

Sunday, October 26, 2003

Susan Cunningham

Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra  
ACT, 2600

Dear Sir,

**Re: Sustainable Cities 2025**

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Terms of Reference and discussion paper for this inquiry and would like to register my interest in taking part in later discussion groups if such an opportunity exists.

My background to and interest in this topic are as follows:

- My academic studies in ecology and biodiversity provide me with some theoretical context,
- My previous employment with community groups gives me some knowledge of public intent and community capacity,
- My present employment gives me some knowledge of State Government processes and interests,
- My position as landowner of an acreage block bordering a creek within suburbia gives me some knowledge of local government authority perspectives, policies, and practices, and of urban neighbouring residents desires, and
- My involvement in real estate investment gives me some appreciation of the pressures that constrain urban development.

I consider the discussion paper to be a good starting point but I would have liked to see more media coverage of this inquiry.

I reside in Rockhampton in Central Queensland so my perspective will reflect my experiences here, and the neighbouring Capricorn Coast region.

This submission will be brief and I intend to focus on three areas of special interest: sewerage use, urban nature conservation and the effect of building codes on sustainable and eco-efficient building design.

***1. Sewerage use***

At present Rockhampton's sewerage is treated to a minimal standard (I am not sure if secondary or tertiary) and then discharged into the Fitzroy River and thence to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) inner lagoon. The Capricorn Coast's sewerage is also disposed of by release into the inner GBR lagoon. Meanwhile, water supply is becoming a critical issue for both population centres. There appears to be no recognition in the community that recycling sewerage would relieve much of the supply pressure while removing a

degradative impact from the GBR. Treating and returning sewerage to the water storages is not technically difficult but at present the focus is on “finding more water”.

The TOR for this inquiry has not specifically mentioned sewerage use/recycling for consideration. I would recommend that the TOR be expanded to investigate how recycling sewerage might be a part of sustainable cities in the future. Undoubtedly there are public perceptions that oppose sewerage reuse, but there are also institutional and economic factors that should be addressed. This inquiry could be a great opportunity to take sewerage reuse into public debate and examine how to overcome those negative factors.

## ***2. Urban nature conservation***

The concept of “settlements which can be co-habitated by people, flora and fauna” (p. 5 of the discussion paper) is noble and self-satisfying but hardly practical. I am all in favour of having this discussion in the public arena and applaud you for putting it up for consideration but I consider it an exercise in making humans feel warm and fuzzy.

Native wildlife (both flora and fauna) falls broadly into one of three categories.

- The first are those who do very well in human-created environments. They are usually called “pests” (eg. magpies).
- The second are those that survive in human-created environments but usually with high rates of attrition and often without humans being aware of how badly impacted they are (eg. bandicoots). These are usually called “common” but without any real justification.
- The third are those that simply don’t do well in such highly disturbed environments and/or if they did we’d have major problems co-habiting with them (eg. large kangaroos).

In practice, urban nature conservation requires large areas of habitat linked to other such patches and locked away from human influences, or it needs a radical restructure of how we interact with nature. Such a restructure would require the serious containment of domestic pets like dogs and cats, major revision of how local government authorities manage public lands for public good, and a complete renewal of how neighbouring urban residents view the wilderness over their back fence.

In my experience, local councils want to maintain all public land in a park-like setting, and hence destroy much of the habitat required by wildlife (official vandalism). Urban residents want public lands looking all neat and tidy, except for where they want to dump lawn clippings and such like (unofficial vandalism). Everyone agrees controlling cats and dogs is a good thing, but not their own cat or dog which should be exempt from any such controls (pet vandalism). The tragedy of the commons is alive and well and living in suburban Australia.

We need to remember that nature does not need managing. It is human interactions with nature that need to be managed.

Urban nature conservation in practice requires (in my opinion) the following:

- Suburbs buffered from neighbouring wilderness areas and urban expansion prevented from gradual encroachment (this would assist with bushfire control also),
- Dog and cat controls to be stringent, and to be enforced rigorously,
- Management of public lands to be undertaken with habitat preservation a higher priority than short-term prettiness,
- Human access to be controlled so that all forms of vandalism are minimised, and
- Habitat linkages to be preserved as a priority, or recreated where necessary.

Encouraging humans to manage their backyards in a more wildlife-friendly way would be another positive step forward. Lawn, for example, has little to offer Australian native wildlife.

In Rockhampton, which has a human population that is steady, more native vegetation has recently been cleared for house construction even though there are unoccupied lots in the central area, which could be redeveloped. Local speculation abounds as to just where all the people are to come from to occupy these houses. There will be no co-habiting with wildlife on these blocks, there is no wildlife left.

### ***3. The effect of building codes on sustainable and eco-efficient building design***

Three years ago I went to build a new house as an investment. I know more about sustainable building now than I did then. I was dismayed to find that in tropical Queensland I couldn't easily find a builder who built high-set houses. They are now all building lowset brick-on-slab houses. These are suitable for southern cold climates but not for Rockhampton. They are eminently unsuitable and require ongoing energy inputs to make the interior liveable. Further, the building designs are now more unsuitable than they were three years ago. Eaves, for example, are almost non-existent.

My perspective is that for many people building a sustainable eco-efficient house must be easy for them. They don't have the time or knowledge – or money – to go chasing architects. They need to be able to buy “off the shelf” as it were and if an eco-efficient house isn't available off the shelf, they'll build a brick box because it's too difficult to do anything else.

Builders have to satisfy the market and if they aren't getting requests for eco-efficient houses, they have no reason to design and market them.

Hence we have a Catch-22 situation – no apparent market pressure for builders to build eco-efficiency and no apparent market from which the majority of buyers can choose.

It seems to me that eco-efficiency needs to be a basic part of building a house, any and every house, not only architect specials. As a society we have to say that if sustainability is important (and we all agree it is) then we factor in the basics to every house, every building, from here on. Sustainable building design should not be an optional extra just for those with the money, time and knowledge to go down a difficult path. We need to change the building codes. To the credit of Rockhampton City Council, these changes are under way.

Finally, thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission and I would like to reiterate my interest in taking part in any discussion or public hearings you may offer at a later date.

Yours sincerely,

Susan Cunningham