

Report of 27 June Meeting 2013
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Dr Chris Gibson, Director, Global Challenges Research Program,
University of Wollongong.

Topic: *How easy is it being green? Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life*

In this wide ranging and challenging lecture, Dr Gibson discussed everyday behaviour and practices within the household from a sustainability perspective, building on a four year longitudinal study and related empirical projects, on what we call sustainability dilemmas. This is about what people do in the household in terms of consumption, even if they know they shouldn't – and why.

Known scientific evidence of the lifecycle or carbon footprint of everyday products and practices was contrasted against the cultural contradictions and complexities of what actually happens within households, when their everyday practices are examined empirically. Dr Gibson drew on examples from his new book, structured around 'flashpoint' sustainability dilemmas: having a baby, food, toilets, driving cars, televisions and computers, water tanks, mattresses, mobile phones, gardens, and even death.

Dr Gibson emphasized that household sustainability is rife with contradiction and uncertainty. While gains can be made through some actions, they must be traded off against other losses. Whether these trade-offs are worth it is unclear. A good example comes from food. Eating local food may prove more damaging than eating imported food, because 'food miles' associated with the transportation of fruit and vegetables may be only a minor component of total carbon impact. One of Gibson's research team has studied closely the differences between two seemingly identical tomatoes, finding quite stark differences in carbon impacts depending on a range of factors. When she calculated the carbon footprint of tomatoes on sale in the Sydney fresh food markets at Flemington, she found the most significant factor was the fuel source used to heat the greenhouses. None of this information is available to consumers.

Chris Gibson presented a vivid example of sustainability using the findings of studies into various 'green' options available for funerals, including 'natural' burials with cardboard coffins. Ecological footprint modeling suggested that the most significant contributor is not the material of the coffin, nor even the energy, water and resources required to produce the food required at the wake, but rather the transport impacts of getting people to the funeral itself. He concluded that the logical - but crazy - best solution is to have a funeral that no-one attends. He also made the telling point that a 2005 estimate by the US Geological Survey described half a billion used mobile phones sitting in US desk drawers. At that time, USD300 million worth of gold, palladium,

silver, copper and platinum lay in those drawers. The quantities would be vastly different now.

It is clear that the issues raised by sustainability studies such as these must be used to inform appropriate policy-makers and climate change advocates alike. Accordingly, Chris Gibson has been contracted to write a key expert report for UNESCO and UNDP in preparation for the United Nations 2013 Global Creative Economy Report. This report text will form the basis of significant parts of the final United Nations document. In addition, Chris is currently negotiating arrangements to act as international expert contributor for a 2013 OECD report on Tourism and the Creative industries.

The 45 person audience was clearly appreciative of the address at this particularly demanding time for Dr Gibson. This Royal Society Southern Highlands meeting had to be postponed for a week due to his lecture commitments in Europe. He was to return to Europe soon after our lecture.

Anne Wood

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Dr. Chris Gibson BA (Hons), PhD Human Geography (University of Sydney), FIAG
Director, Global Challenges Research Program, University of Wollongong

Professor of Human Geography & Deputy Director, Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research, University of Wollongong.
Independent academic expert, Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) Program, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2011-present.

Member, Expert Working Group, Securing Australia's Future, Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), 2012-2014, One of six members of the Expert Working Group on *Australia's Comparative Advantage* within the *Securing Australia's Future* research program.

Invited to referee articles for over fifty different international academic journals across the disciplines of Human Geography, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Tourism Studies, Anthropology, Musicology, Urban Studies and Planning, Environmental Management.

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