014 and 2015 Human Ecology Forum *Transforming Cultures* theme sought to extend this work by addressing this core question: **how might we bring about the necessary cultural transformation to ensure the long term survival of the human species?** This is about societal change, that is the mix of individual and systems change needed to transform culture. This series wants to elaborate the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of a program for cultural change.

The program is grounded on the following assumptions:

1. Human activity, grounded in a socio-economic culture that ignores or disrespects the fundamental processes of life and nature, is causing degradation to the natural environment and that this is being detrimental to human prosperity, health and wellbeing.
2. Transformation of the current dominant world culture, including its worldview and practices, is imperative to protect human wellbeing.
3. This transformation will need to reassert the biophysical realities within which we live and promote a culture which is sensitive to and respects nature and its limits.
4. While a rapid transformation is required to protect human civilisation, there is still time to take effective action to minimise disruption to human society.

These assumptions overtly drive and frame the discussion. Further participants recognised that any attempt to change culture is being undertaken by people who are embedded in and part of that culture. Thus cultural change assumes that members of a complex adaptive system can intentionally leverage or tweak elements of the system to attempt change, even while recognising that those people have no inherent capacity to control the system and that any resultant change is unpredictable. It recognises that systems have resilience as well as tipping points.

In the context of Stephen Boyden's elaboration of the biohistorical phases of humanity (Boyden 2010) (and see Chapter 1), this transition or transformation from the fourth, current high consumption, ecologically unsustainable phase to a fifth phase founded in biosensitivity, based on understanding the human place in nature, in tune with, sensitive to and respectful of the processes of life is called the biorenaissance. This biorenaissance may be termed the "Phase Five Transition".

The Frank Fenner Foundation (FFF) intends to:

"... convene integrative transdisciplinary discussion and debate on:

- (a) The changes in human activities that will be necessary **to achieve the transition** to an ecologically sustainable and healthy society
- (b) the **changes in societal arrangements** ... necessary to bring about ... **changes in human activities"**

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<sup>1</sup> now the Fenner School for Environment and Society at ANU

in order to contribute intellectually to the Phase Five Transition. This monograph will contribute to these objectives.

### **The question and more questions**

The major question for this project was **how might we bring about the necessary cultural transformation to ensure the long term survival of the human species?** This recognises culture as the 'operating system' for a society. Sub-questions might include: what will an ecologically sustainable society look like; what aspects of culture need to change to allow that to emerge; how would such change be achieved; what are likely barriers and how can they be circumvented?

As the series progressed, further questions arose and were added:

- What is culture?
- How do individual / personal changes translate up to societal change? Or can they?
- Do we know how to carry out designed, deliberative societal changes across all sectors of society, from within that society?

### **This monograph**

Input from a diverse set of disciplines was sought for each's contribution to answering these questions. I note the limitation of the absence of input from political science, sociology, history and social anthropology, all of whom may have brought added insights to the series.

The opening first chapter draws together the key reflections on theory, methodology and practice from the presentations. The second chapter puts the themes and lessons from this series into context of a review of the literature on cultural and social change. The third chapter presents a model for change. The presentations which were made to the seminar series follow. They keep the presenter's style and format to lend authenticity. Some are adapted from documents; others are PowerPoint Presentations. Each is followed by a brief editorial commentary linking them into the broader themes of the monograph and drawing out the key messages for the transforming culture project. It recommends further relevant action.

### **References**

Boyden, S. (2010). Our Place in Nature: past present and future. Canberra, ACT, Australia, Nature and Society Forum Inc.

Boyden, S. V., S. Dovers and M. Shirlow (1990). "Our biosphere under threat."