

Go Big Again

By Trisha Fielding

In the late 1980s, I had big hair. A lot of people did. Everything was big. We puffed ourselves up with our big hair, we stuffed foam shoulder pads into our jackets to appear bigger. Actors in films wore big, over-sized suits and carried big, brick-shaped mobile phones. Rock groups drew big crowds to big stadiums and bounced around on stage belting out big power ballads while their sky-high hairdos remained cemented in place with ultra strong-hold hairspray. The United States and Russia taunted each other with their big nukes, and we lived in fear of an eventual global nuclear war. We were waiting for the “big boom.”

When I was about eighteen or nineteen, I decided I wanted to be a conservationist—a “greenie”—as they were (and still often are) derogatively called. The conservation movement in Australia had gained some serious momentum by the late 1980s. The fight to stop the Franklin River in Tasmania being dammed for (yet another) hydro-electric scheme, and the blockades and protests that took place in the Daintree rainforest in far north Queensland were two high-profile issues that first put this idea into my head.

I announced my intention to my family one night as we all sat huddled around the TV.



Perhaps it was during the news? Perhaps there was something on that night that prompted my resolve? I don’t recall. But I most certainly can recall my father’s reaction, when I casually said, “You know, I think I’d like to be a conservationist.” He was incredulous.

“Listen, tell me this . . .” he said, leaning forward in his chair, and eyeballing me. “How do you expect to be a conservationist when you work for the electricity company? You can hardly

expect to do both,” he said.

It was true that I did work for the local electricity authority, and most of the power to homes and businesses in those days was generated by coal-fired power stations. Large-scale solar plants and wind farms were still a long way off for north Queensland. The burning of fossil-fuels was technically what paid my wages. Granted, I was just a kid working behind a desk in the mail room of the company’s head office, so I wasn’t directly contributing to carbon emissions, but nonetheless, Dad had made a thought-provoking point.

At nineteen, my time was heavily occupied by hanging out with friends, watching endless hours of *Rage* on television, browsing in record shops, and contemplating whether or not those new-format compact discs were worth buying. Surely they could never replace vinyl? I paid very little attention to politics or the economy. But the big issues that *were* capable of permeating my big hairdo were these: the ever-present background threat of all-out nuclear war and the growing movement to preserve the environment. The former issue was playing out on the other side of the world, but the latter was very close to home.

As an electricity industry employee, I was acutely aware of a proposal to construct a hydro-electric power plant in far north Queensland—the Tully-Millstream project. It involved flooding an area of tropical rainforest to enable two dams to feed a 600-megawatt power station. On the surface it seemed like a reasonable plan. Hydro

power was a green solution, surely? Better than burning coal, yes. But it would have inundated 4,300 hectares of land, and around 1,290 hectares of that land was within the newly-inscribed World Heritage area.

Proponents for the scheme argued that only a very small portion (135 hectares) of the land to be inundated was rainforest. And of course, there was the promise of jobs—during its construction phase the Tully-Millstream scheme was expected to employ up to 1,000 people. However, once it was operational, the hydro plant would be fully automated, and operated remotely. So, in fact, there would be no ongoing jobs created. Allowing this scheme to go ahead would have set a dangerous precedent. It would have sent a message to the world that even areas on the World Heritage List might still be exploited or destroyed.

I had begun to feel quite passionate about the environment. About the merits of protecting areas of pristine wilderness. About the need to develop smarter ways to generate renewable energy. But I thought about what my dad had said. A seed of doubt had been sown. Could I reasonably expect to be on the side of the environment whilst earning a living from an industry that was destroying it? I reluctantly conceded that Dad was probably right, and gradually began to let the idea drop.

