

Key questions

1. Is sustainability a worthwhile pursuit?

In respect to irrigated agriculture within the Ord River Irrigation Area (ORIA) the worth of sustainability has been recognised. This has come about by the agricultural industry discovering that issues such as fish kills, rising water tables, salt etc are no longer the problems of other irrigation areas. Add to this, declining yields and in turn gross margins. Industry has accepted that the current farm management system needs to be reviewed to ensure economical security.

Industry believes that these indicators show that degradation is in the formative stage and prompt action will reverse the trend without the demand on resources that other areas within the state are demanding.

In order to progress this, industry in concert with the community and other stakeholders has developed and are now implementing the Ord Land and Water Management Plan that addresses the question for how irrigated agriculture can become sustainable economically, environmentally and socially. Driving the implementation is the community group Ord Land and Water (OLW) with the assistance of Government agencies including the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment, Water and Catchment Protection.

From a wider community perspective the question posed has less relevance, whilst many agree with the concept of sustainability, its relevance is diminished because the effects of unsustainable practices are yet to be felt or identified by other industries such as tourism.

This is not to suggest that there are no moves to put into effect a planning process to create a sustainable community. The thrust in this instance is being led not as an industry / regulator initiative as is with irrigated agriculture, but from an 'agency partnership' that includes community representation. This group is the Ord River Waterways Management Group; its makeup includes agencies with statute responsibilities over water resources, indigenous representation, Shire and OLW.

The above process shows clearly that the pursuit of sustainability is important to the community of the ORIA and Kununurra and we have taken the first steps along that road. The challenge that must not be in any way underestimated is developing the steps to get us there.

2. What benefits could flow if sustainability was taken more seriously

The irrigated agricultural industry within the ORIA has identified economic stability and security as prime reasons to seek sustainability. This would come in the form of increased plant and soil health, higher yields and a quality and marketing advantage that would come as a result of a farm management system that was not dependant on chemical solutions to problems.

Tourism, another important industry is becoming aware of the importance of protecting landscape values and the biodiversity of that landscape as a marketing tool. The phrase 'Kaka-don't', referring to the loss of appeal that Kakadu is having to deal with has sounded warning bells within the local industry. It is here that work is required to identify how we sustain our natural resources in a form that will ensure a stable industry and what form that industry will take.

The impact of environmental degradation on the social aspects of the community has is yet to be fully realised. The problems of aboriginal health and social instability can be in some way attributed to environmental degradation and ensuing access problems. In some instances this issue is been recognised but a similar impact on the European community does not appear to be flagged at this stage.

The relationship between the health of a river or local environment and the social health of the community that exists within it is an important factor that needs to be explored in detail. If the community is denied 'quality of life' from the environment it will struggle to exist at a high level. This will be especially applicable in communities where there is a high expectation for that existence based on traditional culture or personal values. Any degradation of 'quality of life' will degrade our social system and further drain resources in problem management.

3. In your experience, what opportunities exist to pursue sustainability?

From a local perspective sustainability needs to be built up from the community, but advocacy, education and resources must come from Government. The formation of local community action and landcare groups such as LCDC's was a significant step towards sustainability; this strategy needs to continue and further developed. Resources that will allow them to employ personnel with some medium to long term security is essential, community sustainability is no longer part time work for volunteers.

In concert with these community actions government agencies and local Government must develop their own integrated approach to sustainability. Guiding future planning based on local values and regulatory administration of these strategic plans is the responsibility of Government. It is the role of the community to establish the values and development goals locally; it is the role of Government to incorporate these into their planning processes. It is the role of all groups to ensure that this happens regularly at one table. The make up of the Ord River Waterways Group with its Government and community representation is one model that to date has been successful in its approach to sustainability.

To allow the above processes to develop people must be educated that concepts such as the 'triple bottom line' are relevant to us all. Environmental and social values are still being actively suppressed within the community, especially within small towns where economic stability for one reason or another is or appears to be threatened. Many people still believe that for the sake of their family that economic growth is paramount to their life style security, Government and business attitudes reinforce this. It is the responsibility of the Government to encourage people to be able to develop the capacity within themselves to balance more than one value in the decision making process.

