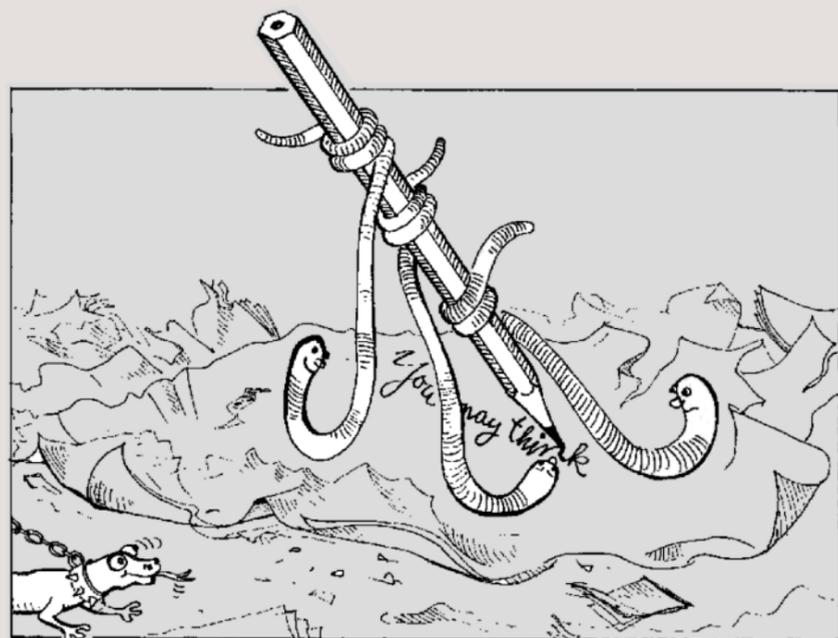


## NO WRIGGLING OUT OF THIS



## WEEDING &amp; WRITING

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Cedric Cecil Matthew Draper  
Mulched his yard with old newspaper,  
All his herbs they turned to seed  
And all the worms they learned to read.

He rang up all the local firms  
And asked if they could sell book-worms,  
A commercial need they could not see  
So he sent them to the library.

Mr Draper had a notion bright,  
If worms could read then they should write,  
So he buried pens and paper too  
To see what those book-worms could do.

Next day at rising of the dawn  
He found some papers on the lawn,  
A message there in letters bold  
And here's the simple tale it told.

“You may think that we are low,  
Slimy, thin and very slow,  
You may think we have no place,  
Only you in the big rat-race.

Look at what you've done to Earth,  
An objective look for what it's worth,  
What is the need, can you explain?  
Not so smart for a great, big brain.

You're depleting it of its resources,  
Driven on by your greedy forces,  
All for bundles of paper money,  
Don't you think that's rather funny?

Racing on with zeal and zest,  
Slowly fouling your own safe nest,  
Fame and fortune your only pay,  
Destroying everything in your way.

So listen now and start to learn,  
What you take you must return,  
Forget the glory and forget the greed,  
Only take just what you need.

Don't pollute, don't clear and slaughter,  
Your future's only soil and water,  
Clean the air and replace the trees  
Or Nature will make you refugees.”

“What! Who are they?” I hear you say,  
“How can they make me change my way,  
For I am Man, the Great Marauder,  
What worth are worms in the final order?

How dare you tell me what to do,  
For I am twice as smart as you,  
I find your writings quite bizarre,  
Who the hell do you think you are?”

“We are the farmers of the soil,  
All day long we work and toil,  
Chewing, mulching endlessly,  
We ask no pay, the work is free.

For we are Nature's creatures too  
And we are mortal, just like you;  
Your importance you may pretend,  
But we will get you in the end.”

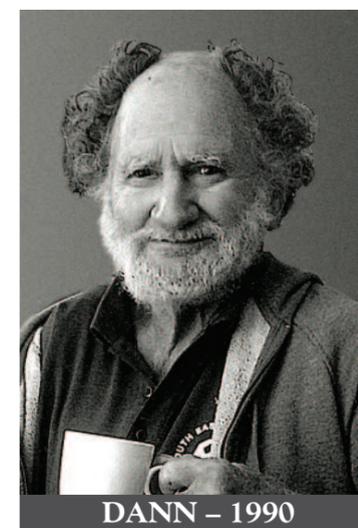
## COUNTING THE COST



MALTHUS – 1798

“I think I may fairly make two postulata: first, that food is necessary for the existence of man. Second, that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state ... Assuming then my postulate as granted, I say that the power of population is definitely greater than the power of the earth to provide sustenance for man.”

English clergyman Thomas Malthus in an essay on the principles of population in 1798.



DANN – 1990

# Man's appetites foil his dreams of sustainability

Population pressure underlies the continuing depletion of earth's resources  
wrote Paul Dann in the *Canberra Times* thirty years ago.

Sustainability, according to the dictionary, means 'enabling to last out, to keep from failing'. As Malthus implied two centuries ago, agriculture, being the basis provider of food, is the major component of sustainability as regards mankind's survival. Sustainable agriculture and land use necessitate a system in which the resources flowing from it are at least equal to those flowing into it, with no reduction in the 'bank'.

More emotively, sustainable agriculture can be regarded as a form of land stewardship in which the 'the land' in all its aspects, is passed, without deterioration, from one generation to the next.

A nice thought – but achievable?

Yes, but only within the limits of pressure on the land resource. And this pressure, though outwardly expressed by social, political and economic forces, is basically a function of people pressure. As an astute grazier adjusts his stock numbers to match the carrying capacity of his property, so eventually the world will need to match population with the world's carrying capacity.

Concerned environmentalists and, as a consequence, politicians, deplore the degradation, so evident, of our land. They, we, lament the soil erosion, the salinisation, the acidification, the nutrient impoverishment, the chemical

pollution, the deforestation. Many of the answers to these problems have been known for decades. Society, however, lacks the political and economic will to apply the remedies.

We know how to counter deforestation – stop cutting down the trees. We know how to reverse soil acidity – apply lime. We know how to prevent further chemical pollution – stop applying chemicals. This is not to say that further research is no longer required, to give cleverer answers to some of the problems; but land degradation in Australia could be halted, almost immediately, if its farmlands and forests were closed up and its food and fibre products imported.

Such a suggestion, even were it not



SHARPE.

facetious, would of course be untenable in current political, social and economic contexts. Land degradation, and thus unsustainable agriculture and hence and unsustainable society, is itself a symptom of structural and institutional problems within that society.

The primary cause of unsustainable land use in Australia is a combination of a growing, highly urbanised society and a strongly export-oriented economy. At some 17 million, Australia's population exerts relatively little direct pressure on the land – something like one person per 45 hectares (though much of this is desert), compared with one person per half a hectare in Sri Lanka – but most of this population is in large urban conglomerates, substantially coastal.

This means that, to feed its population, Australia's farmlands are mined of minerals (4kg of phosphorus, 9kg of potassium, etc. in every tonne of grain, going to the cities in largely a one-way flow, to be flushed out to sea or buried in landfill.

Even this would be sustainable for a long period, were our farmlands to feed only ourselves. But the reality is different. In 1988-89, for instance, Australia produced 14.3 million tonnes of wheat yet consumed only 1.9 million tonnes. The rest – exported overseas to pay for imports. If only two million tonnes of