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16 June 2008

Ms Jennie George
Chair
House of Representatives
Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms George

Re: ACF submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Climate Change and Environmental Impacts on Australia's Coast

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is very grateful for the opportunity to submit to your Committee's inquiry into 'Climate Change and Environmental Impacts on Australia's Coast'.

As Australia's leading environment group, with a forty-year history campaigning to protect marine and coastal environments, and a commitment to ecologically sustainable development and ecosystem-based marine planning, ACF is keen to see effective, well-targeted and well-resourced marine, coastal and catchment policies and actions, especially at this time of dangerous climate change.

Australia's coastal and marine environments are of enormous environmental, cultural, social and economic value but are increasingly under threat from many pressures including the impacts of climate change. Your Committee's inquiry is therefore very timely.

Should you have any questions or wish to seek further information with regard to our submission, please contact ACF's Marine Campaign Coordinator, Chris Smyth, on 03 9345 1129, 0438 123 536 or c.smyth@acfonline.org.au.

We would like to request that ACF be heard during your Committee's hearings so that we can expand on the issues raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Denise Boyd
Campaigns Director

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee. The names are listed in alphabetical order, and the addresses are listed below each name. The list includes the names of the members of the committee, the names of the members of the sub-committee, and the names of the members of the advisory committee. The addresses are listed in the same order as the names.

16 June 2008

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Climate Change and Environmental Impacts on Australia's Coast

Term of Reference 1

Existing policies and programs related to coastal zone management, taking in the catchment-coast-ocean continuum

Australians love their coast. More than 85 per cent of Australians live near it, and the number is steadily increasing – over the last twenty years non-metropolitan coastal areas have doubled in population. But we are now in danger of losing the very thing we love.

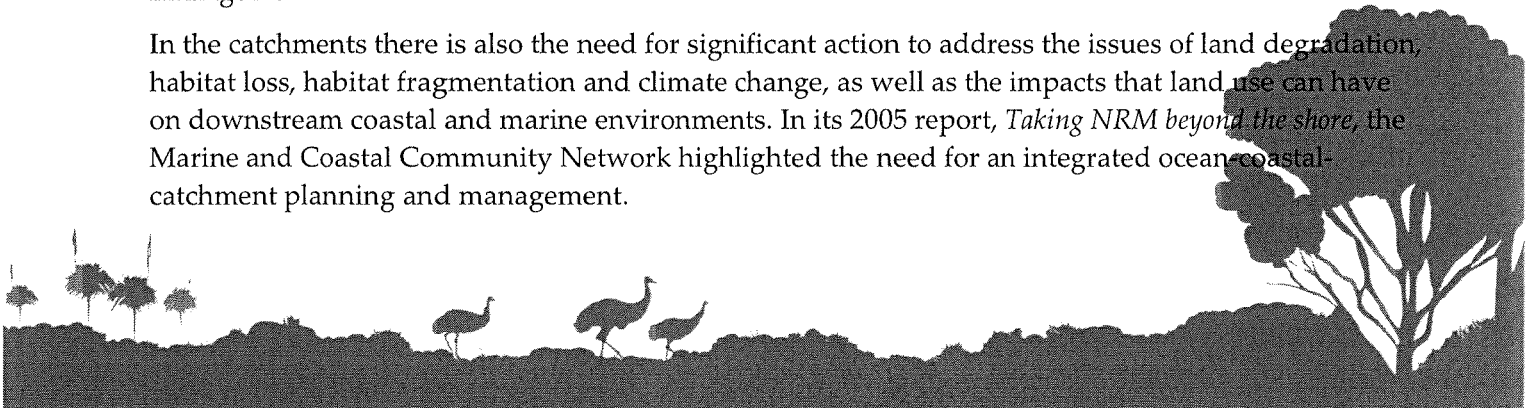
There are major pressures facing coastal environments, well documented in the 2005 National Sea Change Taskforce's *Meeting the sea challenge: sea change communities in coastal Australia* (page 7) and other submissions to this Inquiry. These include:

- habitat loss and fragmentation due to urban development and tourism
- loss and degradation of coastal wetlands
- changes in hydrological systems and marine habitats
- the introduction of pests and exotic species
- coastal erosion

While there has been no shortage of government inquiries and reports on these issues, there has been a lack of national leadership to address them. These challenges need to be addressed at a national level through clear target setting, better planning, increased resources and, at the local level, through the active engagement of local government, community groups, and business.

