

PARALLEL IMPORTATION OF BOOKS

Submission to:
The Australian Productivity Commission
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From: Reg Morrison,

I have no personal interest in fiction/leisure books, but if the economic risk to local publishers is further increased by relaxing restrictions on the Parallel Importation of books, the added hardship and risk to such publishers to will restrict the publication of Australia's serious writers as well. This has already happened to a large extent. Here is an illustration:

There was no GST and no parallel importation of books when I proposed to a publisher in 1983 that I research, write and illustrate a major book on the four-billion-year evolution (geological and biological) of this continent. That publisher courageously took the risk of underwriting this massively expensive four-year project. Published in 1988 this book became recommended reading for all NSW High School Earth-Science students, and even found its way into university recommended-reading lists (Macquarie University). Meanwhile, it sold something in excess of 40,000 copies both here and overseas, mainly the US, despite a text that was exclusively based on evolution, and a price tag that generally hovered above A\$50. It was so successful that some 14 years later a soft-cover edition was republished (8,300 copies according to my records) by another local publisher. It too, sold well, both here and in the US (4,500 copies). I'm no great writer, but the research earned me a research Fellowship at the Australian Museum and the book itself was used as part of the very first Eureka Science Prize in 1989.

Things would be very different today. The imposition of GST and the flood of cheap books from all over the world has ensured that local publishers are extremely unlikely to take such risks in the future. If the GST remains on educational books and parallel importation restrictions are further eroded, there is not the faintest possibility that such a book project would be considered by an Australian publisher.

Let me offer another illustration:

Following the overwhelming success of my first 'coffee-table' evolution book I wanted to make its crucial information more accessible to High School science students, so I compiled a small, very cheap, abbreviated version of the large book.

Between 1999 and 2003 I offered this fully-designed, ready-to-print book to 19 different educational publishers, all of whom liked the style and content of the book but said they could not afford to take the risk since it was not a 'text-book'. I also offered it to two general publishers, but it was 'too educational' for them to take the risk.

There being nothing else of this nature in the book stores—certainly nothing that was exclusively Australian—I decided to self-publish, with the aid of a husband and wife publishing company to manage the printing. My wife and I then distributed the book to schools ourselves. Almost 3,000 copies have now been snapped up by resource-starved Earth-Science teachers.

Encouraged by this success I then embarked on a very similar companion work aimed at biology teachers. Like the previous book this too, exclusively consists of my text, photographs, illustrations and design. It has just been printed, and my wife and I will personally distribute it at our own and our publishing partners' joint expense in 2009.

Despite the fact that the content of both of these books is exclusively Australian and entirely unique, I have now had expressions of interest from two American publishers (Thompson Learning and Chelsea Green). I personally doubt that either is likely to proceed to publication, nevertheless, if by some strange chance the two American companies do publish, but over estimate their US market, the discounted excess stock might eventually be dumped back on Australian retail shelves—at half price, or less. I would then be unable to sell the rest of my personal stock. If the Parallel Importation restrictions were to be relaxed there would be nothing at all to prevent this.

I would therefore argue that:

- GST should be immediately removed from all educational books,
- The current parallel-import restrictions should be strengthened,
- Ms Louise Sylvan should be removed from the Commission. (Given her past advocacy in favour of the parallel importation of books her presence on this commission is not only untenable, but offensive to Australian authors like me.)

Reg Morrison

Reg Morrison
23/12/08

Books mentioned in the above text:

The Voyage of the Great Southern Ark—1988, Lansdowne Press, Sydney. This was republished as:
Australia, Land beyond time—2002, Reed New Holland, Sydney, and Cornell University Press, New York.

Australia's Four Billion Year Diary—2005, Sainty & Associates, Sydney.

The Diary of 'You': Four billion years of human evolution—2008, Sainty & Associates, Sydney.