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Submission to the Sustainability Policy Unit
Department of Premier and Cabinet Western Australia

From the

South Coast Environment Group (SCEG)
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Introduction

The South Coast Environment Group (SCEG) has been active as a community group for the past eight years. Based in the Walpole/Denmark Area, SCEG's has campaigned successfully on a number of local environmental and sustainability issues, including logging of old growth forests, preservation of aboriginal significant sites, protection of biodiversity wetlands and waste minimisation and recycling to name some.

SCEG works closely with the Denmark Environment Group, and local indigenous leaders to prevent the destruction or degradation of the unique natural and cultural heritage of the Southwest.

SCEG enthusiastically welcomes the development of a State Sustainability Strategy by the Labour Government of Western Australia. It is hoped that this exciting strategy can form the basis of a firm and ongoing commitment to sustainability by the West Australian government.

SCEG takes this opportunity to make a submission in response to the consultation paper released for public comment by the Sustainability Policy Unit, Department of Premier and Cabinet Western Australia. The primary focus of this submission is the management of natural resources in the Southwest. It is hoped that the policy unit notwithstanding the lateness of this response can consider the following.

Background on SCEG and the Walpole Wilderness Area

SCEG was formed in 1994 at Tingle Dale hall in response to community concern at the imminent logging of Sharp forest coup, North Walpole. What ensued was a 6 to 8 month campaign of direct action involving a blockade of the entrance to the area about to be logged. It was during this intense period that close bonds were formed and a cohesive dedicated group emerged with a passion and commitment to defend our forests at all cost. It became apparent that direct on the ground action although effective as a stalling technique was not going to win the battle in the long term. At a very early stage in SCEG's development there was a conscious decision to attack on several fronts, direct activism, media liaison, networking with other groups and political pressure. It was this policy of a multi pronged approach that made SCEG's particularly effective in getting their message across. SCEG's then went on to organise campaigns at Wattle, Giblett, Rocky and Swarbrick forest Blocks. These campaigns were absolutely pivotal in bringing the forests issue to the attention of the city, ultimately turning the tide in the forest debate.

SCEG membership has swelled to over 100 with a core of twenty actively engaged at all times.

SCEG's focus has been on all aspects of the environment, not only the forest issue;

1. Contract to manage Peaceful Bay Rubbish Tip and recycling project
2. Owingup Swamp Wetlands base line data study.
3. Review of prescribed burning policies.
4. Spread of dieback through our eco systems.
5. Liaison with local indigenous custodians.

SCEG's originally drafted the Walpole Wilderness proposal as a submission to the RFA. The Group lobbied and sought endorsement of the proposal, and won it from the National Party, Labour Party, Liberals for the Forest and the Greens, it was only the Liberal Party, then in Government that did not offer its endorsement.

As SCEG's had exhausted all avenues of approach to the Liberal Government, it was decided to actively lobby the Labour Party with the hope they would win power in the forthcoming election. SCEG organised for Dr Geoff Gallop and Dr Judy Edwards to come down to visit and tour the area where the concept of the Walpole Wilderness Proposal was outlined to them.

The Walpole Wilderness became a reality with labours win at the election, resulting in the preservation of approx 360,000 hectares which together with the D'Entrecasteaux National Park creates a continuous conservation reserve of almost 500,000 hectares from Black Point near Augusta in the West, to Denmark in the East.

This national Park complex is historical as it will contain the first legislated wilderness areas in Western Australia. SCEG's has just completed five months Stake Holder Reference Group consultation to assist the Environmental Minister on the finalisation of the boundaries of the area. Once this is decided SCEG will then be involved in the Community Advisory Committee to formulate the Management Plans for the Walpole Wilderness Area. This process will be ongoing for some years to come.

Sustainability in the Southwest

Natural Resource Management

The establishment of the Walpole Wilderness Area (WWA) in the Southwest of this state is seen by SCEG as an exciting opportunity to form the keystone of an integrated National Park and protected area system for biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage protection. This area is also seen as an opportunity for the sustainable revitalization of the economies and communities of the Southwest land division.

The endemic and endangered biodiversity in the Southwest of this state has been internationally recognised as a 'biodiversity hotspot.' The sustainable protection of these world class values is now dependant on the realisation of an integrated vision for natural area conservation across all land tenures in the Southwest.

It is of great concern to SCEG that various aspects of current protected area land management practices in the Southwest are inconsistent with such a vision. Particular aspects of National Park management which continue to be ecologically problematic are the management of fire, and the failure to comprehensively address the ecologically disastrous spread of dieback through these areas.

Current CALM policy with regard to dieback management assumes that the spread of dieback through Southwest forests is inevitable. Little effort is made in the interests of dieback abatement unless endangered species are at risk. This is an unacceptable and unsustainable situation for the State's primary natural area management authority, as the end consequence of this rationale is a drastic change in the landscape as we know it. SCEG believes that many Southwest forests have been consistently subjected to inappropriate fire management regimes.

Fuel reduction burning in the past has been inappropriate in three key areas, timing, frequency and intensity, causing unknown ecological changes to the last remaining forests of this type on Earth. No long term scientific studies of the effects of fuel reduction burning of our unique forests has been undertaken by CALM

The establishment and protection of wilderness areas in the Southwest will pose new challenges with respect to fire management in this region. It must be accepted that there is some risk to wilderness areas associated with the possibility of a wildfire in these areas where vehicle access would destroy the integrity of the wilderness.

The risk of wildfire will be a price we have to pay for the conservation of wilderness areas.