But then I started hearing a lot about a big hole in the ozone layer, above Antarctica. Although we could righteously lay blame for the

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potential threat of nuclear annihilation squarely at the feet of “Ronnie” and “Gorby”; when it came to the hole in the ozone layer, it apparently came down to our obsession with our big hair. The 80s hairdo defied gravity. It was permed, teased, and styled upwards. The higher the better. It was structural, sculptural, architectural, and it was only made possible through the use of copious quantities of hairspray. But hairspray, among other things, I discovered, contained chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

In the 1970s, scientists had begun warning that CFCs were causing the depletion of the protective layer of Earth’s stratosphere, the ozone layer. The ozone layer is what protects us from the Sun’s ultraviolet radiation. Dire predictions were made about the increased rates of skin cancers and cataracts that would occur, particularly in places like Australia, if something wasn’t done to stop the ozone depletion. In a decade where bigger was better, we now had a very big problem.

Okay, so CFCs weren’t just in hairspray. They were in many aerosol propellants, in Styrofoam and polystyrene packaging, in solvents and degreasing agents, and in refrigerants found in electrical appliances like fridges and air-conditioners. We had to find a way to do things

differently. In a remarkable act of international co-operation, big industry agreed to develop viable substitutes for CFCs, and to commit to phasing out these chemicals. This commitment to ban production of ozone-damaging chemicals throughout the entire world was written into a global treaty—the Montreal Protocol. This treaty was agreed to in 1987, just two years after the discovery of the ozone hole over Antarctica. It came into effect on 1 January 1989.

I look back at my late teens and recall, quite vividly, the media coverage of the hole in the ozone layer. Some people kept their hairspray, but the CFCs it had previously contained were gone. Some people gave up their big hair habit altogether. But if you did persist with up-styling your hair, there always seemed to be a lingering suspicion amongst your friends about whether you were using the new kind of hairspray, or whether you were wantonly contributing to the enlargement of an already large hole in the ozone layer with your now, frankly, irresponsible hairdo.

Decades on from the implementation of the Montreal Protocol, according to the United Nations, ozone protection efforts have also slowed climate change and prevented an estimated 135 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions. The Montreal Protocol is also

estimated to have helped to prevent 2 million cases of skin cancer each year. It is the only United Nations environmental agreement to be ratified by every country in the world. Just let that sink in for a moment. Every country in the world agreed to work together on this issue.

In 1989 the future was looking grim. Climate change was happening. Greenhouse gases—generated primarily by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas—were predicted to cause more frequent and severe weather events. More intense floods, droughts, fires, cyclones. Polar ice caps melting. Sea-levels rising. In 1989 there was still time to act. That year, Australia’s Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, admitted that consensus among scientists was that major climate change was linked to the “levels and nature of industrial and agricultural activity,” which would have “major ramifications for human survival.” The Australian Government’s 1989 statement on the environment, titled *Our Country Our Future*, outlined plans for legislation to address the significant threat posed by unchecked environmental degradation.

The big (and from this distance, somewhat surprising) lesson from the 80s is that the Australian voting public broadly accepted the science and accepted that we needed to enact change, both at an individual and a collective level, in order to avoid a potentially unliveable

future. For many, the 1980s is most well-remembered as a decade of excess, and as a decade of bad fashion. But the 80s marked a significant turning point in human history—the rise of an awareness of, and concern for, environmental issues on a global scale. We’d had a big wake-up call. Experts told us our hairspray habit was killing the planet, and, improbable as that seemed, we believed it. Even though the science hadn’t even been fully proven, collectively, governments and industry saw the big picture and acted for the greater good.

But somewhere in the 1990s, Australian governments made a sharp turn away from those early environmental action plans and began framing the discourse on climate and environment as an either-or choice. Either we moved to take steps to arrest climate change, or we prioritised economic security. Jobs, industry, trade agreements—all took on a priority level that seemed far more important than reducing greenhouse gases. Australians allowed themselves—all too easily—to be talked out of caring about the future of the planet.

Now it’s 2025, and although we’ve made some inroads, it feels as though we squandered our advantage. We’ve squandered decades. Perhaps all we really need to do is have the courage to go *big* again?

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