

## *From the Kitchen*

23 February 2011



Humans are illogical, which is contrary to what we tell ourselves and each other but consistent with our animal nature. We can reason and debate, make lists of arguments for and against something but, when we act, we seem to act at the behest of some other process.

We are certainly inventive, making complex tools and elaborate nests. We also make ever more and ever-more-complex rules to try and curb the excessive and illogical behaviour of many of our species' members, as they give expression to strong drives which are not curtailed by logic. If we could really all live together in ways that are informed by logic, we would not need all these laws, or even any of them. Logic would inform us that behaviour which is detrimental to some individuals in our tribe is ultimately detrimental to the perpetrator.

We are keen observers of events and circumstances and good at keeping records of these. However, we habitually fail to act on conclusions that logical analysis of those events, circumstances and records would lead us to. That failure is fed by illogical processes: mostly fear and hubris. We build settlements on floodplains (even swamps) and in areas of frequent seismic activity, we pour our excrement and detritus into the atmosphere and into the nearest waterways, we hunt food species towards extinction and we tell ourselves that we can continue to do so. When a few among us point to the folly and ultimate self-destructiveness of all this, we fall back on fear and hubris to guide our responses.

Much of the behaviour of the majority of all humans is based to some extent on inaccurate records of what a guiding deity has conveyed to one or another remarkable person, together with an inaccurate social history. A small and decreasing number of humans base their lives on observed cycles and relationships and are perhaps making a better go of it, although most of the latter have been subjugated by the former.

Logic would inform us that we need to plan well into the future, yet few of us do so. Most of us (or our representatives) temper our planning through fear and hubris – fear of the consequences of doing or not doing particular things and the hubris that we can find solutions in time if things do go awry, as logic informs us they will, given that we ignore our historical records, our science and our instincts.

Given our animal nature, it would indeed be logical to pay more heed to our instincts. It is the height of hubris to imagine that we have evolved to the extent that those innate qualities and drives can be ignored because we now have such large and agile brains. It is interesting that scientific investigations increasingly come to the conclusion that those things we instinctively know are good for us or bad for us, are in fact so.

Our failure to act on what we know to be right and to plan on the basis of this comes from our fear of doing without or missing out, or plain greed – 'get as much as I can now, before it runs out'. Greed is a manifestation of fear.

If we acted only out of logical analysis, our laws should prevent people from doing the wrong thing; anyone contemplating doing something wrong would weigh up the benefits of the proposed misdeed against the likelihood of being caught and the penalty to be paid if caught. If the likelihood of catching a miscreant is not very high or the penalty less than the gain from the illicit behaviour, it would be a simple matter for legislators to increase the penalty and bolster law enforcement. But we don't operate that way. In the USA, where in most States a murderer risks losing his or her life, people still commit murders by the thousands and most of them get caught and are convicted. In those circumstances murder is not logical, if it ever is.

Laws can also be a warning about behaviour considered to be dangerous, such as talking on a hand-held mobile phone while driving or riding on top of a moving train. If we behaved logically, our behaviour could be informed by the very existence of such laws, not merely the possibility of being caught and fined.

There is currently much discussion in this country about supporting or not supporting a change to using renewable resources. While the evidence from countries that put public money into developing renewable resource industries is that it is good for the overall economy, in Australia it is fear that seems to win the day rather than logic – the fear being that we will have to drastically reduce our standard of living in order to protect our environment. Even if that were so (and evidence seems to be to the contrary), logic would inform us that a reduced standard of living is preferable to extinction.