

**Submission to the Inquiry by the Commonwealth House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee into a Sustainability Charter**

The House Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage is to be congratulated for its inquiry into and report on the potential development of a national *Sustainability Charter for Australia*. Many Australians now accept recycling of papers and plastic from their households but do not consider the bigger picture of the ecological footprint of their urban consumption of food, water and power and its transport delivery impacts.

The charter should be aspirational so that all Australians are aware of the special characteristics of this, the only nation occupying a whole continent and one that is ancient in origin. It should be simple and clear in its concepts and able to be promoted to all levels of our society. A catchy slogan could headline its intentions.

Your discussion paper outlines the need for targets for the sustainability of water, transport, energy, building design and planning – recommendation 1. However, I believe that heritage should be added to this as it is fundamental in underpinning all aspects of Australia's environment.

**Heritage considerations:**

Our heritage, the surrounding landscape layered with places and associated objects, tells the story of who we are, what we have done over time in Australia and our relationship to the environment. We have shaped that landscape and it has shaped us and how we have lived, and formed our cultural identity. Our heritage is a living record of places, objects, events, associations and memories which define and sustain our natural and cultural history. It is central to our wellbeing and our sense of identity as Australians. It is for us, the present generation, to nourish and nurture this inheritance for future generations. But this inheritance has been under increasing threat as economic restructuring, and social and technological changes, have dramatically altered neighbourhoods, pressured urban centres, and emptied the countryside. If Australians could see that their heritage needs to be considered in a sustainability framework like air and water as an essential aspect of their daily environment rather than as a one-off relic from the past, then this attitudinal change would assist in environmental, economic and social renewal.

Heritage is currently one of the reporting fields in the Australian State of Environment reporting but it has not had much prominence to date. Nor have its recommendations been used in formulating policies that would ensure the sustainability of heritage places. In 2003 amendments to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* broadened the definition of 'environment' to embrace the heritage values of places.

These values include its natural and cultural environment having aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other significance for current and future generations of Australians [section 528, (47)]. This followed the Council of Australian Governments, or COAG, review in 1997 of Commonwealth / State roles and responsibilities for the environment which also incorporated consideration of management of heritage places. COAG decided to redefine the role of the Commonwealth to focus attention on places of national heritage significance and provide the legislative capacity to offer some real protection to those places. This recognises the leadership role of the Commonwealth and is similar in intent to your Charter and its proposed workings.

Heritage conservation by its very nature requires sustainability –whether for tangible built heritage or intangible aspects which require education and training for their survival. ESD principles were at the forefront of the heritage assessments of places of cultural significance –those with historic, aesthetic, scientific, social or spiritual values - identified in the field surveys for the Regional Forest Assessments in the late 1990s.

Heritage resources are non-renewable and in urban planning schemes heritage overlays are applied to ensure that heritage values in those places so identified are protected in any new developments or enhancements.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Policy Framework and Incentives for the Conservation of Australia's Historic Built Heritage Places solicited many submissions in from August 2005 to January 2006. The Australian Heritage Council recommended that the Productivity Commission consider the following measures to ensure sustainability of our heritage:

1. The importance of integrating all aspects of heritage at all levels of government in both legislation and policy;
2. The Australian Government build the National Heritage List as a central plank of its heritage policy;
3. A strengthened Commonwealth leadership role in fostering national identity through the identification and interpretation of nationally significant heritage places and stories and through historic themes;
4. The need to lift standards for conservation works in the built environment and to develop consistent standards in assessment;
5. The need to close the legislative gaps in protection of the historic environment;
6. The development of education curricula incorporating knowledge and appreciation of Australia's heritage and supporting training programs in heritage conservation;
7. The development, especially for regionally disadvantaged places, of an appropriate shared formula between governments for funding conservation works where the private sector cannot provide resources;
8. The development of a mix of grants and incentives to support sustainable use of heritage places, including the imaginative use of programs not specifically addressing heritage issues, such as tourism and regional development programs;

9. The development of new mechanisms for co-ordination and co-operation between governments, especially Commonwealth-State/Territory cooperation in building the National Heritage List.

**State of Environment reporting:**

Your discussion paper (p.10) correctly states that State of Environment (SOE) reporting is not aspirational and is not a substitute for a sustainability charter. But it does supply data and information against which to measure condition, pressures and trends affecting heritage places. The *Australia State of Environment 2001* report outlined the emerging issues for historic heritage (p.4), and these have accelerated in impact since then:

**Loss of historic heritage places** continues at an uncertain pace due to:

- urban redevelopment – main street redevelopments and loss of functions due to shopping centre constructions,
- urban consolidation impacting on the heritage character of older suburbs,
- abandonment of rural structures–due to changing technology and new markets/products,
- public building redundancy due to movement of client population especially in rural areas, asset rationalisation and mergers,
- loss of cultural landscapes through changing rural use patterns.

This historic environment is also broad in type and distribution from first settlement sites to grand public buildings, from vernacular buildings to complex industrial sites. At the end of 2000, there were 13,101 places entered in the Register of the National Estate, 75 % of which were historic places and New South Wales dominated with nearly one third of all places.

