

Pittwater Sustainability Working Group

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Environmental and Heritage Committee
House of Representatives
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Submission to “Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter” from the Pittwater Sustainability Working Group

The Pittwater Sustainability Working Group (previously LA21 Committee of Pittwater Council) commends the development of a sustainability charter for Australia. We feel that sustainability is a major issue affecting all Australians which must be tackled with urgency and strong leadership. We would like to make the following points:

1. We note that on p 3 of the discussion paper are listed key areas for the development of targets, being - the built environment; water; energy; transport and ecological footprint. The PSWG would like to see the recognition of other critical areas, being land use, education and especially biodiversity. It should be understood however, that a fully integrated approach will be necessary.

The World Conservation Union’s Red List of Threatened Species released on May 4 2006, shows that Australia is in the top four countries for threatened species. The Red List identifies 639 species in Australia as threatened with extinction, with 65 species listed as critically endangered. Australia must act with urgency to conserve our precious biodiversity.

Engagement of the general public through education will be a crucial and necessary component in moving society towards sustainable living in Australia. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014, provides an ideal focal point for massively ramping up efforts in this regard. Ecological foot-printing tools are a valuable educational approach that could be used with the general public on a much wider basis than has been possible to date.

2. Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) must be considered at every level of decision making. In NSW, ESD is enshrined in many pieces of legislation including the Local Government Act, but it is appropriate that the Australian Federal Government provides leadership in ESD for the nation, and acts to bring consistency and integration across all states and all levels of government.

We feel that although not recognized in the Australian Constitution, Local Government, as the level of governance closest to people’s daily lives is especially critical in supporting transition to a sustainable future, as recognized in Agenda 21 in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit.

“ Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and sub-national environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development.” Agenda 21, Chapter 28

Many local councils are already doing good work in this area but more support and funding is needed.

3. There should be an immediate investment in infrastructure that supports sustainability. Examples would include:
 - ready availability of alternative fuels such as bio-diesel
 - affordable availability of fuel efficient vehicles such as electric hybrids
 - light rail systems in cities, and rail to replace road transport for freight
 - smart meters for households to assist in managing energy consumption
 - grid connected solar systems for households to feed electricity back into the grid
 - energy efficient street lighting (including ensuring light is not directed wastefully into space)
 - water recycling systems for new developments or to supplement environmental flows in our waterways.
 - wildlife corridors should be mapped and installed as a matter of urgency across the Australian landscape to support biodiversity conservation in a time of changing climate.

We believe that financial incentives or government support should be available to encourage the uptake of sustainability infrastructure by Australian industries, local councils and households. Left to the market, these technologies will penetrate only slowly, and we are concerned that transition towards sustainability is a matter of urgency.

4. Our group supports the inclusion of both aspirational statements and hard targets in the proposed sustainability charter as well as the commitment to the charter as a “living document” which must be reviewed regularly. We suggest that the system should also include rigorous evaluation to ascertain the degree to which “the Australian community relates to and identifies with” the charter and its targets, as well as into the barriers and drivers of behaviour change.
5. We endorse the commitment to improved benchmarking and reporting processes in order to be able to track progress towards sustainability, and to the upgrading of State of Environment Reporting across all levels of government. At present, SoE reporting happens in a piecemeal fashion under different legislation at Commonwealth, State and Local government levels. SoE reporting is not mandatory in all states, and because it is undertaken under separate legislative frameworks it is not properly nested.

Ideally, engaged and trained volunteers from the community would assist with collection of valid data on issues such as water quality and bird counts, which would feed up into local SoE reports, which would feed up into State SoE reports, which would feed up and inform the national picture.

6. In all decision making, the precautionary principle must be applied as a means of protecting future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Marita Macrae
President

David Palmer
Secretary

Joanne Tulau
Convener