

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter

SUBMISSION by Gordon Hocking

OVERVIEW

The Inquiry discussion paper notes that Australia adopted Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) in response to the 1987 Brundtland Report, explaining, “Put simply, ESD means using, conserving and enhancing the community’s resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and quality of life for both present and future generations is increased.”

But instead of protecting “ecological processes, on which life depends”, Australia has employed policies and programs that have promoted human population growth and increased economic activity, both impacting adversely on local and national ecosystems. Australia’s 2005 population is projected to increase by 38% by 2050. This startling population increase virtually rules out any hope of reducing environmental impact. Professor Tim Flannery makes this point in relation to greenhouse gas emissions in his recent book *The Weather Makers* (page 237).

Western Australia’s State Sustainability Strategy is a good example of the mischief that can be done against ESD by misusing the words ‘sustainable’ and ‘sustainability’. These words are sprinkled monotonously throughout the discussion paper’s reference to the WA Strategy without any mention of the ESD requirement to protect “ecological processes, on which life depends.” In contrast, note how simply Sweden tackles its environmental objectives, aiming to hand over “to the next generation a dynamic but sustainable society in which the major environmental problems have been solved.”

This submission argues that the May 1992 Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment (IGAE) already provides directions for all levels of government to incorporate sustainability criteria into all decision-making. New regulations and a new layer of bureaucracy are not required. It is sufficient that governments adhere to their commitments under the May 1992 IGAE.

Recommendations

- 1) That all levels of government adhere to their commitments under the May 1992 IGAE.
- 2) That an Australian Population Policy be adopted that respects ecological limitations, in the spirit of ecologically sustainable development principles.

DISCUSSION

I do not share the discussion paper’s acceptance of Mr Chris Davis’ view that, “sustainability is a journey not a destination.” In my view, *sustainable* is like *pregnant*: it’s not possible to be a little bit pregnant, and a society is either sustainable or unsustainable. Our society is unsustainable because we are damaging our life support system: by using non-renewable resources at a rate faster than they can be discovered or replaced with alternative resources; and by using renewable resources as a rate that is degrading the resource base. And our life support system – the environment – underpins our society in a most fundamental way: it allows us to exist.

May 1992 IGAE

The *May 1992 Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment* (Section 3) requires policy making and program implementation to be informed by: the precautionary principle; intergenerational equity; conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity; and improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms [to address externalities] ...

- 3.5.1 *precautionary principle – Where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.*
- 3.5.2 *intergenerational equity - the present generation should ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations.*
- 3.5.3 *conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity ... should be a fundamental consideration.*
- 3.5.4 *improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms -*
- *environmental factors should be included in the valuation of assets and services*
 - *polluter pays i.e. those who generate pollution and waste should bear the cost of containment, avoidance, or abatement*
 - *the users of goods and services should pay prices based on the full life cycle costs of providing goods and services, including the use of natural resources and assets and the ultimate disposal of any wastes*
 - *environmental goals, having been established, should be pursued in the most cost effective way, by establishing incentive structures, including market mechanisms, which enable those best placed to maximise benefits and/or minimise costs to develop their own solutions and responses to environmental problems.*

ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

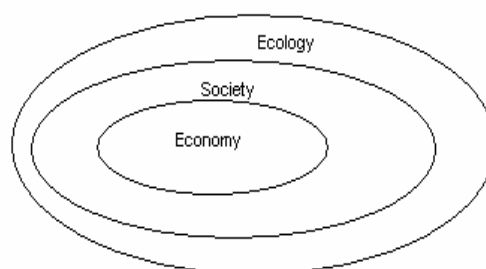
Ecologically Sustainable Development is the aim of the IGAE, and its principles must inform this Inquiry. ESD means using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and quality of life for both present and future generations is increased.

Ecology is defined as the branch of biology dealing with living organism's habits, modes of life and relations to their surroundings.

Biological diversity is defined as the diversity of genes, species, populations, communities and ecosystems and the linkages between them.

Ecological sustainability is thus a condition in which ecological processes and systems are protected and biological diversity is preserved in order to maintain a sustainable life support system for all species for all time.

The 1996 State of the Environment Advisory Council promoted the integration of ecological thinking into all social and economic planning. This thinking recognises that the economy is a sub-set of society, and that many important aspects of society do not involve economic activity. Similarly, human society is totally constrained by the natural ecology of our planet. The Committee developed the following decision-making model needed for an ecologically sustainable future for Australia.



National Headline Sustainability Indicators (NHSI) have been developed (ABS, 2002) to provide appropriate performance measures as a means of indicating overall progress towards ESD. The existence of the May 1992 IGAE and NHSI make a Sustainability Charter unnecessary. What is necessary, however, is an understanding that the economy is only a part of society and that human society is totally constrained by the natural ecology.

The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy does not reflect this central message of ESD – it is a mischief, and should not be given any credibility by the Inquiry.

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE GROWTH ECONOMY

The CSIRO submission to the 1994 Inquiry into Australia's Population Carrying Capacity noted: "CSIRO believes Australia can carry its present population – or a higher one – in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way *only* [my emphasis] if the nation is prepared to change the way it does things. Australia lacks the necessary knowledge and understanding to manage effectively its current population at current living standards. Every extra person and every unit increase in consumption increase the need to rectify this situation" (*Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity': one nation - two ecologies*, AGPS 1994, page 137).

