You have to hand it to the pygmy bluetongue – to date, it has quietly survived a barrage of natural hazards and man-made pressures. But the effects of drought brought about by climate change are putting the tiny lizards under unprecedented threat.

A team of Flinders University biologists under Professor Mike Bull has been studying the pygmy bluetongue and its larger cousin, the sleepy lizard (pictured above), for almost three decades. Professor Bull’s discoveries about the extraordinary life cycle and habits of the sleepy lizard, including its tendency to pair with a mate for life, earned the lizard a major role in David Attenborough’s recent reptile documentary series, Life in Cold Blood.

At present, it is the conservation of the pygmy bluetongue that is claiming much of Professor Bull’s attention. Driven from much of its habitat on the Adelaide Plains by the pressure of urban development, the lizard pulled off an extraordinary conjuring trick. Last sighted on a building site in suburban Marion in the 1950s, the species was thought extinct for 30 years until another individual was discovered in the gut of a dead brown snake some 250 kilometres away, near Burra in SA’s mid-north.

Since then, 24 separate small populations have been found on privately owned land all around Burra. But because the patches of native grassland on which they live are isolated by tracts of cultivated land, the populations are unconnected, meaning that they cannot recolonise naturally when numbers dwindle.

“Lizards do not breed during drought,
and if drought years increase as the climate change scenario suggests, the populations will be under threat,” Professor Bull said.

“We know that they’re OK in the short term, but we are really worried about what is going to happen to them in the longer term.”

One response from Professor Bull and his team is an attempt to develop methods for successfully transplanting lizard colonies to managed conservation areas. Experience shows that reptiles seldom respond well to translocation, and tend to move away from new sites.

“What we have to do is find ways to encourage them to stay put,” Professor Bull said.

A computer model designed to simulate the varying densities of water, and water flow, in an aquifer could one day be used to pinpoint suitable underground freshwater storage and recovery sites. Developed by PhD student James Ward using German software “FEFLOW”, the model simulates the hydrogeologic parameters that may be present during Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR), a technology used to augment or replace traditional freshwater supplies. These parameters, including water density and flow, are particularly important when ASR - which involves injecting excess fresh water, such as storm water, into a confined aquifer where it is stored until needed - is applied to a saline aquifer.

“Many people assume that when you pump freshwater into an ASR well, it creates a nice cylindrical shaped bubble of liquid which remains untainted by its surrounds,” Mr Ward explained.

“However, studies have shown that if fresh water is pumped into a saline aquifer, the ‘bubble’ of fresh water can get fuzzy around the edges where it is filtered through grains of sand and ‘mixed’ with the heavier saline solution.”

“The instability between the water densities can cause the injected plume to ‘float’ towards the top of the aquifer while at the same time forcing the heavier salt water to slump to the bottom of the aquifer towards the centre of the well, forming more of a conical shape, thus reducing the volume of water that is recoverable at an acceptable quality.”

According to Mr Ward, to combat the issue of density contrast in ASR wells an industry rule of thumb is used stating that where an aquifer registers 5,000 parts per million salt or less, density need not be a factor when choosing a suitable site.

Yet, Mr Ward’s research has proven this to be insufficient as a decision parameter and has instead revealed density effects in ASR are complex and could occur during injection and pumping, as well as storage.

“Essentially, the computer model was able to accurately display how factors such as level of salinity, the hydraulic conductivity of different layers within the aquifer and the storage duration all have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a site,” he said.

“The number of 5,000 parts per million has no effect whatsoever – there is far more that needs to be considered as far as the physics goes.”

According to Mr Ward, these findings could be used to help develop a framework that could be used in conjunction with Geographical Information System (GIS) technology to produce maps of suitable future sites for ASR wells.
Keeping up appearances with cosmetic surgery

Cosmetic surgery is fast becoming an addiction to quell insecurities of the modern workplace and enhance job prospects: according to Flinders University sociology professor Anthony Elliott, more and more people are undergoing the surgeon’s knife as a “quick fix”, fuelling a global boom in cosmetic surgical procedures.

No longer the exclusive realm of the wealthy, the annual bill for procedures such as liposuction, face-lifts and breast enhancement is estimated to exceed $US20 billion in the US, while Australians are expected to spend some $350 million on cosmetic surgery in 2008.

Conventionally, the epidemic-like spread of cosmetic surgery is attributed to obsession with celebrity culture and lifestyle consumerism, but Professor Elliott argues that there are more fundamental forces at work.

