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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

SUBMISSION ON DISCUSSION PAPER – INQUIRY INTO A SUSTAINABILITY  
CHARTER

**INTRODUCTION** To be of any value this initiative must be cognisant of the real world in which Australia exists. This world is heading rapidly, largely unchecked, down the road to a situation of global environmental collapse from which it will be difficult for humanity to recover. Hence if a sustainability charter is to be of any value it must recognise this situation and incorporate relevant targets. It must also provide an achievable system of monitoring since Australia's record in this field is very bad.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS SUBMISSION** I have been involved with the environmental sustainability field since the late 1960s. At different times I have been the CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation (1973 -1986), a member of the governing body of the World Conservation Union representing Australasia and Oceania (1981 – 1988) and an environmental consultant working in this field (since 1986). As ACF Director and as an IUCN Councillor I was involved with the development of the World Conservation Strategy and the National Conservation Strategy of Australia. In 1987 as a consultant I produced a report for the federal Government on 'Environmental Indicators for Monitoring the National Conservation Strategy of Australia'. I was also a consultant for work on the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development. In 1988 I produced what I believe was the first independant conservation strategy in the world for a local area (Norfolk Island) and in 1997 produced a conservation strategy for the Great Ocean Road Region for the ACF and other groups. Both of these incorporated state of the envionment indicators. I have also been active in this field as a Councillor of the ACF (1987 to the present day). I was for instance the Coordinator of ACF Council's Task Force 2025 which advised the ACF on its role for the thirty year period from 1995 to 2025, including how to implement the necessary social change. Particular fields I have worked in include population (as a member of the National Population Council), the natural enviroment (as a member of many bodies) and trade. For my work on the last mentioned fundamental matter I received an award from The Advance Australia Association.. I played a key role in the events which led to the 1991 decision for an indefinate ban on mineral activity in Antarctica. I have similarly played a key role in the initiation and maintenance of the international moratorium on commercial whaling

**THE CONTEXT OF THE INQUIRY** The context of the inquiry is a world which is preoccupied with expansion of population and utilisation of resources. Whilst this movement is of longstanding it escalated over the last 250 years. Initially the expansion was in the form of the Eurapean occupation of lands in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australia. Over the last 100 years expansion has increasingly been achieved through the intensification of land use and the finding of new resources. This drive has been and is fuelled by the finite resource of fossil fuels which are the basis of most aspects of human life today from manufacture, household needs, and transport through to agriculture. At this stage approximately half of the stock of foossil fuels has been used up and the world is seeking to move to the nuclear energy source for base load power which also utilises a finite resource in the form of uranium. The loss of fossil fuels for fertiliser production is likely to seriously impact on agricultural yields.

The benefits of the expansion in terms of increases in material standard of living have been unequally shared with the world divided into 'have' and 'have not' nations and with large disparities amongst the population in each group.

To facilitate the expansion a large number of institutions and arrangements have been put in place and these have become a force in their own right. They include the arrangements for global free trade and competition, the use of military might to maintain the supremacy of the rich world and the preference for private enterprise over public regulation.

The way this philosophy is presented in political terms is a belief in economic and population growth and unhindered trade and competition. In the circumstances of the dominance of this culture of expansionism, growth of this kind necessarily involves an ever increasing throughput in materials for consumption. Attempts at decoupling through the introduction of sustainability measures have no chance of success except in local instances in rich countries (for instance in controlling pollution in cities). The only way they could be successful globally would be if the growth philosophy was abandoned in favour of achieving a non-expansionist steady state society.

I have outlined the very strong factors working for the maintenance of the endless growth society in attachment 1. These are all operating to extend the lifespan of our growth-oriented to the point where recovery will be very difficult. You will see from this that I believe that the present preoccupations of the environment movement, including the hope placed on sustainability measures, will most likely act in a negative way by creating a false sense that the problem can be solved by tackling the symptoms and not the cause (the cause being the nature of our growth obsession).

