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SUBMISSION TO SUSTAINAIBLITY POLICY UNIT

By R.G.Chittleborough

I was heartened in mid 2000 when Dr Gallop's Party made an unequivocal commitment to Ecologically Sustainable Development and was subsequently elected to office on 10 February 2001.

However, since that time I have been increasingly disappointed, with the word ‘ecological’ being dropped as the Government gropes towards "Opportunities for Sustainability". The change of emphasis and dropping of that holistic term opens the way to a return to a reductionist approach to sustainability, with a separate set of solutions for each perceived problem. Some may claim that this simplifies the approach, however it sadly loses sight of the many two way relationships between the physical environment, ecosystems, our social & industrial demands, our numbers and our lifestyles. Such is the complexity of ecology.

Because of this complexity, the task of drafting an Ecologically Sustainable Strategy should be put into the hands of Australia's leading (practising) ecologists, rather than expecting a mixed bag of politicians, planners, developers, industrialists, etc., to thrash out a framework by consensus. I have had years of experience on two international Commissions, and also convened a State Conservation Strategy group, where collective representatives tried to reach consensus on sustainability.

Consensus has a fine democratic ring, but it merely reduces the outcome to the lowest common denominator the tenacity of those participants having the greatest greed.

Dr Gallop has chosen to redefine his commitment to sustainability (p.2 of FOCUS ON THE FUTURE) as "the ***simultaneous*** achievement of environmental, economic and social goals". This infers that these three facets are of equal importance, so that one merely juggles them until some sort of 'balance' is achieved.

That may sound all very well, at least superficially. However, what happens when the economic goals chosen by our leaders, or the lifestyles demanded by the rich, grossly exceed ecological sustainability - as has occurred for some years now? That means we are living beyond our (ecological) means, so that no possible balance can be made between our society and the environment.

If Dr Gallop's advisors were skilled ecologists, they would appreciate that the ***first*** question to be asked of each economic and social goal, must be "Is it ecologically sustainable?" If it is not, then that goal must be rejected.

Thus like it or not ecological sustainability takes precedence over both economic and social goals; for unless both of the latter satisfy the basic requirement of ecological sustainability, society has no sustainable future. And for years now, Australia - and particularly WA - has been living beyond its (sustainable) means.

This fundamental principle needs to be stated clearly ***before*** attempting to frame an Ecologically Sustainable Strategy for WA - otherwise we will end up with a meaningless wish-list of compromises which will inescapably fall far short of the sustainability goal.

I commend the UN & the World Business Council on Sustainable Development's target for industrialised countries (p.3 of FOCUS ON THE FUTURE) for "a 10 fold reduction in our consumption of resources and a 20 fold increase in resource (use) efficiency." However, the paper FOCUS ON THE FUTURE merely mentions these desires, rather than setting them as prime targets in an Ecologically Sustainable Strategy for WA.

Are the Existing Government Initiatives listed on p.4 of the Paper, to be framed around achieving a 10 fold reduction in our consumption of resources ***and*** a 20 fold increase in resource (use) efficiency by 2040?

Even more importantly; how can these targets be achieved and held without urgently acting to halt population growth?

Under the heading of SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES (p.4), the Paper mentions the Precautionary Principle which Australia adopted so enthusiastically at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (but seldom follows today). The Precautionary Principle must remain a guiding principle while our understanding of ecological interactions continues to be developed.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY (p. 6) is rather vague, reading as if ecological sustainability is desirable but not absolutely essential. It is not just a case of 'best practice', and doing the best we can - we ***must*** set progressive targets and time frames, and ensure that these ***are*** achieved. Government leadership is crucial here - otherwise we will have another spectacle like the Water Corporation currently wringing its hands saying the community has failed to achieve this summer's water consumption targets -which should have been enforced years earlier. We simply can no longer ***afford*** to fall short of targets.

Towards the end of THE GLOBAL CONTEXT (p 7), there is a noble sounding paragraph on how WA can play a leading role in helping to address global issues at the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesberg in September 2002. However, WA's current flagrant practices of escalating consumption of fossil fuels at faster rates than anywhere else in the world, is hardly consistent with such ideals.

AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE (p 7) begins with the highly inadequate claim that Australia is the only continent with an affluent, highly developed society succeeding in "retaining a *relatively* healthy environment". The key word here *is 'relatively'* - it dodges admitting that Australia's environmental debt is rising rapidly as our soils, water, air and ecosystems continue to degrade. This takes me back to the late 1950's at the International Whaling Commission, where the representative of one nation (active in Antarctic whaling), proposed that since southern humpback whale stocks were in *relatively* better condition than blue or fin whale stocks, the IWC should allow more humpbacks to be taken, in order to lessen the pressure on blue and fin whale stocks. My response to that proposition was worded so forceably by the leader of the Australian delegation, that the delegate who made the proposal packed his bags and returned to Norwav at once!

A FOCUS ON WESTERN AUSTRALIA (p 8) opens with a delusive paragraph, saying "WA is a fortunate and prosperous state, with substantial natural resources, a productive agricultural sector"…….etc. etc. I commend the writer to read the Conclusions on p.57 of the WA Environmental Review 1986, which begins: "In effect we in WA have been living beyond our means for some time and now have an accumulated debt which must be met if we are restore sustainability…." This situation has only worsened since that time.

In the same section of the Paper (p 8), the paragraph on 'ecological footprints' is subjective and simplistic, open to missuse by the uninitiated. For example, a lay person might divide the 'average' ecological footprint into the total area of WA, obtaining a limit of 7.74 million people as an ecologically sustainable population for WA (at our present standard of living). However, calculated ecological footprints can be misleading, overlooking the harsh reality that a large (and increasing) proportion of WA's land has virtually zero carrying capacity even for such transient activities as ecotourism.

"But", the writer of that paper might quickly respond, "I did not claim that an average ecological footprint of 3lha of land per person was ecologically sustainable; I recognise that we need 'to reduce the total ecological footprint of our economy by at least half' (to achieve sustainability)."

Even so, if in the time it takes to halve our ecological footprint, WA's total population actually doubles, we would then be in the same position as now -applying unsustainable pressures upon our environment.

Having just completed a book manuscript concerning the failed attempt to establish sustainable whaling on Australian shores during the post-war era (1948-63*)*, I have direct experience with the goal of sustainability - experience which I attempted to apply in later tasks.

I offer Chapter 16 What Have We Learnt? from that manuscript, as part of the Submission to help guide the preparation of an effective Ecologically Sustainable Strategy for WA. There is much more material which I could offer, but I have deliberately kept this as brief as possible. For our situation is now so critical that this may well be our last opportunity to forge and apply an ecologically sustainable strategy. Even now, the backlash from processes which we have already initiated may prove to be beyond our control.

Attempting to patch over past mistakes will no longer suffice. Very drastic modification to economic and social goals are absolutely essential if we are to achieve ecological sustainability. That **CAN** be done, if we accept the dire necessity.

I wish the Premier's Sustainability Policy Unit every success in their urgent and daunting task, which if pursued with the much needed vigour, might yet threaten (or make) their careers. But even if the attempt fails to establish a sustainable society, we will know we have tried.

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End.: Ch. 16 from my MS. "GONE WHALING".

GONE WHALING

- Stumbling towards Sustainability

THE HUMAN SIDE OF AUSTRALIAN POSTWAR WHALING -
FROM ONE WHO WAS THERE

By Dr Graham Chittleborough

Anecdotes sustaining a young marine biologist appointed by CSIR in 1951 to work out sustainable yields for the postwar humpback whaling industry then developing on our Australian shores. A kaleidoscope of a lifestyle now vanished - yet many similar relict attitudes are still to be found within today's approaches to sustainability

I

Chapter 16

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

Some might consider that having documented one brief phase of our history in fair detail our task is done. But history, while of course fascinating in itself is only really valuable to mankind when we learn and apply its lessons in our future activities. Many seem to regard whale stocks as an optional resource - we have profited from their exploitation, but we *can* do without them.

The crucial lesson still to be learned from those early stumblings towards sustainability, is one of priorities. Despite a number of brilliant writers ranging from Rachel Carson to today's Tim Flannery, most of us - especially Australians and Americans - have yet to grasp that we MUST put the ecology *before* the economy if we are to achieve sustainability (locally *or* globally). Unless we can truly sustain the stocks and ecosystems upon which our communities depend, debate on economic policies is irrelevant.