In his new book, Making the Cut: How Cosmetic Surgery is Transforming Our Lives, Professor Elliott says that global economic changes are creating a sense of profound uncertainty and even fear among individuals, and that the turn to cosmetic surgery is a key response.

“The core of it, for me, hinges on a number of big changes to do with the global economy, particularly in terms of our new ways of working; that is, a shift away from very organisationally structured, long-term jobs for life with pensions, to a world characterised by contract-driven, short-term segments of labour and just-in-time delivery,” he said.

“Bodies today are pumped, pummelled, plucked, suctioned, stitched, shrunk and surgically augmented at an astonishing rate. The global electronic economy has introduced new anxieties that are increasingly resolved by people at the level of the body and bodily appearance.”

While not condemning cosmetic surgery out of hand, Professor Elliott says there is an alarming aspect to people’s willingness to favour a quick fix solution over the physical and psychological risks of surgery or considerations of long-term health.

“There has been a shift from a focus on long-term health to getting ‘fit,’” he said.

And spectacular as the statistics are, they still do not represent the full picture – Professor Elliott said most of the figures don’t reach the ‘soft’ end of the market, comprising minor treatments like micro-dermabrasion.

“In the UK, it is now possible to have a botox ‘touch up’ over the counter at the chemist during lunch time: it has become much more mainstream,” he said.

“Globalisation is usually talked about its effects in terms of the economy, of share markets and finance; there has been less talk about globalisation at the personal level and the working level, and that is what this book is really about.”

Making the Cut is published by Reaktion Books and sells for $47.95.

Charles Gent

National canteen project coup for Flinders

Flinders University has scored a major coup, securing the Federal Government’s $1.25 million National Healthy Schools Canteen project.

Coordinated by the Department of Health and Ageing, the project benefits from a joint collaboration between the University’s Departments of Nutrition and Dietetics, Public Health and Social Health Sciences, the Department of Dietetics and Nutrition at Flinders Medical Centre, as well as Flinders Partners, the commercial arm of Flinders University.

Aimed at promoting good health and reducing the burden of chronic diseases, the project will see the development of a national food categorisation system, as well as training guidelines and resources, to help school communities make appropriate menu choices.

The guidelines will then be disseminated to all government and non-government schools across Australia to encourage the development and retention of healthy eating patterns in primary and secondary students.

“The Flinders team will engage in a considerable amount of professional and industry consultation throughout this project, thus providing them with a fantastic opportunity to showcase their research capabilities,” project manager Julie Gardner from Flinders Partners, said.

“Success with this project will also enable the University to further demonstrate its credibility nationally in the area of nutrition and dietetics, and place it among the top institutions in this area of research.”

Work on the National Healthy Schools Canteen Project began last month and will take two years to complete.

Emma Kibble
Flinders’ links with the Middle East were further boosted with the visit of a high level Saudi Arabian delegation in April. Dr Ali Albeshri, Saudi Cultural Attaché and Professor Mohammed Alqatani, Manager of Academic Affairs of the Saudi Cultural Mission in Canberra discussed Saudi students enrolled at the University – who are sponsored under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program – with the International Office, Enrolment Services, International Student Services Unit, Student Learning Centre and the Intensive English Language Institute.

The Mission’s role is to facilitate the admission as well as provide ongoing assistance for Saudi sponsored students at the University. In 2008 there are nearly 20 students undertaking courses ranging from undergraduate paramedic studies to postgraduate studies in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) and education.

Flinders is committed to developing links with potential student markets in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East in general. In the past two and half years the University has visited the region on eight occasions.

Corruption prevails despite reformasi: Hadiz

Associate Professor Vedi Hadiz

The reformasi movement has delivered important changes to Indonesia, including direct elections and greater press freedom, but “money politics” – the system of bribery, pay-offs and corruption that underpins power, wealth and influence in society – remains entrenched and is proliferating.

At Flinders University to present the 2008 Flinders Asian Studies Lecture, Associate Professor Vedi Hadiz of the University of Singapore said that along with the peddling of influence, political thuggery is on the rise.

A long-time observer and analyst of Indonesian society and politics, Associate Professor Hadiz said that while many institutions have been transformed, the “predatory social interests and forces” that existed under Suharto have survived his downfall and are prospering.

“They have reorganised into new vehicles such as political parties, and reinvented themselves as democrats and reformers,” Associate Professor Hadiz said.