Looking out to sea, the situation is little different. Government responses to overfishing and fisheries bycatch, water pollution, marine pests, habitat damage, ocean-based aquaculture and climate change are undermined by our sector - and jurisdiction-based oceans planning and management frameworks which are inadequate at providing integrated, ecosystem-based marine planning and multiple user management.

In the catchments there is also the need for significant action to address the issues of land degradation, habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and climate change, as well as the impacts that land use can have on downstream coastal and marine environments. In its 2005 report, *Taking NRM beyond the shore*, the Marine and Coastal Community Network highlighted the need for an integrated ocean-coastal-catchment planning and management.



Recommendation 1

- Integration of planning, protection and management across the ocean-coast-catchment continuum.

How it is delivered:

- Well-targeted, well-resourced, ecosystem-based ocean, coast and catchment planning, protection and management across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Criteria for the funding of projects associated with the Federal Government's 'Caring for our Country' and 'Caring for our Coasts' initiatives to ensure that the practical integration is supported.

Terms of Reference 3

The impact of climate change on coastal areas and strategies to deal with climate change adaptation, particularly in response to projected sea level rise

Climate change is an emerging and overwhelming threat for our coasts, oceans and catchments. In 2007, a report by the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC), *Climate change in Australia: regional impacts and adaptation – managing the risk for Australia*, identified cities and coastal communities as a key sector at risk in Australia. The report also identified three coastal biodiversity hotspots requiring particular focus for climate change adaptation: Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics, Kakadu and the south-west region of Western Australia. Coastal estuaries are home to a significant proportion of Australia's biodiversity and this biodiversity is threatened by even small changes in sea level.

More recently, the interim Garnaut report has highlighted this sensitivity of Australia to climate change impacts: 'Australia's interest lies in adopting a strong and effective position on climate change mitigation driven by our exceptional sensitivity to climate change and our exceptional opportunity to do well in a world of effective global mitigation.'

Rising sea levels could cause flooding or erosion of beaches, mudflats, estuaries, seagrasses, mangroves and other intertidal areas, threaten billions of dollars of coastal housing, harbours and roads, and add substantially to the costs of beach and coastal protection works such as dune protection, sea walls and beach replenishment programs. Climate change related increases in rainfall could lead to increased runoff and potential increases in sedimentation and pollution in estuaries, bays and on reefs.

The direct impacts of climate change and other pressures on our coasts and oceans will be exacerbated by some government responses to tackle climate change. Wind turbines, for example, could impact coasts of landscape and heritage significance. The pressure on urban water supplies due to drought, increasing population and the failure of governments to drive significant improvements in water conservation, recycling and efficiency is leading governments to invest in dams (e.g. Traveston Dam), weirs (e.g. Wellington on the River Murray) and desalination plants (most states) as expensive, inefficient and unsustainable fixes to deal with the urban water crisis. These and many other impacts associated with climate change will have severe implications for Australia's coasts and communities, as will the ever-increasing pressures from coastal population growth.

Recommendation 2

- Adaptation to climate change risks delivers critical decisions about public and private coastal assets regarding adaptation to climate change risks.

How it is addressed

- Coastal infrastructure planning and management addresses the risks and impacts from rising sea levels and increased storm activity on coastal settlements, supported and informed by a national settlement policy.
- Recognition of the limits of adaptation planning and the need for critical decisions about what public and private assets can be protected in their current coastal locations and what needs to be moved from harms way.

Recommendation 3

- Strengthening of environmental assessment and approvals processes

How it is addressed

- Coastal development proposals that place further infrastructure at risk, or have negative impacts on other coastal and ocean values, must received more critical scrutiny within the context of increased risk (See recommendation 1).
- Assessments and approvals processes across jurisdictions should be considerably strengthened through improved and uniform State and Territory accreditation to a national best practice standard.

