

Censorship and suppression of the scientific community harms nature and society and violates democratic principles

The Ecological Society of Australia's 2018-19 survey on academic freedom and research suppression reveals extensive and deeply concerning evidence of suppression of research results and professional advice in government, environmental consultancies and universities.

The survey revealed this suppression has serious consequences, including poor environmental outcomes, poorly informed policy, and compromised public debate which weakens democracy.

Over one third of survey respondents reported reduced job satisfaction, bullying and harassment for communicating publicly and increased personal suffering. Many reported jeopardised employment prospects, including job losses, and deteriorating mental health as a consequence of employers violating academic freedom and suppressing research.

Such violations contravene the ESA's mission and values. The severity of the situation requires the ESA to express its concerns and stand up for its members' rights, interests and welfare, the environment, and the community more broadly.

This week over 600 ecologists met in Launceston to address the theme; "Ecology: science for practical solutions". Ecologists provide expert advice on ecosystem matters, delivering practical, evidence-based solutions for major environmental problems. However, vital information about the threats and solutions is being suppressed for political or corporate gain, at the expense of society, nature and the wellbeing of individuals.

We therefore call on governments to:

- Modify code of conduct statements and conditions of employment to ensure that expert scientists in government cannot be prohibited from delivering factual, scientifically-derived information in public discourse.
- Actively change workplace cultures to create an environment where responsible practice is defined as providing factual information, both in public discourse and in internal communications.
- Respect academic freedom when collaborating with university researchers, including in contractual arrangements.

We call on universities to:

- Have explicit, publicly-visible policies that enshrine academic freedom as a fundamental right of academics.
- Pro-actively and publicly defend academics when they are unfairly attacked over their research or teaching.
- Provide training for academics on effective public-facing science communication and expression of their right to academic freedom.
- Reject contractual arrangements that do not respect academic freedom.

And we call on industry to:

- Improve accountability of ecologists in industry, both to ensure that results and reports are professional and defensible, and to provide the best professional advice and guidance for industry.
- Encourage open sharing and peer review of consultant reports and data sets.
- Support staff to share factual information about their work publicly.