Similarly, David Yencken and Debra Wilkinson write that, "Increases in population must have an impact on the environment unless there is a compensating drop in consumption and/or an increase in technological efficiency which in combination lead to no net increase in energy and material use or waste output" (*Resetting The Compass: Australia's Journey Towards Sustainability*, CSIRO Publishing, 2000 at p40).

Moreover, Albert Bartlett, Professor Emeritus of Physics, University of Colorado (Boulder) employs simple arithmetic to show that, "Population growth and increases in affluence make it impossible for reasonable increments of improved efficiency in the use of resources to enhance or even to preserve the environment" (*Arithmetic, Population and Energy* lecture on DVD available from nsw@population.org.au).

Population increase is a multiplier of consumption. Accordingly, population and levels of consumption cannot be considered separately when considering environmental impact and sustainability. If you have more of one you must have less of the other. Yet, in Australia, growth in both population and consumption are encouraged – a double whammy (and clearly unsustainable).

Duncan Brown, Emeritus Professor, Department of Biological Sciences University of Wollongong, argues that, "We need to acknowledge our biology. We are a species of animal, which despite our sophistication and technological achievements, depends for survival on the same fundamental principles as all other species. Economics and technological sophistication can affect the quantitative details of that dependence, but not the basic principle." Ockham's Razor, ABC Radio, 6 November, 2005, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/ockham/stories/s1497147.htm>.

The Inquiry's terms of reference seek to develop achievable targets in key areas of environmental impact. This is commendable – but reducing impact and becoming sustainable is not the same thing, and must not be confused. Even if public transport operates at a miserly energy use per passenger kilometre, it cannot be said to be sustainable while it grows to serve an ever- growing population.

Sydney water supply overwhelmed

Principles for ecologically sustainable development were enunciated 20 years ago, but there is little evidence that they have been applied in Australia. Sustainable water consumption practices, for example, rely upon having an accurate understanding of the available long-term safe extraction yield of the available water sources, and ensuring that consumption remains below that safe level.

In Sydney's case, Sydney Water has determined that its supply capacity can safely service 4.5 million residents (correspondence to this author from Sydney Water, dated 20 January 1994). This assessment, made 12 years ago, has withstood the test of time remarkably well, although it is not considered that the energy used in securing that supply level is, of itself, sustainable (particularly inter-basin transfers from the Shoalhaven River). Sydney's water supply capacity is determined allowing for a mix of raw water, recycled water, leakage prevention, demand management price signals, environmental flows and water restrictions when required. Desalination was not considered. Recycling is to accompany all new residential development zones.

It's important to note here that any form of recycling is also energy-intensive, but that capturing the nutrients in Sydney's sewage stream is imperative in sustainability terms. At the core of ecological sustainability lies the notion of 'closed loops'. Discharging the nutrients contained in sewage (especially phosphorus) into the ocean is clearly not a sustainable practice.

Sydney's proposed desalination plant faces huge opposition because it is energy-hungry; it could increase Sydney's energy consumption by around 2 per cent. But, the relentless annual arrival of 44,000 new consumers into Sydney means that within two years Sydney's energy consumption will increase by around 2 per cent anyway. A *sustainable* water supply requires *sustainable* energy inputs. It makes no difference what strategy is used to augment Sydney's water supply it will use more energy (and thus produce more greenhouse gas emissions).

Sydney has overwhelmed its water supply many times in the past: from The Tank Stream to Busby's Bore, to the Botany Swamps, to the Upper Nepean system, then the Cordeaux, Nepean, Avon, Cataract and Woronora, then the mighty Warragamba which dwarfed the storage capacity of all the previous reservoirs. Finally even water from the Shoalhaven has been diverted to Sydney after the building of the Tallowa dam.

Australia's population growth programs are central to ESD discussion

Must Sydney's population yet again outgrow its water supply, requiring expensive and energy hungry augmentation measures? Many other developed nations do not have population growth policies that overwhelm their water supply and preclude greenhouse gas reductions.

United Nations projections (see *State of World Population 2005*, United Nations Population Fund NY) show that by 2050, Europe's population will fall by 75 million (or 10 per cent), Japan's population will decline from 128.1 million to 112.2 million (or 12 per cent) and Australia's population will increase from 20.2 million to 27.9 million (or 38 per cent). Europe and Japan are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Australia rejected Kyoto — it is not possible to grow population and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

And it is not possible to have a sustainable water supply for an unsustainable expanding Sydney population. Sydney's present population *does not have a water supply problem*. The problem is that government policies and programs at both state and federal levels are deliberately designed to create a water supply problem by fostering population growth.

Conclusion

The abandonment of population growth policies, minimising economic activity and achieving 'closed loops' are central to achieving ecological sustainability. Creating a 'Sustainability Charter' that ignores population growth and economic activity — the primary cause of our present unsustainable practices — is not simply a matter of ignoring the elephants in our living rooms; it's a crime against our descendants.

END. Submission ... Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter. Gordon Hocking 1 May 2006