Terms of Reference 2 and 4

'The environmental impacts of coastal population growth and mechanisms to promote sustainable use of coastal resources' and 'Mechanisms to promote sustainable use of coastal resources'

Dealing with the particular challenges of coastal development requires integration into a broader intergovernmental agreement on sustainability. This would take the form of an Australian Sustainability Charter that included time-bound biophysical targets which, in the case of coastal ecosystems, would be tailored to the different needs of particular coastal and marine regions.

This recommendation is consistent with the recent recommendation for the 2020 Summit sustainability stream which recommended to adopt 'a National Sustainability, Population and Climate Change Agenda and develop robust institutions to support it' (Report of the 2020 Summit – stream on 'Population, sustainability, climate change, water and the future of our cities' page 57).

ACF believes that an Australian Sustainability Charter, and the elements of it which relate particularly to coasts, would also need to be supported by a well funded National Sustainability Commission and by a process to harmonise legislation and planning laws across jurisdictions so as to be nationally consistent. (Refer ACF submission to the Inquiry into A Sustainability Charter 2006)

The time-bound biophysical targets that are developed to implement an Australian Sustainability Charter as it relates to coastal sustainability should fulfil the following criteria:

- appropriate in scale to the policy context (i.e. local, regional, national)
- based on the best available science, and regularly revised
- independent and inter-related with key economic and social indicators
- fair and just
- backed by appropriate funding and institutional arrangements.

Examples of the targets that would be adopted in support of an Australian Sustainability Charter that relate to the particular sensitivities of coastal ecosystems and challenges of sustainable coastal development include:

- cut greenhouse pollution – at least 30% reduction by 2020 and 80-90% by 2050
- secure water for all life – return all freshwater systems (rivers, wetlands, estuaries) to ecological health by 2030 with a focus on systems that have major impacts on the health of coastal ecosystems, particularly the exposure of acid-sulfate soils in areas where river flows have dropped to all-time lows (the mouth of the Murray) or where human activities are encroaching on foreshore lands.
- protect and conserve biodiversity – protect at least 30% of each Australian marine ecosystem in highly protected areas by 2020 (building resilience to climate change)
- restore our land – reduce weed and pest infestations by 25% by 2030, particularly in areas of high conservation status
- eliminate toxins from our environment – ensure by 2030 that newly manufactured products and production processes are free from damaging organic substances
- minimise waste – recover 95% of domestic, commercial, industrial waste by 2030
- make transport sustainable – increase shared, ‘low-net-carbon’ transport use in Australian cities per capita to 25% by 2030.

These targets should be built upon, and harmonised with, sustainability targets and indicators already being set by local and state government jurisdictions, and be an expression of our nation’s commitment to international agreements and protocols that relate to the environment, e.g. Ramsar.

Recommendation 4

- Australia should establish an Australian Sustainability Charter.

How it is addressed

- The Charter includes time-bound biophysical targets which, in the case of coastal ecosystems, is tailored to the different needs of particular coastal and marine regions.

Recommendation 5

- All levels of governments allocate sufficient resources to build community capacity to engage in coastal and marine planning.

How it is addressed

- Recognition of the value of effective community engagement and participation to ensure a secure future for our coasts and oceans

- Governments provide the necessary resources to maintain and build the capacity for community engagement and to develop the knowledge and skills of the participants.

Recommendation 6

- There is a key role in coastal and marine planning and management for Indigenous Australians and their sea country

How it is addressed

- Recognition of the role of Indigenous Australians that live along and manage extensive areas of the coastline, and the potential for serious negative impacts on those communities from predicted sea level rises
- Capacity building and support structures are provided to Indigenous communities and Traditional Owners to ensure socially, culturally and environmentally sustainable use and management of sea country.