The only way sustainability measures can be helpful in avoiding widespread environmental degradation is if they are coupled to a move to a steady state society. That is, if they are purpose designed to be transitional steps from a growth to a steady state society. If the Sustainability Charter is to be meaningful it will need to relate to Australia's current damaging role as a major supplier of finite energy resources and to Australia's potential to use its resources in a completely different way aimed at restoration of the global physical and social environment.

THE DISCUSSION PAPER On page 4 you mention with approval the comment of Mr Chris Davies that "sustainability is a journey not a destination". I believe in any journey it is very important to work out first where you want to go. This will help set the route in the form of transitional objectives and actions. Ideally, I believe it is best to approach the securing of the future through outlining: 1) where we want to go; 2) where we are NOW; and 3) the steps we need to take to move from where we now to the desired environmentally sustainable future. My second attachment comprises a discussion paper (developed for the ACF) along these lines. Please note that since I produced this in 2005 I have changed my email address.

With regard to the historical framing, in the discussion paper a strong impression is given that the move towards sustainability has resulted from the Brundtland report of 1987. This is incorrect. The main genesis of this drive (including the Brundtland report) was the international Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. Between that date and 1987 there were many key developments in Australia which are ignored by the paper. Importantly, in 1980 IUCN with UNEP and WWF produced the 'World Conservation Strategy'. In that same year Australia began to produce 'A National Conservation Strategy for Australia Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development' This in turn led to the production of the first national state of the environment (SOE) reports. An account of the situation in Australia as it was in 1986 can be found in a paper I delivered to the Ottawa Conference on the implementation of the World Conservation Strategy. It was titled "Australian Case Studies: Strategies for the Future" (see the book 'Conservation with Equity: Strategies for Sustainable Development' (1987).

Since your discussion paper in effect denies the existence of these earlier national SOE reports it is important to mention them. A good first reference is the report (14/10/1985) of the Senate Standing Committee on Science, Technology and the Environment (reference: 'Annual Reports: National Conservation Strategy of Australia') This includes the final report of the NCS Interim Consultative Committee which includes the recommendations re the production of regular SOE reports. The first of these reports - 'State of the Environment 1985' - was published by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Environment in 1985 and was followed in 1986 by a companion 233 page source book.. A second SOE report - 'State of the Environment in Australia 1986', also published by the same Department, was published in 1987. The foreword to the 1985 report by the Environment Minister states that this is "the first comprehensive report on the state of the Australian environment".

It frankly beggars belief that your Committee is so ill informed about these events that it states incorrectly on page 10 that that the first national SOE report was produced in 1996. There is however a more important outcome of this ignorance and that is that that it is highly likely that this mindset will continue. One of the major benefits of having regular SOE reports using similar indicators is to be able to establish trends. This means that a lot of thought has to be given to the indicators and the temptation has to be resisted of continually changing them. More important still, the information gathered must be used for monitoring and trend analysis. A perfect example of how not to proceed was the failure of the 1996 SOE report to utilise the results of the 1985-86 reports. Given this appalling record I have no confidence that this aspect will be attended to. It is more likely that each time it is decided to produce an SOE it will be treated as a new venture. The Charter will need to include some safeguards on this matter.

Your discussion paper quotes with approval the Swedish Environmental Objectives. I think this approach is a good one but believe there are some other targets which could be added as follows:

- 1) reduction in social inequity including elimination of poverty;

- 2) increase in education and health care opportunities;
- 3) retention of rural amenity;
- 4) expansion of network of protected areas including wilderness;
- 5) types of energy sources utilised including increases in proportion of renewable energy; in energy supply;
- 6) extent of repair of environmental damage.;
- 7) size and distribution of population; and
- 8) indicators relating to export of materials and overseas assistance

CONCLUSION The idea of a sustainability charter is supported but a) the Charter will need to be framed in the context of the real world and deal with Australia's present contribution to damaging growth through supply of materials and its potential to be part of a grand plan to achieve global sustainability including global environmental recovery; b) SOE reporting will need to be tightly controlled to maintain its usefulness in trend monitoring.

Geoff Mosley 7<sup>th</sup> April 2006