4. What is the role of the Government, business and the community in facilitating change to be more sustainable?

The Government roles are to-

- Build the capacity of the community so balanced and informed decisions can be made.
- Lead the community in the development of strategic plans with resources and expertise.
- Reinforce the integrated decision making through regulatory bodies.
- Assist with incentives and research and development geared towards business sustainability.
- Ensure that the lines of communication between community, Government and business exist, are two-way and are used.

The Business community's roles are to-

- Identify unsustainable practices within the industry.
- Develop and implement with Government best management practices.
- Underpin industry development with triple bottom line philosophy.
- Provide a safe product to the community.
- Maintain communication with the community and Government.

The role of the community is to-

- Take on the responsibility to leading the move to sustainability at a local level.
- Ensure that values important in the community are carried forward into our roles as industry and Government employees.
- Ensure that the community can communicate within and with Government and business effectively.

5. What best practice examples exist, if any, to demonstrate how sustainability is being progressed?

Best Management Practices (BMP's) within the ORIA and Kununurra are being established across industries and the community. None of these BMP's has yet been developed to the point where they can be shown to be clearly effective in assisting the community and industry attain their sustainability goals.

Community BMP's include locally designed bag and slot limits for the recreational fishery.

The fin fishery on Lake Argyle has developed a code of practice in an attempt to reverse the presently unsustainable annual catch size, in the hope that the industry can survive from an economic and regulatory viewpoint.

Unrestricted tourism development has been the trigger for that industry to consider industry codes that may address the degradation of landscape and biodiversity values that the industry relies on.

The agricultural industry is the most advanced of all industries in the local development of BMP's however it is this industry that has felt the effects of unsustainable practices for the longest. It is expected that the agricultural road to sustainability will be the longest and hardest.

Although the development of local BMP's has yet to clearly demonstrate they can be effective in achieving sustainability the ownership of the planning process gives us the confidence to develop the proper means of implementation, much is, and will be trial and error. Already some strategies have indicators and monitoring starting to deliver trends that suggest we are on the right path.

Perhaps the BMP that has been identified as being the greatest driver towards sustainability is the processes that brought about the development of the Ord Land and Water Management Plan (OLWMP) and the Ord River Waterways Management Group (ORWMG).

The OLWMP came from the community genuinely wanting a halt to environmental degradation. The consultation process and development of community action groups to tackle the complexities and issues identified from the consultation, then the implementation of the plan by the community and Government is an ideal model for how communities can progress sustainability. All other local BMP actions have been initiated from some aspects of the plan

The ORWMG also came as a response to the plan, with Government agencies seeing the worth of an integrated and collaborative approach to trying to achieve sustainable strategies.

6. What research and development is needed to ensure sustainability outcomes can be achieved?

Priority needs to go to the development of BMP's for industry and redefining what are the appropriate farm management systems for our own environment.

In order to progress this, the work and knowledge needs to come from local sources. The current practice that concentrates resources in some areas while denying the opportunity in other areas with the expectation that a suitable model will be developed to fit all scenarios does not always work. An example of this is the National Heritage Trust not being willing to fund water efficiency work outside the Murray Darling System while a water allocation plan for the Ord River is developed without the necessary scientific knowledge to allow informed decisions to be made.

Priority also needs to go to creating the necessary tools that will allow a community to decide and plan its own future based on principals such as the triple bottom line. This would involve the development of a model that allow the implications of decisions made now to be estimated in a future time frame, taking out some of the guesswork in development and more importantly making us aware that we do need to be concentrating on how decisions will impact. Resources to build this model are an important aspect of most strategies; it is here that the Government needs to focus its attention.

7. In a more general sense, what else should western Australia be doing to contribute nationally, regionally and globally to progress sustainability?

Western Australia, because of what is already lost to unsustainable farm management and because of what it can still save needs to set its sites high. We need to reinforce our parochial independence and set about being the 'world's best' at striving for sustainability. Someone must lead, be it initially a single person, then a community, followed by a region and state then the country. There is an opportunity for our state to take on the role as leader, a course of action that may not need to be tied to anything else apart from our commitment and achievements with the available recourses.