

Submission to the State Sustainability Strategy

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Background

Towns in rural WA are under threat from declining income, seasonal conditions and degrading natural resources. The EcoTown Association formed in an attempt to turn around current trends and facilitate a brighter future for rural WA. EcoTown has developed out of findings from Rural Towns Program work and has five member shires – Pingelly, Mt Marshall, Perenjori, Merredin and Tammin. The focus of EcoTown is to identify and capitalize on under utilized natural and other resources within rural communities to create a more sustainable future.

Objectives

- Ø Maximise profitable long term Enterprises
- Ø Increase Employment
- Ø Protect and enhance the Environment

Principles

- Ø Manage the town and its surrounding catchment as an integrated system
- Ø Fully understand and capitalize on the town's competitive advantage
- Ø Use water where it falls for profit, recreation, or the natural and built environments
- Ø Promote diversity of enterprises, employment and natural environments
- Ø Treat everyone as a potential investor in the town
- Ø Learn from natural ecosystems
- Ø Apply monitoring to assess continual improvement
- Ø Recognise local environmental attributes as opportunities
- Ø Involve the community in achieving EcoTown objectives

KEY QUESTIONS

Is sustainability a worthwhile pursuit?

Definitely Yes

What benefits could flow if sustainability was taken more seriously?

More people will realise that every action they take has an effect on the environment and community when they learn about EcoTown examples. Hopefully they will make subsequent changes in actions that will significantly reduce undesirable effects, protect, or even enhance future production as well as quality of life in their home communities.

When EcoTown principles are implemented immediate reductions in water quantities supplied to Pingelly and other towns could result. Less demand could be made on the Harris River Dam thus easing demand to increase Perth's supply. EcoTown provides towns with a framework for the development of new profitable long-term sustainable enterprises based on the natural resources of the towns.

Merredin is pursuing opportunities to substitute imported water with locally sourced surface and groundwater. The town has a large rock to the west that is partially used to harvest water, an trial Reverse Osmosis plant producing potable water and an opportunity to harvest water from the international airfield. Our expectation is that if the water is made available for distribution new sustainable employment for Merredin and many other towns will result.

Benefits can be summarised as follows

- Ø Improved employment opportunities
- Ø Improved marketing opportunities for local products
- Ø Investment dollars for enterprises from funding bodies and corporations
- Ø Financial support for conservation of biodiversity
- Ø Amenity improvements
- Ø The towns will be more desirable places to live and in turn will attract others
- Ø An improved outlook for the community, particularly for the young;
- Ø Reduced reliance on resources sourced from further a field (eg scheme water, power),
- Ø Reversed land degradation
- Ø Increased learning opportunities for community members.

Opportunities to pursue

EcoTown provides excellent opportunities for rural towns to develop efficient systems that are better adapted for West Australian conditions.

The relative isolation and small populations of rural towns compared with closer settled areas along the coastal sand plain from Gingin to west of Albany makes them ideal opportunities to develop “model sustainable communities”.

As introduced above a key opportunity that EcoTown plans to develop is the water resource of each town. A rough estimate indicates that for every GL of water captured, 36 jobs may be created. This will depend on the type of enterprises developed and other external factors. The estimate is based on financially viable aquaculture, horticulture, tourism and recreation enterprises being created.

Based on actual, but not yet comprehensive, knowledge of potential enterprises in member towns the following estimates have been made.

| EcoTown | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Town | ML | Jobs | Salt |
| 1 Pingelly | 300 | 100 | yes |
| 1 Merredin | 250 | 33 | yes |
| 1 Bencubbin | 50 | 12 | yes |
| 1 Perenjori | 10 | 12 | yes |
| 1 Tammin | 20 | 20 | yes |
| | 630 | 177 | yes |

The Water Corporation would be expected to play a leading role in this endeavour. Any loss of markets for Darling Range water could be replaced by local water and more even use of water in Perth and surrounds.

Salinity is seen as a major problem in the Wheatbelt. However EcoTown see it as a major opportunity to turn water (where it falls) into income. The author has been aware of the need for an economic driver to address soil salinity for over twenty years.

EcoTown is addressing other ways of to improve sustainability such as replacement of non-renewable energy with renewable sources with greater recycling of waste products. Fro example Bencubbin is a town at the end of a supply grid for Western Power. Generating renewable energy for shire buildings and other businesses in town is a prime objective. Sources to be investigated include solar, wind, waste products and biodiesel.

Role of Government, Business and Community

We strongly suggest that Government needs to be proactive in recognising, supporting and working with communities, such as EcoTowns, who are prepared to adopt practices that comply with the principles listed above. When Government supports groups like EcoTown it is saying, “we appreciate your self help approach.” EcoTown aspires to lead by practical example.

Municipalities such as the shires forming EcoTown need to be encouraged and supported. It is necessary to assist them to thoroughly investigate opportunities within their communities’ and assist them to take the risks involved. Government may consider low cost loans rather than grants. Successful enterprises could then repay back into a fund that can then be accessed by others. For example Government could provide financial support for water harvesting in rural towns. Water produced could then be sold to recreation clubs and private enterprise.

Government also needs to be adopting these principles in its own planning department as well as directly or indirectly funded research. The Department of Planning should be planning for recycling of water, low energy housing and sensitive natural resource use. For example could low energy design requirements be adopted for all new commercial or residential subdivision and building permits? This would educate many who are ignorant of the benefits and force others to comply.

Business should be encouraged and rewarded for incorporating sustainability principles into their businesses. Taxation benefits when purchasing specialist machinery required for sustainable production, as well as R&D assistance to develop new machinery, plants, chemicals or processes should be considered. Building low energy design homes could attract a \$500 rebate from the Government in a similar manner to converting cars to gas.

Partnerships have been initiated by EcoTown with corporations such as Elders, Solar Energy Systems, Western Power and theWater Corporation. These partnerships are vital to understanding and achieving sustainable production and should be encouraged by Government.

Best Practice Examples

Merredin townsite, Pingelly recycling of treated sewerage for town ovals.

R&D needed

Efficient use of collected wastewater, reduction in evaporation, reverse osmosis treatment of saline water.

General Actions to pursue Sustainability

Hold State Sustainability Best Practice Forum in 2004. Sustainability awards and recognition could occur. Have a category for farms and towns.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES **Farmer and Community Groups**

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Tuesday, 30 April 2002

Contact EcoTown

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