Recommendations:

- CALM policy with regard to dieback management should be immediately reviewed.
- Fire management in Southwest forest should be independently reviewed on an on going basis.
- The precautionary principle should be applied more consistently with respect to fire management of Southwest forests, and long unburned areas should be protected from fire as a matter of importance.
- Adaptive and location specific fire management techniques must be developed for wilderness areas. Such approaches must be based on the two principles of early detection and fast response.

Wilderness Areas

SCEG submits that a number of smaller wilderness areas would constitute a more sustainable and safer approach than one large area, given the nature of the areas and the risk of wildfire. A larger number of wilderness areas would also provide the required flexibility to manage the impacts of nature based tourism on a sustainable basis. A number of wilderness areas would facilitate a system of rotation for tourist access between areas at different times, to allow for recovery of ecosystems from tourist impacts, as well as allowing the trial of different tourism management techniques.

SCEG firmly believes that the JANUS Area criteria¹ for the selection and definition of wilderness areas is inappropriate for the South West of WA. The criteria was primarily developed for ecosystems in the Eastern States.

The minimum area of 8000 hectares free of prior human impact should be reduced in the context of Southwest wilderness areas. It is submitted that the flexibility clause in the JANUS criteria should be used in the determination of potential wilderness areas in the Southwest.

Recommendations:

- The JANUS criteria should be altered under its flexibility clause to allow areas of under 8000 hectares to be defined as wilderness areas in the Southwest
- A greater number of smaller wilderness areas are more sustainable than fewer larger areas, especially with regard to fire management and the impact of tourism.

Mining in National Parks

Of particular concern to SCEG is the inappropriate practice of mining exploration and mining in National Parks.

One example of such an area of unique biodiversity and cultural significance which continues to be degraded by mining companies undertaking exploration is Lake Jasper, situated in the D'Entrecasteaux National Park between Walpole and Pemberton, Lake Jasper is the largest freshwater lake in Western Australia.

Lake Jasper is a unique example of an unaltered aboriginal camping ground, as it appeared thousands of years prior to European settlement. Now flooded, the site lies beneath the waters of the lake, where mining for mineral sands would destroy this precious cultural asset and spiritually

¹ W.A. RFA Documentation Vol. 1 pp20, 167

significant site. The chemistry of the submerged sulfate soils under this lake are such that if the soils are disturbed sulphuric acid is formed which would irreversibly alter this near pristine ecosystem.

SCEG is deeply concerned about the significant impact of mining exploration, which has already taken place surrounding Lake Jasper. SCEG is totally opposed to the annexation of mining areas from National Parks, and submits that the Lake Jasper mining exploration lease and similar areas within other national parks should be revoked and the areas reinstated as National Parks.

Recommendations

- The Labour government of this State is urged to display commitment to its election promise of no new mining leases to be granted in national parks, by revoking any exploration leases which currently exist in National Parks.
- Lake Jasper should be immediately be reinstated as part of the D'Entrecasteaux National Park

Indigenous and Community Involvement in Natural Resource Management

SCEG firmly believes that indigenous knowledge, and the active participation of indigenous groups in the management of natural areas is a undervalued and underutilized resource. In the interests of the dual objective of aboriginal reconciliation and improved natural resource management, SCEG believes that the incorporation of indigenous people and their knowledge in land management must be actively sought as a matter of priority.

Community involvement and community ownership of natural resources is also an invaluable component of the sustainable conservation of natural and cultural heritage values. Neighborhood watch programs to encourage custodianship of natural resources, as well as the encouragement of volunteer involvement, such as the Bibbulmun Track Society are useful mechanisms for increasing community involvement and ownership of natural resources.

Recommendations:

- Indigenous representation must be a required part of the community consultation process of every development proposal. Effort should be made to be accommodating and sensitive to an indigenous approach to knowledge and the understanding of ecological systems.
- Community involvement and ownership of natural and cultural resources should be actively encouraged. This can be achieved by the development and use of new and existing mechanisms for encouraging community participation.

Conclusion

It is hoped this submission by SCEG on the sustainability of natural resource management in the Southwest is of value to the Sustainability Policy Unit, department of Premier and Cabinet. It is the position of SCEG that serious consideration should be given to the aforementioned issues regarding the ecological integrity and social sustainability of Western Australia's world class ecological and cultural heritage.

Page 17 of recently released 2002-03 Budget overview (A VALUED ENVIRONMENT) states in the second paragraph Quote' The Government places a strong focus on protecting the natural environment ensuring a liveable urban environment and planing for ecologically sustainable development in the future .This includes encouraging the growth of ecologically sustainable industries for employment creation.' unquote. It then goes on to state under the heading FORESTS that Quote The Government has delivered beyond its promise by protecting all old growth forests. To achieve this, the Government has committed to the total expenditure program of \$123.5 million as previously announced.

SCEGS would like to propose that the Government now has a unique opportunity (with its implementation of the WWP) to target this area as the showcase example of its ecologically sustainable development programme .Because of its now internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot status and the fact it has the highest rainfall in Western Australia with its ecosystems still relatively intact this area is incredibly valuable to the future of the state. We have a duty and responsibility to not duplicate the ad hoc and ill planned development that has spread all the way down the southwest coastline, development that will cost the state dearly in the future to rectify. With the expenditure set aside in the budget we have a one off chance to steer the future of the area to its inevitable destiny, a World recognised example of sustainable development for the new millennium.

Tom Whitaker
President
South Coast Environment Group