“Rather than achieving their predatory objectives from the protection of an authoritarian state and its security apparatus, they now achieve these aims by the control and manipulation of democratic institutions.”

Alongside burgeoning, albeit decentralised, corruption, some regions have seen an increase in levels of political thuggery, as paramilitary and youth gangs formerly linked to Suharto seek new patronage.

“A lot of political contenders will have their private security arms, and their job is, when necessary, to mobilise and intimidate,” Associate Professor Hadiz said.

He said that although corruption affects all democracies to varying extents, Indonesia can be placed in a category that includes countries such as Thailand, the Philippines or Russia.

Many commentators suggested reformasi would prosper under good leadership, but Associate Professor Hadiz said his own less optimistic predictions have been vindicated.

While conceding that weak leadership under the politically compromised presidencies of Habibie and Megawati did contribute to the failure of reformasi, Associate Professor Hadiz said that the liberal democrats who came to power under President Abdul Rahman Wahid (aka Gus Dur) were also dragged into the mire of money politics.

“Gus Dur found that in order to survive, he had to play the exact same dirty game that his opponents played,” he said.

Associate Professor Hadiz sees little prospect of improvement in the short term, because the intended effects of institutional reform, such as direct elections, have not materialised.

“Before reformasi, presidents, governors, mayors and district heads used to be elected in closed chambers of parliament and local assemblies, and party members were bribed to secure their votes; now the change to direct elections means that rather than eradicating money politics, it has been transferred from parliament to society at large,” he said.

“Now the candidates have to spread their money around.”

Charles Gent
Pricking consciences and shaming the shameless

Political cartooning is one of the last remaining avenues to shame the shameless and prick the national conscience on the big issues in life, according to Flinders academics, Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian.

The Associate Professors from the School of Political and International Studies and the Department of English, Creative Writing and Australian Studies respectively, have just published the country's first study of political cartooning.

Liberally laced with funny examples, Comic Commentators takes the reader into the satirical world of leading Australian cartoonists and explores the impact of their art.

"When we started formally studying political cartoons back in 1996, it looked like a beautifully designed research project, flicking through newspapers looking for the cartoons and being able to call it 'work','' Associate Professor Phiddian told Flinders Journal.

"While it was the sort of thing that risked giving academics a bad name, it became increasingly clear that political cartoons are very significant," he said.

"Cartoons are virtually the only remaining anti-spin and shaming devices left in the mainstream newspapers at a time when spin and shamelessness are a ballooning element in public life."

Or as Associate Professor Manning puts it: "Political cartooning is a license to mock the kings and queens of political life."

The cover of Comic Commentators is a case in point. With allusions to the Red Nose Day charity fundraiser, The Australian's Bill Leak sketches former Prime Minister John Howard holding a tray of noses adorned with the United States flag next to a sign saying Help the War Effort. The cartoon is titled National Brown-Nose Day.

Elsewhere, the authors note that hundreds of cartoons dealing with the 2001 Tampa crisis uniformly advocated more humane treatment for refugees but that this unanimity clearly had little impact on public opinion, which remained broadly opposed to 'illegal immigrants'.

"Still, cartoonists were quite the most un governable part of the media on this topic, and remain so. At the very least, they provided support and consolation to those opposed to a policy and its media-managed execution," they said.

Comic Commentators - Contemporary Political Cartooning in Australia is available from Network Books for $34.95 on link: www.api-network.com/secure/payment/

Peter Gill

Users of ‘ice’ are taking their habits to work

The use of "ice" – the illicit drug methamphetamine – is causing and contributing to growing levels of workplace absenteeism, but even more alarming is that many methamphetamine users are turning up to work while under its influence.

In a new study focusing on the use of methamphetamine by Australians in paid employment, researchers from the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) at Flinders University found that the highest rates of methamphetamine use is among workers in the hospitality industry.

Four per cent of the workforce had used methamphetamine in the past 12 months and the 18 to 29 age group have the highest rate of use (11.2 per cent). Close to a third (32.9 per cent) of employed methamphetamine users reported going to work while under the influence of the drug, while just over 13 per cent reported that they had failed to attend work because of illicit drug use.

The study, based on data from the 2004 National Drug Household Survey, has recently been published in the Drug and Alcohol Review. One of the report's authors, Dr Ken Pidd, said that although methamphetamine users represent a very small fraction of the workforce, the findings give cause for considerable concern on several fronts.

"There is an obvious link to lost productivity through heightened absenteeism – apart from absences from work due directly to illicit drug use, 56.8 per cent of methamphetamine users reported absenteeism due to illness and injury in the three months before the survey," Dr Pidd said.