Term of Reference 5

Governance and institutional arrangements for the coastal zone

Australia's coasts and oceans are national assets, but in our three-tiered federal system of government, responsibility for looking after them is fragmented due to a lack of cooperation (and often conflict) between government agencies responsible for conservation, urban development and resource management. The policies, plans and actions of all levels of government need integration, targets and resources. To effectively tackle the coastal and marine issues raised in this submission, there is a pressing need for resources, legislative support and new institutional arrangements.

ACF, with the National Environmental Law Association has conducted considerable research and stakeholder consultation into its proposal for an Australian Oceans Act (please see attached summary of the proposal).

The Resource Assessment Commission Coastal Zone Inquiry (RAC, 1993), after an exhaustive consideration of the issues facing Australia's coast, made a number of recommendations that continue to be of direct relevance today, in large part because they were never acted upon. Some of the recommendations below are consistent with those recommendations. This current Parliamentary Inquiry should review the broader list of RAC recommendations as it seeks to establish what actions are needed to deal with the crisis on our coasts.

Recommendation 7

- An Intergovernmental Agreement on Coasts and Oceans is signed between federal, state, territory and local governments.

How it is addressed

- The three levels of Australian governments commit through an intergovernmental agreement to ecologically sustainable futures that sets long-term goals, with clear actions, targets, indicators and timetables, that are integrated into the ecologically sustainable use of resource uses and conservation on a regional basis.
- Delivery is achieved through nationally consistent, strengthened and integrated legislative,

planning and management provisions across state, territory and Commonwealth jurisdictions should be a major commitment of such an agreement. (see also recommendation 4)

Recommendation 8

- The Federal Government forms a partnership with local governments to deliver local responses to the impacts of population growth and climate change.

How it is addressed

- The role and expertise of local government in management of extensive areas of coastal foreshore through development and oversight of strategic and statutory plans for coastal settlements, rural areas and catchments, is supported by direct Federal investment in public assets and infrastructure that will also address planning for sea-change population and development shifts.
- State and Federal government cooperate to identify the threats to the coast from climate change by preparing coastal protection and retreat strategies where adaptation strategies may prove inadequate.

Recommendation 9

- The Federal Government develops a national oceans and coastal policy.

How it is addressed

- The Federal Government's commitment to a national coastal policy is broadened to include oceans policy.
- The strategy focuses on advances in coastal and marine planning, protection and management and integration

Recommendation 10

- The Federal Government initiates national legislative reform to significantly improve ocean and coastal planning, protection and management.

How it is addressed

- Consideration of proposals to establish separate coastal and oceans acts, or to combine them within one act that would give legislative drive to the recommendations and proposals in this submission.
- The review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999* includes stronger provisions for the protection of the natural and cultural heritage of Australia's coasts and oceans.

Recommendation 11

- The federal Department of Environment Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) establishes a national coastal division

How it is addressed

- A national coastal division within DEWHA would provide leadership, stewardship, and performance monitoring, and build capacity to implement coastal policy through support for the development of strategic plans and state of the coastal environment reporting.

Recommendation 12

- A National Coastal and Oceans Advisory Council is established to identify and recommend actions on coastal and oceans issues

How it is addressed

- A National Coastal and Oceans Advisory Council identifies and reports to the Prime Minister on major coastal and marine issues and solutions from across Australia.
- Membership is from a diverse cross section of civil society with well-recognised, long-term experience in coastal and marine affairs that can lead a well informed discussion on the future of Australia's coasts and oceans.

Recommendation 13

- The Federal Government establishes an Australian Oceans and Coastal Fund.

How it is addressed

- A federally funded, Australia-wide program would enable and support threat mitigation to the social and environmental values of coastal and marine environments.
- Coordinated national action is delivered across key areas of coastal and oceans planning such as responses to climate change, national infrastructure support, expanded marine and coastal scientific research, water quality improvement, limiting land-based sources of pollution, the buyback of coastal land, the protection and relocation of infrastructure and a fair and just structural adjustment for some fisheries and regional communities.

For more information, please contact:

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The Australian Conservation Foundation is committed to achieve a healthy environment for all Australians. We work with the community, business and government to protect, restore and sustain our environment.

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