

State Sustainability Strategy

Written submission

27 March 2002

To:

Professor Peter Newman
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit
Policy Office
Department of the Premier and Cabinet

From:

Ruth Balding
PO Box 290
Glen Forrest
WA 6071

Introduction:

Having read your consultation paper, "Focus on the future: opportunities for sustainability in Western Australia", I came to the conclusion that the first two major initiatives to start thinking about sustainability in this state involved government leadership and education.

Sustainability is much more than 'worthwhile'. Worthwhile implies a 'feel good' dimension with no huge benefits, that is, we don't have to do this but maybe it would be good if we did. Why isn't sustainability essential? If we don't start to focus on sustainability then our resource base and natural environment will continue to decline. We don't really recognise or acknowledge an urgency to sustainability as effects are gradual but the consequences will be apparent in as little as 50 years and future generations will definitely be left with unwanted rewards and facing a harder future.

Our consumer society has developed a culture of higher and higher expectations about wealth generation and standards of living. There is recognition that generally we live well now but instead of being content or even grateful for that we seem to have a general feeling of dissatisfaction with our lives and so we focus on wanting more and more. Items once perceived to be luxuries are promoted as essential to our lifestyle and are now used as a common element or measure to judge standards of living. One example of this is air conditioning homes. Having lived in a much harder climate in Darwin without air conditioning, I am amazed at the attitude starting to pervade that you cannot survive in Perth without air conditioning. Advertising pressure by project builders along with the new homes section in Saturday's West Australian and the real estate industry through the force of their influence with the public have managed to turn an expensive luxury into a common essential feature. They argue and successfully convince home owners, that no-one will buy your house without air conditioning and consequently you won't be able to sell or rent a house without air conditioning. Air conditioning of homes would be totally unnecessary if basic orientation and design features were automatically incorporated in new homes.

Our vision in Western Australia to progress sustainability would be to develop our cities and towns into sustainable cities and towns. A sustainable city or town would have good public transport infrastructure, good walking, cycling paths and general access and have green corridors. All waste would be recycled either into other materials or into energy products, people would be encouraged and shown how to utilise every resource in a sustainable way. The majority of West Australian's live

in Perth and people who live in Perth may be the last to become aware of the problems being generated by the lack of a sustainable approach to our lives. This is because they are removed from the reality of the problems caused by salinity, by clearing, by the realities of living without scheme water and so on.

Government Leadership

The state government must seize the initiative, show it is concerned and lead the way for the people of this state to sustainable practices. To establish a sustainability policy unit, the government must have had some idea of where it wants to head with sustainability. With the help of these submissions and consultation with different sectors of our society, the government will refine its vision of sustainability. With this vision it leads the way for the people of Western Australia towards a sustainable future. Naturally it must be packaged and promoted in such a way that people will support the vision and in turn support the government's endeavours. This leadership role of the government will also involve incentives that people will either respond to willingly for the portrayed benefits or they will be given the incentive to avoid fines or other negative measures that encourage changes in practices.

Sustainability is not in the consciousness of most of the people of Western Australia. I believe that there is no imperative for people in WA to live sustainably. Even the consultation paper refers to Western Australia as a "... fortunate and prosperous state, with substantial natural resources, ..." (my emphasis). Elsewhere the paper refers to "... our abundant natural resources." Exactly, and that is the view taken by the general population and why the people of WA would think that sustainability (if they knew what it meant) refers to somebody else, somewhere else. For what have we got to worry about when even the government keeps telling us about how much we have? It is because of the perpetuation of this general perception and attitudes that the government must be shown to be leading the way and getting the issue of sustainability onto the agenda of our everyday lives.

Too many commercial interests currently influence current thinking and trends. To be lazy is one of our basic instincts and we seek the easy options. Leadership and education are prime ingredients to influence people's beliefs and attitudes. There must be laws and incentives as beliefs infrequently transform into actions. For example, support for protection of the environment would be generally high in the population. Yet it too infrequently translates into practical ways where individual households actively live and pursue ways where they can directly

contribute to lessening their impact on the environment. Much of this is due to lack of knowledge or understanding or not being shown how individuals can have an impact and go about it in small ways.