Statistics reveal that employed methamphetamine users are more extensive polydrug users, with the other drugs used most commonly being alcohol (99 per cent), tobacco (85 per cent), ecstasy (34 per cent) and cocaine (23 per cent).

The occupational profiles of ice users is also alarming; Dr Pidd said with use among workers in the hospitality industry running at 9.5 per cent (of the total of 4 per cent of the population), at 5.4 per cent in the construction and transport industry and at 6.5 per cent among tradespeople, there are clear implications for occupational health and safety.

"When compared to users of other illicit drugs, methamphetamine users are significantly more likely to drive a car, operate heavy machinery or abuse someone while under the influence," Dr Pidd said.

"They pose risks not only to themselves, but to their co-workers and members of the public."

As well as defining the scale and nature of the problem, Dr Pidd said the study’s development of a ‘profile’ of workers who use methamphetamine means that there is now an opportunity to develop more cost-effective targeted intervention and prevention programs.

Charles Gent
Funding for new health research centre

Flinders University will establish a new research centre to examine ways of improving health outcomes and preventing people falling through society’s cracks after a leading academic received a coveted Federation Fellowship from the Federal Government.

Professor Fran Baum became Flinders’ inaugural recipient of the fellowship, when, last month, she was named as one of 14 outstanding researchers who will share in $23 million of funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) over the next five years.

“This is pretty significant achievement, not only for myself and the University, but for the field of Social Science as a whole,” Professor Baum, who is Head of the University’s Department of Public Health, said.

“Historically, very few social scientists have been recognised by these grants, but winning this grant is very timely given that social inclusion and health inequality are priority issues for the new Federal Government,” she said.

Over the next five years, Professor Baum will receive a salary, plus an additional $1.6 million in funding from the ARC. She will also receive additional funding from research partners, including Flinders University, the State Government and other Government agencies.

The funding will be used to establish the Australian Institute of Society, Health and Equity at Flinders, a centre aimed at identifying how the economy, and society more generally, reduces the opportunities for people to receive the best health outcomes possible.

It will also look at ways of improving public health policies.

“For a researcher it’s like winning the Grand Final,” she said. “I can work full-time at research, rather than managing or teaching, lead a team of post-doctoral researchers and PhDs and develop an internationally significant research institute at Flinders.”

“Ultimately I hope that, over time, the research we generate at the institute will be used to influence and shape public policy and debate; that way we can ensure these social issues remain at the forefront of Government planning and strategy for a long time to come.”

Emma Kibble

Investigating leadership in education

Professor Israel, from the School of Law, said his research aims to identify the ways that institutional, disciplinary and national teaching award schemes have been, and could be, used to develop new generations of leadership in higher education.

The project will investigate award recipients’ understanding of leadership and will chart their development of skills, knowledge and capacity in the area.

“I am hoping the project will identify what skills, capacities, values and knowledge award recipients think today’s educational leaders need,” Professor Israel said.

“It will also map where recipients believe awards fit within the development of their careers and identify practices related to their application and subsequent success that have already contributed or could support the development of their leadership skills in learning and teaching.”

Professor Israel said the Fellowship, which starts in the second half of 2009, will also involve a series of case studies to explore how institutions use teaching awards to generate leadership opportunities, as well as a review of international best practices.

The complete findings will then be used to develop a range of best practices, which will be trialed on participants in the Flinders University Leadership Program.

“Participants in the program will be provided with cutting-edge information about how their academic peers view and develop leadership in the current educational environment, helping participants understand the contextual and varied nature of leadership within tertiary education,” Professor Israel said.

“The findings of the report and new strategies will then be disseminated to Carrick and other institutions in the hope that they may be implemented across the sector.”

Emma Kibble

PHOTO: Linda Nylind
With more than three decades of service to the University in a variety of different roles, Deputy Chancellor Ian Yates epitomises service to the community.

Mr Yates began his association with the University Council in 1970, when the then Arts student was elected as President of the Student Representative Council. After graduating in 1972, he stayed on at Flinders in the role of Executive Officer of the University Union and in the early 1990s returned as a member, and later President, of the Convocation and Alumni Association Committees. Several decades of experience in operating in political and senior public service arenas as a lobbyist and representative at both state and national levels, coupled with his extensive background in senior management as Chief Executive of the Council on the Ageing, has also proven to be an invaluable resource for the University – especially in the fields of community and commercial engagement.