Much of the change to environmental conditions in the settled coastal strip, its hinterland catchments and forested areas over the past five to ten years can be attributed to the pressures of population growth. The Human Settlements theme report of SOE reporting documents many of the impacts in relation to energy use, material consumption and waste disposal. Moreover, the spread of settlement with its consequential flow-on effects on stormwater discharge, sedimentation, pollution of waterways, and destruction of biodiversity (including weed proliferation) presents enormous challenges to planners, engineers, developers, environmental managers, and communities as they seek to retain (and perhaps even enhance) environmental values. And it is in this settled area that both natural and cultural heritage values are often damaged beyond recognition although the presence of strong community groups often ensures the protection of valued heritage features (see Lennon et al., 2001). One clear message from the various studies conducted over the past ten years is that what happens in one part of the landscape/catchment is being transferred elsewhere. In the meantime, useful SOE reporting is confronted with the challenge of accessing and analysing diverse, incomplete or otherwise inadequate data sets.

Further development of heritage policies and reporting on their outputs through SOE indicators has been proposed in many submissions to the Productivity Commission inquiry. This would certainly be enhanced by working with other sectors of government to ensure sustainability of inputs to projects instead of the silo effect and, in some cases, funding programs which cancel out each other's objectives. The Chairs of the Heritage Councils of Australia and New Zealand recommended that the *State of the Environment Report* should be confirmed as the key ongoing performance monitoring mechanism for the conservation of historic heritage places, with appropriate financial support provided to match its status to facilitate this at all levels of government. We await the final report of the Productivity Commission on this inquiry.

### **Cultural capital and sustainability:**

The cultural values or cultural capital of heritage has been increasingly studied, especially in urban planning. English Heritage has been at the forefront most recently in this field:

The publication of the Power of Place (2000) report, and the government's response in *The Historic Environment: a Force for Our Future* (DCMS/DTLR, 2001), were seminal moments in the development of public policy for the historic environment in recent years. The reports crystallised a new way of thinking about the heritage all around us, in terms of the different ways in which the historic environment adds social, economic and environmental value to people and communities. Both reports helped to raise the profile and understanding of the historic environment within government and with wider stakeholders (*Heritage Counts*, 2004).

There are excellent lessons for us in these responses of the public to the power of place. Many associated reports are found at: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/sher/>

Heritage is a capital asset that yields a flow of economic, social and cultural services now and into the future. As such it can be compared with natural environment capital. It is now accepted that we have a duty as a society to manage our natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations; the same duty can be asserted for the cultural capital that we have inherited from the past and want to pass on to future generations. In addition, the goal of sustainable development, now clearly understood in regard to the management of natural capital, is just as relevant in its application to cultural heritage - the nation's development will be unsustainable in cultural terms if we neglect to look after our heritage.

Cultural capital involves reinforcing or rediscovering national and regional identity as well as issues of shared heritage and social cohesion. This has implications for social arrangements like education, community activities like festivals, marketing distinctive traits of the historic and natural environment and job creation.

The World Bank has finally recognized that ‘cultural resources are important as sources of valuable historical and scientific information, as assets for economic and social development, and as integral parts of a people's cultural identity and practices.’ It now has an operational policy on Cultural Property whose objective is ‘to avoid, or mitigate, adverse impacts on cultural resources from development projects that the World Bank finances.’ In June 2005 the Bank endorsed a policy of community driven development to increase social accountability and control over cultural resources  
[[Inweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/52ByDocName/CulturalProperty](http://web18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/52ByDocName/CulturalProperty)].

The English National Trust commissioned research to examine the role of the historic environment in making a significant contribution to social regeneration and community wellbeing. Analytical techniques for understanding the way in which people interact with the historic environment were developed and a range of indicators to measure whether or not they benefit were devised. The objective is to help the historic environment sector ‘to put heritage to work where it is needed most’ and to move beyond the ‘regeneration rhetoric.’ The results of the first stage which show that engagement in heritage activities increases social capital and community social benefits such as health, wealth and education can be found at:

<http://www.archaeologists.net/modules/icontent/inPages/docs/pubs/soccont.pdf>.

#### **Sustainability Objectives and their measurement:**

As your paper noted (p.15), reducing the ecological footprint of Australian cities could be one of the major, overarching and measurable objectives of the proposed sustainability charter. This would also provide a clear link with heritage impacts in urban and rural areas.

The Rio Declaration on sustainability, Agenda 21, conventions on climate change, biodiversity, forests, desertification, fisheries etc are coherent meta-policies setting frameworks. But with them come difficult problems –variable spatial and temporal scales, intricately connected problems, pervasive risk and uncertainty, poorly assigned management responsibilities, poorly defined property rights and well-justified demands for community participation. Due to *ad hoc* policy and amnesia or ignorance of environmental history, Australian landscapes are still deteriorating, as we are not good at persisting with long term monitoring, with implementation, policy evaluation and learning, continuing consultation with relevant stakeholders and ‘fall victim to fads, fashions and changes of mind both political and academic’ (Dovers, 2000:146-8).