So spurious assertions by George Bush or John Howard that we cannot *afford* to dramatically change economic policies, are meaningless. Unless we place ecological sustainability as first priority, there can be no economic sustainability at all. Claiming that as we get richer, we can better afford to repair the environment is now being seen as patently double-talk.

Today, the word 'sustainability' is on everyone's lips. Governments proclaim they are fully committed to Ecologically Sustainable Development committees (both local and international) ponder on just what that means, and how to achieve it. Rather than becoming swamped in a morass of philosophical debate, let's see just what we have learnt from the simplistic test trial of sustainability begun over 50 years ago on humpback whales?

We all recognise that the early models developed for calculating sustainable yields to be taken from single stocks of whales, fish, or timber resources, were highly simplistic, taking little account of the wide range of 'natural' pressures (as well as other, indirect human impacts) operating on that stock. Nevertheless, one immediate lesson learnt from the humpback test case

was that the sustainable yields so calculated were FAR lower than all previous optimistic guesstimates'. And as we begin to understand the ecological interactions *between* species in the food chain, as well as interactions with the physical environment the safe sustainable yield estimates fall even lower.

The second lesson learnt from these early years is that the sustainability approach is based upon an assumption that cultural attitudes do not change with time. Even during the last humpback whaling era (1948-1963), our Australian society was changing its attitude towards whaling, preference swinging to the less invasive - and culturally more enjoyable and satisfying, whale watching. Even those who still continue to cling to immediate economic returns, admit that there are now cheaper and better substitutes for whale oil and other whale products.

Toddy, the sustainability concept is being expanded from maintaining each single stock to maintaining whole ecosystems: and to recognising that our community may have a range of uses which it wishes to maintain while still sustaining the ecosystem. Also, we are recognising that some important uses are aesthetic, so cannot readily be expressed in dollar terms. Hence the task of calculating sustainable levels for each ecosystem becomes exceedingly difficult when applying numerical models derived in an era of economic rationalism.

Thus we make commitments to:-

Sustainable Agriculture;
Sustaining Forest Systems;
Sustaining Grazing Systems;
Sustaining Water Resources;
Sustaining (Natural) Diversity;
Sustaining Coral Reef Ecosystems;
Sustaining Mangrove Ecosystems;
Sustaining Antarctic Marine Ecosystems;
Sustainable Aquaculture;

and so on;

culminating in; Sustaining the Environment.

If this approach was applied successfully to each ecosystem, in an ideal world we would develop a sustainable policy for every renewable resource. The effect would be that every renewable resource would be utilised up to (but not exceeding) that which it can sustain indefinitely. In other words, we would aim to maintain our renewable resources at carefully determined steady-state levels.

A wonderful ideal, if it could ever be achieved.

But within that dream lies an anachronism. If we are sustaining every renewable resource (including the Environment) within the limits imposed by a steady-state approach, how can we continue to accommodate exponential increase in human population - as well as the continuing increase in *per capita* consumption of resources, as 'guaranteed' by the present economic growth policies?

The sustainability approach can only succeed if we add two more commitments:

Sustainable Population (of humans);

AND, Sustainable consumption (per capita).

That, of course, is in conflict with Australia's current economic policies - and those of many other 'developed' countries.

Well meaning bodies such as the Australian Conservation Foundation currently preach that if only Australia adopted firm strategies to repair its environment -"Cutting greenhouse pollution; protecting forests; controlling land clearing; repairing our rivers and landscapes; licking salinity; restoring our marine environment; preventing a new nuclear reactor or nuclear dump:" - this would Save Australia Tomorrow (see Habitat; Special Supplement vol. 29, no.5, 2001).

Admirable as it would be to carry out these repair strategies effectively, they will certainly fail, if in fact, Australia's present human population is unsustainable, and while we insist on continuing to increase our population even further. Yet we still hear our leaders insisting Australia has so much empty space that we can easily fit in another twenty million *or more!* Such spurious claims show absolutely no comprehension of ecology, nor of Australia's exceedingly low carrying capacity.

As outlined in my book *'Shouldn't Our Grandchildren know?'* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), ecologists assembling the evidence gathered in recent decades have concluded that the current population of Australia, living present lifestyles, within a harsh and fragile environment of low carrying capacity, is simply not sustainable.