Education

The population is unlikely to adopt sustainable practices unless there is an education program in place. This would be similar to the introduction of recycling practices that have now been accepted and become commonplace with so many people. People require guidelines on what in practice they could be doing, thinking about, and why, what are the benefits and what the alternative would be if we continued with our unsustainable practices. Sustainability could be incorporated into the school's curriculum. That is, through education, put sustainability and our part in it on everyone's agenda.

Issues in response to the consultation paper

Incentives

People need incentives (and incentives doesn't necessarily have to be money or goods) to adopt sustainability principles. There must be incentives for building commercial and domestic buildings along sustainable lines. The recent introduction of a State Government rebate for the installation of solar hot water services is a good example of a positive incentive.

Rewards / Prizes

Establish a 'Premier's Prize' for the best sustainability project or design or practice each year. The Premier contributed the forward to the consultation paper so presumably he has a belief in sustainability and supports the initiative. Leadership is needed to take the people of WA towards a sustainable future. The Premier is the prime position to show the necessary leadership and direction and to demonstrate by example how we as a group can achieve advances towards this goal. The government as a whole should lead by example. As a starter, why not set an example and introduce proper recycling with set targets in government departments. Some councils in Sydney have made it compulsory for solar hot water services to be incorporated into new homes.

Domestic waste

Why would there be a need for any land fills in Perth? The Red Hill Waste Disposal facility is an excellent example of how all of Perth's domestic waste should be handled and treated. This would be my best practice example that clearly demonstrates how sustainability is being practiced in Perth.

Packaging

Packaging is a big part of both the domestic and commercial waste issue and it is imperative to limit it as much as possible. Why not have as a goal the aim to have all packaging materials made from recycled materials which are in turn recycled again. In my area, Coles Supermarket has introduced hard plastic crates to pack items in at the checkout to transport groceries home instead of using plastic bags. I saw that as a great initiative and support this development to replace plastic bags in supermarkets.

Harvesting from nature

Phase out the issuing of licenses for harvesting from natural areas. In particular, harvesting of native flora for the cut flower industry from state owned public land. This is definitely a clear example of an unsustainable practice. Instead assist commercial growers to cultivate our exquisite flora for the cut flower industry. Of equal concern is the amount of native flora taken illegally for commercial purposes. All native floras in public areas should be automatically protected so that everyone is aware and receives the same message. Wildflowers have a huge impact on the tourism industry and the potential to generate income for the state yet there is little recognition of this economic impact in the way that so little is protected and so much is allowed with official consent to be destroyed. We're supposed to be one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world yet we seem to be intent on having as little as possible protected. The amount of our natural environment preserved is so tiny in comparison to the size of this state.

Why not introduce more stringent penalties for illegally harvesting from nature to emphasise the value of and importance of this resource, our native flora, to the state and the people in this state. Of course, some penalties do already exist for illegal gathering of native flora but they are not strong enough to be a deterrent and have much of an impact. Many existing penalties are so low that they are seen as a joke, viewed as small change or are incorporated into the costs of an enterprise and it's business as usual. An example of this happened recently when a large WA company illegally cleared land for quarrying operations. The penalty for this multi million-dollar company is a maximum of \$3,000, generally

seen to be pathetic. Greed, unfortunately, remains such a huge incentive. On the other hand recent successful prosecutions of illegal abalone poaching with large fines imposed successfully sent appropriate messages to the community about the value of this resource.

Housing developments

The practice of total destruction of the natural environment for housing developments is unwarranted and depressing. Everything is totally cleared, the land leveled and the top layer of soil removed so that nothing native will regenerate. This is really obvious in the northern coastal suburbs. How has this attitude that natural bushland is worthless and should be removed been allowed to prevail? Why could there not be guidelines for developers of housing estates whereby certain plants and trees must be retained and incorporated into the landscaping? Larger percentages of natural bushland areas need to be preserved as nature reserves in residential housing developments. The area usually set aside for reserves or open green areas is so small. Importantly, link all bushland reserves by green corridors.

Related to this issue of housing developments is the impact of growth along coastal areas. A coastal development strategy is urgently required especially for the Perth region and areas of higher population. So far, developments along the coast appear to be a free for all. A current contentious issue that the government has to get right is the development proposal around the Ningaloo Reef area. Currently developments seem to be allowed to totally impose themselves on and dominate the coastline.

