Friday, 6 May 2005

Linda Hamilton
55 Lavender Farm Road
EMERALD VIC 3782

Attention: Mr Rob Skinner
Managing Director
Melbourne Water
PO Box 4342
Melbourne VIC 3001
Australia.

Dear Mr Skinner,

I write to you in regard to the planned killing of the 20 or so Emus living in the Cardinia reservoir.

Two Melbourne Water staff members came by our house on the 18th of May to deliver and discuss your Community Information Bulletin outlining upcoming pest control measures. During our conversation your staff revealed that the 20 or so Emus living in the 2,800 hectare reserve would be killed as they pose a threat to the quality of the water.

Two reasons for their destruction were explained to me.

1. They are responsible for the spreading of blackberries in the reserve
2. They have certain pathogens such as E. coli, that could be transferred to our drinking water and pose a hazard to the health of the people who drink the water sourced from the reservoir

The first point barely deserved a response as there are thousands of birds eating the blackberries both within the reserve and the surrounding area happily dropping seeds where ever they may go. There would have to be a dozen other things that could be done that would make a more significant impact on the spread of blackberries in the area.

The second point regarding E. coli was also dumbfounding – we all carry populations of E. coli in our systems, the dangerous strain of E. coli which causes sickness and death in humans is usually attributed to eating undercooked ground beef products. As chlorination kills E. coli very readily and all water supplied by Melbourne water is chlorinated I cannot see how there can be any E. coli threat from the Emus.

Seriously, I believe these responses were given by people who truly did not understand the reasoning behind the planned kill themselves. And who could blame them as your Community Bulletin Information states that the reason for the killing as follows: "These animals are not native to the area and cause environmental damage, including erosion and damage to the forest area, which in turn has the potential to affect the quality of the water in the reservoir." They, like me probably had a gut feeling that Emus are very unlikely to be a cause of erosion and damage to an Australian bush forest. After all, they have been inhabitants of forests all across Australia for a very long time and until we came along the forests were doing very nicely. Considering that there are approximately 20 Emus in 2,800 hectares of healthy bushland they are hardly likely to be an issue with erosion from the activity of the Emus.

In addition, it is also fairly likely that the deer living in the reservoir have more damaging feet and eating habits and are more likely to have a negative affect on the soil and forest in the reserve, yet they are not currently a target pest species for Melbourne Water.

Your staff kindly referred me to Frank Lawless, who I believe is a forester for Melbourne Water. Frank also offered feeble reasoning including, and unbelievably to "ensure biodiversity". I won't bother to comment on this.

Frank referred me to Melita Stevens, the scientist within Melbourne Water responsible for the recommendation to kill the Emus. Melita and I have had a couple of lengthy conversations and I am still unconvinced of any valid scientific reason for the decision to kill the Emus.

Firstly, I must emphasise that Melita did not support the reasons given by the Community Information Bulletin and she explained that her decision was based on protecting the quality of the drinking water from pathogens. She agreed with me that the E. coli threat was immediately addressed with the application of chlorine, and we know from the information on your website that all water supplied by Melbourne Water is chlorinated.

Her concern was with the pathogen cryptosporidium, a parasite that lives in the intestine of humans and animals, in large numbers it can cause cryptosporidiosis. This was and I believe still is her primary concern. Melita believes that the likelihood of the Emus having significant levels of cryptosporidium in their intestine is moderate as they have been introduced into the reserve from farmland.

It is common belief that the Emus were previously farmed and five or six of them were dumped in the reserve about six years ago. We do not know if they came from a cattle farm, but it is this link to farmland, particularly the possibility that it may have been cattle farmland that seems to be the problem. Melita referred to Canadian research that supported the view that animals from land that had farmed cattle were more likely to harbour cryptosporidium. I do not know if this study included any bird species. I believe that the study referred to intensive cattle farming – not the sort of cattle farming common in Australia.

Here is where I have the biggest problems with all the explanations provided to me to date.

- There is no standard for assessing the risk of a species hosting dangerous levels of cryptosporidium and yet the Emus have been classified as a moderate risk. I ask on what scientific basis.
- There has been no testing for cryptosporidium of either the Emus, other animals within the reserve, their faeces or the water.
- Testing for the presence of cryptosporidium is possible. Please contact BTF Pty Ltd for more information (02) 8877 9150.
- The whole of the land that is now Cardinia Reservoir was, as recently as 1969 farmed. Significant portions of the land was used to farm cattle, yet we were using water from Cardinia reservoir in 1977. Logically all of the animals that are now in the reserve have been exposed to farmland that was used to raise cattle.
- E. coli is dealt with by chlorination.
- Blackberries are spread by most of the birds that live in and visit the reservoir. Killing 20 individual Emus, while leaving thousands of rosellas, cockatoos, lorikeets, cuckoos and other birds and animals will have little, or no measurable impact.
- Emus are well adapted to the Australian bush and do not cause soil erosion, nor do they damage the forest.
- Killing a native animal in a native environment does nothing to assist bio-diversity.
- There is no evidence that the Emus have caused a cryptosporidiosis outbreak to date and it seems that as time goes on the likelihood of this happening becomes less and less.

I ask you please, very kindly to have the decision revisited and to please ensure that any decision to kill our native animals is done only on a scientific basis.

If, after reading this letter your scientists still believe that the Emus pose a threat, I ask you to please make available funding to at least test the Emus and other animals in the reserve for the presence of cryptosporidium in their faeces over a suitable period of time, this should at least establish if there is a real threat that needs to be addressed.

I strongly believe that the time is past when we had the right to kill and clear as a first resort and I don't believe that I am alone. I will be taking copies of this letter and a petition to popular places within our community to collect signatures in support of a decision to leave the Emus in the reserve, or at least to push for further research before the final decision is made. These will be forwarded to you by the 18th of May 2005.

If you would like to discuss this letter with me please call me on 0417 346 399.

Yours sincerely,

Linda Hamilton

P.S. Walking along the fence of the Cardinia Reservoir I often see wombats, kangaroos, rare black cockatoos and of course the Emus and it always made me feel that there were people who knew how important it was to provide our community with pristine water. I know in many countries and indeed other states in Australia the tendency is to care less about the water source and more about the water treatment. I fee very lucky to live in Melbourne, a city with such good quality water. Good clean water comes from a good clean environment and in Australia Emus are part of that environment.