Across Australia's extensive semi-arid and arid pastoral lands, stocking rates as perceived by early squatters (usually viewed during better seasons), have been as rosily optimistic as humpback whale quotas perceived by eager whalers. Over recent decades as environmental degradation of pastoral lands proceeded faster than cuts in stocking rates, the carrying capacity of grazing lands has declined despite token management measures - paralleling the decline of humpback stocks and the cuts in annual quotas. And within our strictly limited areas of arable land, degradation (in the forms of salination, erosion, compaction, acidification, loss of organic debris & species diversity, etc.) are now cutting into the high hopes of sustainable yields.

The lessons of sustainability on land precisely mirror those on marine stocks.

However, the present commitment to a sustainable environment is now being tested by an even more immediate threat - that of global climate change, which is already under way, brought about by excessive emissions of greenhouse gases (largely from burning fossil fuels) by an over-consuming society. For Australians living in a harsh, arid environment and already making unsustainable impacts upon so many facets of our land and seascapes, this is fast becoming the ultimate test of our commitment to sustainability.

Australian Governments, both Federal and State, have made repeated commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, a series of political compromises have negated effective action. Over the past fifteen years1 the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), consisting of several hundreds of objective scientists internationally, have repeatedly recommended that we must cut greenhouse emissions by 60% *(of 1988 levels)* by 2030 if we are to achieve sustainability.

Our first compromise, the Toronto Protocol of 1988, (signed by Australia on 11 October 1990) was for a 20% cut in emissions.

Then in our second compromise (the Kyoto Protocol of 1997), Australia 'won' an 8% *increase* in greenhouse emissions (above 1990 levels), on grounds of being economically disadvantaged!!

Stark reality peeps through a report 'Energy WA', published in June 1996, when the Western Australian Government calmly admitted that its 1995 emissions were already 50.9% above 1988 levels, and by 2000 would be 98% above 1988 levels! As recently as June 1999, WA State Cabinet reported that by 2010, Western Australia's emissions will be 240% higher than 1990 emissions *(The West Austra1ian* 9/6/99, p.3).

Now our leaders are refusing to ratify even their hard-fought Kyoto Agreement: apparently frightened by much publicised, but spurious, claims of industrial groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry that to do so will inevitably result in "further economic hardship" (loss of profits) and massive unemployment! In contrast, the positive policies of countries such as Denmark are already demonstrating that there are sustainable energy alternatives which can and do, maintain both employment and overseas income.

From the latest national reports to the United Nations, Australia's *per capita* emissions of greenhouse gases are still rising, and at 27.6 tonnes *per capita* per year, are the highest in the world higher than the USA (21.1 tonnes), and vastly higher than the *average* for the European Union (10.3 tonnes)

Isn't this greed policy every bit as bad as setting the humpback whale quotas six times higher than sustainable? Almost as bad, in fact, as the rogue activities of Captain Solyanik! The pattern of approach to global warming is just the same as in whaling - the same greed the same grossly inadequate political compromises and meaningless gestures. But this time so much more is at stake if we fail in our commitment to a sustainable environment.

As set out in my 1992 book, once feedback loops have been activated within our vast oceanic sinks for excess carbon dioxide and that may already be starting with the death of coral reefs and declining production of Antarctic Bottom Water - they will be extremely difficult to halt. And the impacts will exacerbate most of our *existing* environmental problems (salination; sustainable use of water resources; agriculture; forests - including plantations; maintaining species diversity; etc.). It may even turn the present recovery of humpback whale stocks into a slump leading to extinction.

CSIRO's climate modellers repeatedly point out that we are not taking sufficient action to stem man-made climate change, warning that the worst case scenario is now the most probable (The West Australian; 14 March 2002, p.1O). Yet our leaders (and many within the community) continue to cling to the fading hope that present trends will somehow magically revert to better times.

Well may loyal Australians lustily sing, "Advance Australia Fair!" But can we afford to advance (grow) rapidly with heads turned skywards, while ignoring those better understanding the terrain who repeatedly warn of precipices ahead? If we rush headlong forward with no precautionary (and effective) contingency plan in operation, we are no better than the lemmings. And like the lemmings, once in free-fall there can be no turning back.

Have our leaders really learned anything from the well monitored disaster of 20th century whaling - which showed that compromises always fall short of sustainability?

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