Water

I believe water to be the most crucial issue we face in this state. The prevailing attitude to water seems to be that it's an infinite resource and as long as you can turn the tap on and water comes out there is no problem. There seems to be a lack of recognition or acknowledgement that Perth in particular and Western Australia in general faces a water crisis; the lack of water resources, problems about renewal and supply against growing demand, and a culture of general wastefulness. There's continued demand for water to pursue pleasure activities, gardening included. Grass or lawn, deemed to be essential in everyone's garden places a huge demand on our water supplies.

Total conflict of interest prevails with the Water Corporation responsible for the conservation of water and the need to increase sales to generate more revenue.

Why not introduce a regulation whereby all homes are required to install a water tank? Even if the tank water were only used to water the garden or wash the car, it would be a huge help with domestic water consumption. Allow greater use of grey water. In our situation it appears crazy to have the same precious drinking quality water go down the toilet and water gardens and so on.

Encouraging sustainable alternatives

Proper guidelines for local government need to be established that encourages a sustainable approach to building and other resource use alternatives. My own local government body would not be unusual in its refusal to permit straw bales homes, for example, to be built and definitely not composting toilets! Such alternatives have been studied, researched, written about and put into practice elsewhere for many years now, yet one is unable to convince conservative councils to allow sustainable practices such as these in their area. Perhaps other alternative sustainable building materials have been investigated. There appear to be only barriers to using sustainable building materials. WA is so heavily promoted and identified as being a resource rich state that this extends to our attitudes towards what building materials to use. People have grown up with and had the idea continually reinforced that we are rich in resources in this state and have nothing to worry about.

Home building

Guidelines need to be developed and adopted for home building. Passive solar and energy efficient principles should be incorporated as a standard into every home. Correct orientation of homes is a first step in utilising natural energy aspects. Perhaps energy efficiency levels should be set for homes. A strategy should be developed to encourage people to build more functional, smaller homes that don't consume so many resources. Our approach to home building is very unsustainable requiring huge resources. A trend towards smaller more functional homes may occur naturally, especially with recent evidence that due to demographic changes in families, the large houses that seem to have become standard in Perth may become the white elephants of the future.

Set targets for people who buy land that a certain percentage is left for original native plants. Phase in the reduction of the use of lawns and palms not native to WA in domestic gardens.

Public transport

How could we begin to be sustainable in our travel habits with the provision of such poor public transport infrastructure? This was the first

thing I noticed when I moved to Perth. In Perth we have developed and encouraged a car culture, the car is king! Design train carriages to better accommodate bikes. Cyclists continue to wait for proper bike paths linking all parts of Perth. In my area, cyclists continue to wait for the installation of a bike path along the Midland railway line. Also, cyclists as commuters desire a direct route to workplaces, not the scenic routes often designed for the Sunday family bike ride. Government departments need to become more bike friendly and provide proper facilities to encourage employees to cycle to work. At many workplaces cyclists are hassled about where they can leave their bikes. They are not offered secure places to store bikes, the bike racks installed usually do not meet Australian standards and in fact lead to bike damage and theft, and showers and change areas are often not provided.

Current policies on car use by those who are provided a car by their workplace encourage more travel by car and greater fuel consumption. The practice of providing a car as part of an employment package with free petrol, free maintenance, free parking spaces at work actively enforces greater car usage. Most of these cars are required to be driven a minimum number of kilometers per year and many people have to work hard at driving unnecessary distances and to unnecessary places just to obtain the minimum kilometers required.

Revegetation

More revegetation projects need to be undertaken in WA. Although the work they do is great, relying on volunteers and community groups to do these projects makes it such a slow process without any systematic overall approach. Why not have as an aim that all roadsides were revegetated with natives to a minimum number of metres in from the road? Anyone who drives in WA would be aware of the thousands of kilometers of bare roadsides.

Conclusion:

I came across your consultation paper "Focus on the future: opportunities for sustainability in Western Australia" on a casual visit to the Museum. The exhibition was excellent and I was asking staff whether there was more to see as it seemed so small. However it was an excellent introduction to sustainability and issues in WA. I doubt that I would have seen your consultation paper if I hadn't happened to make a quick visit to the Museum that day as I have not seen any other reference to it. I hope that the exhibition was designed to travel throughout WA.