

AID/WATCH History

by John Seed founder of the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) for Aid/Watch 20-year Anniversary

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[John Seed] I was sorry to have missed AID/WATCH's 20th birthday party last week, especially after both AID/WATCH founders, Carol Sherman, and Lee Rhiannon, rang to ask me to present some of my recollections of the background and history that led up to this happy day.

And so, I reminisce.

In the mid '80's, my partner at the Rainforest Information Centre, Ian Peter set us up with an email account with Econet in San Francisco. We were, I believe, the first Aussie NGO to start using email – in 1989 Ian would set up Pegasus Networks - Australia's first public internet provider - from our office in his north Lismore home.

Through email in 1985 we accepted a request from the US Environmental Defense Fund to join their campaign to reform the environmental policies of the World Bank and the other multilateral development banks. Dams and other huge projects being funded by these banks were destroying millions of hectares of primary rainforest and displacing literally millions of indigenous people from their traditional lands on several continents.

Our appreciation of the awful environmental impacts of the banks' lending policies grew when we got to see some of these at first hand. For example, after Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) volunteer Patrick Anderson and I returned from our 1985 Rainforest Roadshow of India, we received a request from someone there to share our experience in stopping the damming of the Franklin and lower Gordon Rivers and another of our volunteers, Carol Sherman, spent 10 days walking along the Narmada River with her two young kids.

Later, we discovered that Australia's contribution to these multilateral development banks was only about 15% of our aid budget, the remaining 85% was spent on bilateral (country to country) aid overseen by the Australian Government aid agency AIDAB (as AusAID was then known). And the same lack of environmental concern was exhibited in these projects as by the World Bank. So, we started campaigning for the reform of AIDAB's environmental and human rights policies and during this campaign enlisted many of the Aussie environmental NGO's (ACF, TWS, Greenpeace etc) and development assistance NGO's (Freedom from Hunger, Community Aid Abroad etc.) to join us in calling for a Senate inquiry into the environmental effects of Australia's aid programme.

Here I'll hand the story over to Patrick Anderson who spearheaded that campaign (and then went on to start Greenpeace International's rainforest campaign in the Netherlands before moving to Indonesia where he presently works on forest and indigenous rights issues)

[Patrick Anderson] John and I were invited to India in 1985 by the Gandhi Peace Foundation to talk about our experience in the use of Gandhian methods in defence of nature in the NSW rainforest

campaign and the Franklin River campaign. We toured widely over three months, giving about 100 public talks, and showing the film about Terania Creek, *Give Trees a Chance*.

We visited the Narmada Valley and learned that the World Bank was considering funding for big dams there. We saw for ourselves the impact of existing dams, and I wrote to the Australian Treasurer, Paul Keating, asking him not to support World Bank investment in the Narmada Dams, due to severe social and environmental impacts.

On return to Australia in 1986, we got together a coalition of groups to call for a Senate Enquiry into the Environmental and Social impact of Australia's development assistance, which was successful, as the issue was taken up by a Senate Standing Committee in 1987. I gave evidence and submitted a paper for RIC to the *Standing Committee: Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts Inquiry into the Ability of the Australian Development Assistance Bureau and the Federal Treasury to Assess the Environmental Impact of Development Aid, 1987*.

From the Australian Senate website on the history of senate enquiries, there is the following:

... the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts examined the attention given to environmental considerations in multilateral development assistance and Australia's bilateral assistance program; its report 'Environmental Impact of Development Assistance' was tabled in December 1989. Recommendations in this report were designed to give effect to Australia's concern over the environmental impact of multilateral development assistance and to ensure the adequate integration of environmental considerations into Australian development aid planning.

The Government, with minor exceptions, accepted the Committee's recommendations. The response to the report announced the provision of environmental assessment training for staff of the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau and the inclusion of environmental issues and controls in aid project documents.

Overall, the response described evaluation and review measures to ensure that Australia's aid would promote environmentally responsible development; it also described arrangements to permit the *Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act* to be applied to bilateral aid. One of the recommendations of the Enquiry, which was taken up by AIDAB, was to provide funding to Australian NGOs for environmental projects overseas.

Through all of this, we all realised that it would be useful to have a group dedicated to monitoring and challenging Australian Aid, and AID/WATCH was born.

The Senate broadly accepted all our criticisms and its Inquiry's findings required far-reaching changes of AIDAB. For the first time AIDAB had to prepare environmental impact statements for projects before funding them and to obey Aussie environmental laws even when working in countries with no such laws of their own. Furthermore, the Senate called upon AIDAB to create a new funding window – The *Non-Governmental Organisations Environmental Initiative* or NGOEI

which would provide \$1 million per year for NGOs to create aid projects which establish new standards of environmental excellence in the delivery of Aussie development assistance. Having been for years the chief thorn in AIDAB's side, the RIC felt that it was unlikely that we would see any of this money but, to our amazement, every project that we proposed to AIDAB over the next several years was funded. These included the reforestation of the sacred mountain Arunachala in S India; the protection of more than a million Ha. of tropical rainforest in Morobe Province PNG by creating an economic alternative to industrial logging – we provided landowners with small portable sawmills and training in ecological forestry in exchange for them putting 99% of their forests off limits to all industrial developments - and the creation of a biological reserve in Ecuador.

RIC was stunned to be on the receiving end of this largesse and figured that AIDAB probably hoped that fear of losing this funding would prevent RIC from continuing to harass them. So it was that in September 1992, RIC helped fund the creation of AID/WATCH by Carol Sherman (who had been spearheading our campaign against the Multilateral Development Banks and had authored the 1990 book "A Look Inside the World Bank") and Lee Rhiannon (who had been working at The Ideas Centre and later went on to become a Greens member of the NSW Parliament (1999-2010) and since then a Federal Senator).

This way AID/WATCH could continue monitoring (and where necessary criticising) AIDAB while RIC (with no conflict of interest) could receive funds from the NGOEI which remained in place until John Howard became Prime Minister. It was axed (alongside funding for "Women in Development") in the Coalition's first budget in 1996.