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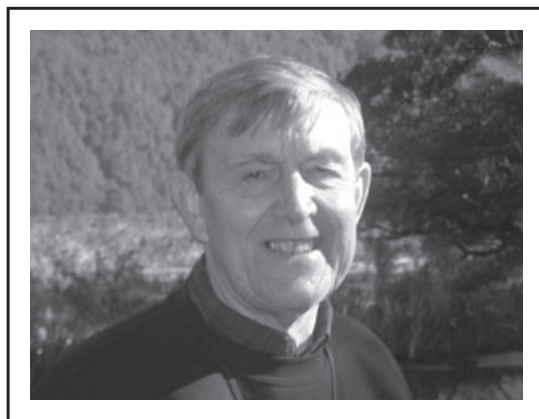
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## 2009 AARES Distinguished Fellow

**Ian R. Wills**



Ian Wills grew up on a sheep and grain farm at Lake Bolac in western Victoria. He studied agricultural science at the University of Melbourne, graduating BAgSci in 1962. He returned briefly to the farm, but a combination of push and pull factors (footrot and the encouragement of the late Alan Lloyd), saw him return to the university to complete his MAgSci at Melbourne in 1966, and his PhD at the University of Illinois. His doctoral studies in the United States included 6 months at the University of Chicago under T.W. Schultz, which led to his doctoral topic, a study of the impacts of Green Revolution technologies on Indian farming.

After teaching in the Department of Agricultural Economics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Ian returned to Australia in 1972. From then until his retirement at the end of 2006, he was based in the Economics Department at Monash University, where he taught and researched in environmental economics, agricultural economics and development economics.

Ian has written many articles, conference papers and consultancy reports in the overlapping areas of agricultural economics, development economics and environmental economics. He has also written two editions of the highly regarded textbook *Economics and the Environment: A Signalling and Incentives Approach*. That title points to Ian's approach not only in his books but also in his work more generally: market and public decision makers' information and incentives are viewed as central in explaining behaviour and in analysing policy issues. The textbook reflects Ian's interest in explaining

economics to students and a wider audience of policy makers and specialists in other fields.

Ian has made significant contributions to debates on several natural resource issues, including regulation of rural land use and ‘sustainability’. The question ‘where is the market failure?’ was central in his thinking as he addressed land use issues in the sugarcane lands, the Yarra Valley and elsewhere. Ian credits the arguments of farmer and planner colleagues on the Farm Management Advisory Committee of the Upper Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges Authority in the late 1970s for prompting his interest in market failure arguments for regulation of rural land use. Among Ian’s writings on land use controls are an economic appraisal of the justification for controls in a 1983 report of the Senate Standing Committee on Science, Technology and the Environment, and an examination of the economic case for government intervention to address degradation of agricultural land published in *Australian Journal of Agricultural Economics* Volume 31(1), 1988.

In the early 1990s, governments developed an enthusiasm for initiatives to promote ‘sustainable development’. Ian was prominent among the economists who tried to provide meaningful and economically sound guidance on defining and pursuing this ill-specified objective. One of Ian’s insights, outlined in *Policy*, volume 8(3), 1992, was that the openness of a society was the most useful predictor of how successful it would be in achieving sustainability. The theme of the importance of societal institutions for sustainability is extended in his textbook; when economic–environmental systems are so complex that it is impossible to know what actions will promote sustainability, society’s learning and the signalling and incentive systems are likely to be the best indicator of sustainability – of ability to adapt to changing social, economic and environmental circumstances. In recent years, Ian has worked on several consultancies on environmental flows and floodplain restoration in the Murray–Goulburn system; in these, also, sustainability considerations were relevant. Between 2000 and 2007, Ian also pursued his interest in sustainability as co-editor, with Yew-Kwang Ng, of the Welfare Economics and Sustainable Development theme within the online *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, produced by UNESCO and EOLSS.

Sometimes in partnership with postgraduate students and others, Ian devoted substantial effort to countries other than Australia. Aside from his PhD research on India, he wrote papers on property rights in China (with Xiaokai Yang), a book *Land Preparation in West Java: Benefits and Costs of Alternative Techniques* (with I.K. Nehen), land tenure and land policy in Sarawak (with Robert Cramb), cross-cultural costs of exchange in Malaysia (with Ergan Dogan and Russell Smyth), and land use controls in the United States.

The 1997 and 2006 editions of Ian’s textbook have the following sentences at the opening of chapter 1: ‘...the route to resolution of environmental problems lies through first understanding and then reducing these incentive and informational barriers. But the complexities of human–environment interactions, where people are both dependent on the environment and capable of

changing it, mean that the task will be anything but easy'. In the spirit of F.A. Hayek, whose inspiration he acknowledges, Ian provides in his book an assessment of how, and how well, markets and government planning can prevent the failures in co-ordination between people's decisions on natural resources that are the cause of environmental problems. The conceptual treatment, which is presented with a well-rounded perspective, is complemented by substantial discussions of important local and global environmental problems that many readers have found very valuable. In his writing, as in conversation, Ian is not one for terse presentations: his style is to spell out the story!

Largely for family reasons, Ian looked forward to opportunities to spend time in the United States. On several occasions he was visiting scholar in the Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Arizona, Tucson. He also had visiting appointments at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the University of Minnesota, St Paul, the Food Research Institute, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, and Political Economy Research Centre, Bozeman, Montana. Down under he was a visitor in the Political Economy Research Unit, CSIRO Land and Water, Adelaide for 3 months in 2004. Preceding all these visiting appointments was a Ford Foundation PhD scholar residency at the Pant Agricultural University, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Ian has been a long-time member of AAES/AARES. He was president of the Victorian Branch in 1981 and has served and supported it in other ways over more than 40 years. From 1974 to 1977 Ian was joint editor with Alistair Watson of *The Australian Journal of Agricultural Economics*. It was on the Watson/Wills watch that the article that is arguably the most-often cited *Journal* publication appeared in 1976: Bob Gregory's 'Some Implications of the Growth of the Minerals Sector' (volume 20, number 2, pp. 71–91).