A recent study of Australia’s journey towards sustainability, while acknowledging the four pillars of sustainability – ecological, social, economic and cultural – concentrated on the ecological pillar. It used many of the issues of Australia’s State of Environment reporting arguing that ‘we need to know the scientific requirements as precisely as possible...then more effectively as possible make the social and economic adjustments’ (Yencken and Wilkinson, 2000:9-10). It acknowledged that change will have to be tightly argued for ‘because it challenges many well established mind-sets, structures and power

relationships' (ibid.,) and in its short discussion on cultural sustainability, showed that young people have environmentally supportive beliefs but lack conceptual knowledge (ibid., 359). However, it did not examine environmental history and our lack of knowledge of this essential ingredient in the sustainability of cultural heritage of our landscapes.

Despite the professional gaze encompassing a wider, holistic view of environment, with intangible as well as tangible attributes but worked through administrative and legal distinctions, the community view is often different. The high prominence of natural heritage places nominated for heritage protection, along with movable cultural property such as artefacts, and memorials suggests that the professional distinction between heritage types is not prominent in public consciousness

The natural and cultural heritage theme report for the *Australia State of the Environment 2001* report discussed “Sustainable Heritage” which was defined as meaning that the nation’s heritage is respected and appreciated by Australians and international visitors and that use of, and visits to, heritage places and objects contribute to the social and economic well-being of the nation and its constituents without detriment to the heritage resources; and the integrity of the heritage resources is never jeopardised (Lennon et al., 2001:5-6). Yet there exist some significant threats to the sustainability of Australia's heritage, as follows:

**Natural and Cultural Heritage: key threats to sustainability in 2001.**

Issue	Detail	Comment
Knowledge about heritage places and objects	Surveys have been undertaken but the resulting data about heritage places has not been assessed for registration	Integrated assessments will give a more holistic view of our heritage. Integrated identification and conservation of all heritage values on any particular piece of land is required
Physical condition of heritage places and objects	Little quantifiable data available and no national monitoring system is in place to assess the condition or health of heritage places.	Demolition, clearing and incremental losses continue. Heritage assistance programs at the local level are inadequate but could assist assessments.
Cultural values of all types are being neglected in natural	Indigenous heritage places can only be conserved effectively <i>in situ</i> and as part of the natural	Integrated conservation planning which provides for the protection for all values is essential.

areas	environment of which they are an integral component. Protocols not being always complied with, thus lack of sustainability of the heritage resource.	Cultural landscape framework will assist in this integrated assesment of all values for a place.
State of traditional Indigenous languages	The number of Indigenous languages and the percentage of speakers has continued to decline, although there is some language revival around one SA region.	There are an estimated 55 000 Indigenous language speakers and 20 languages regarded as 'strong'. Lack of speakers in young age groups is a concern.
Survival of heritage in areas of significant population change	Many places are under significant threat from urban expansion, redevelopment and rezoning on urban fringes and from neglect/abandonment in rural areas.	Statistics reporting losses are poor especially for rural areas.
Disposal of heritage properties	Government reorganization in all jurisdictions has resulted in redundant heritage assets	Loss of function has resulted in changed and lost heritage values for many places.
Community involvement	There has been a declining involvement of people in historic heritage and an increase in natural heritage or environmental issues. Indigenous communities are participating more in heritage protection.	As heritage becomes more professional in its methods and employment patterns change to shift and untenured work, there are less skilled volunteers available.
Impact of tourism	Government policies encourage tourism for its revenue but there are negative impacts from physical pressures on the heritage resource and from inadequate interpretation of the heritage values of places.	Lack of monitoring of impacts is a continuing concern. Lack of evaluation of visitor understanding of heritage values of tourist places.
Ignorance and lack of passion and vision for the future	Heritage like beauty has a subjective element to it; however, widespread ignorance of	Heritage becomes a business and less able to inspire citizens about the privilege and responsibility of

	Australian settlement history, Indigenous history and basic ecology means that many citizens are unable to make contextual judgements.	managing the only continent in the world occupied by one nation – Australia!
Changing legal and administrative arrangements for heritage conservation.	Failure of national leadership to date to establish a set of minimum standards for the identification, listing and conservation of heritage places	Gaps in the identification and conservation of heritage places if implemented before State, Territory and local systems are developed to fill the gaps left by the demise of the Register of the National Estate
No development or testing of models of sustainability applicable to heritage places	Places are only sustainable as heritage sites if adequately funded and protected so that their values are known and respected	Lack of monitoring of pressures affecting sustainability of historic heritage especially in urban areas.

In answer to your questions (p.16) I believe, given the above discussion, that a sustainability charter could consist of aspirational statements and measurable targets. Research is still required into development of usable indicators but this requires convergence of many existing attempts. Some existing national standards could be applied (environmental NEAPS) while others still require development for example, in the heritage field.

The implementation of the sustainability charter could be integrated into existing and improved State of Environment reporting. Given English experience recently, it would be possible to measure cultural and social values in relation to sustainability. Many submissions to the Productivity Commission also highlighted the need for measuring non-economic values in heritage conservation.

I wish you success in considering the integration of the many aspects of the Australian environment into a sustainability framework.

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