With his intimate knowledge of the University system, Mr Yates firmly believes Flinders is poised to enhance and further its reputation as a centre for teaching and learning excellence in the coming years.

“At this time, I strongly endorse the direction our new Vice-Chancellor has outlined in his State of Flinders University paper and I will assist the implementation of those ideas in any way I can, through my roles as Deputy Chancellor, Resources Committee Chair and active alumnus,” he said.

Flinders University has joined the Close the Gap campaign to redress the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders die 17 years younger than other Australians and Indigenous infant mortality is three times that of other Australians.

The Close the Gap pledge signed by Vice-Chancellor, Professor Michael Barber, says “it is a national disgrace that Indigenous Australians do not have the same access to health services that other Australians enjoy”.

The campaign calls on Australian governments to take action to achieve health equality for Indigenous Australians within 25 years through:

• Increasing annual Indigenous health funding by $460 million per year to enable equal access to health services - as recommended by an Access Economics report commissioned by the Australian Medical Association,
• Increasing Indigenous control and participation in the delivery of health services,
• Addressing critical social issues such as housing, education and self-determination which contribute to the Indigenous health crisis.

“As an institution with a strong commitment to indigenous education and advancing public health, Flinders University is pleased to support the Close the Gap campaign,” Professor Barber said.
Oz drama database now boasts 40,000 entries

AusStage, the database of Australian theatrical productions based at Flinders University, has notched up its 40,000th entry.

Begun in 1999, and now on its third round of funding from the Australian Research Council, the project brings together 22 partners, including 18 universities, in an ambitious project to provide basic details of every play, musical or performance mounted in the country.

Dr Jonathan Bollen, who oversees the project at Flinders, said that AusStage is primarily text-based. While the database does allow extra information to be stored, he said one of its most important roles is to provide links that point to other on-line arts resources. Performing arts collections around the country, particularly in libraries, hold extensive digitised images as well as more detailed information on productions and performers.

One of the earliest performances documented in AusStage links to a promotional flier held in the National Library, which advertised a performance of the play Jane Shore in Sydney in 1796. Much of the recent effort, however, has been devoted to methods of capturing information about contemporary productions. Dr Bollen said the database incorporates forms that allow self-reporting (subject to verification), and also draws on searchable newspaper databases to track down theatre reviews.

Dr Bollen said that building up comprehensive pictures of particular periods is often assisted by specific research projects at partner institutions. As well as collecting information from arts funding bodies, researchers make face-to-face contact with individual theatre companies to retrieve programs and records of performances.

Eventually, Dr Bollen said, the database aims to offer graphic or animated features so that it can act as an interactive interface, allowing users to track the dissemination of a given play.

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Italian Spiderman spawns ten sequels

He’s pudgy, moustachioed and obnoxious, and now he’s going to star in his own movie.

The South Australian Film Corporation recently made a $9,500 grant to support the development of a series of short videos based on the character of Italian Spiderman, the dubious superhero created by Flinders University Screen Studies graduate Dario Russo.

Italian Spiderman, a mock three-minute ‘trailer’ for a very bad 1964 Italian film that never existed, initially achieved cult status on the internet hosting sites YouTube and MySpace. It has since gone on to international fame, garnering more than 18 million hits in its five-month life on the web.

The basic footage was shot in a single day on 16mm film, and the cheap special effects, overblown voiceover and cheesy soundtrack – integral features of B-grade Italian movies – were incorporated later. The video, made as a final year project for the Screen Studies course, used the University’s 1960s concrete architecture and pine forest as backdrops.

Thanks to the SA Film Corporation funding, the first half-hour of the “lost” full-length movie will be posted on the internet in 10 three-minute instalments, beginning later this year.

Beyond producing a soundtrack single, Mr Russo said there are no plans for the Spiderman to go commercial. If his popularity continues, however, the whole movie may yet emerge.

“[If people keep on watching it, it will probably keep on coming,]” he said.

To learn more about Italian Spiderman, go to www.alrugo.com

Charles Gent

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www.flinders.edu.au/news

Diary date

FRIDAY, MAY 16 2008

THURSDAY, MAY 29 2008
6pm – Law Public Lecture, Moot Court, Law and Commerce Building. ‘Animal Law Talk: an Indian perspective,’ Mr Raj Parwani. One of India’s foremost legal advocates for animals and animal protection relates some his 25 years of experience in the courts. RSVP to events@voiceless.com.au

Charles Gent