Submission to the State Sustainability Strategy

World Wide Fund for Nature Australia

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WWF Australia Submission to the WA State Sustainability Strategy

Introduction to WWF Australia

For nearly 25 years WWF Australia (World Wide Fund for Nature Australia) has worked as an independent force to protect this natural environment – working across economic, political and cultural boundaries. During this time we have gained over 25,000 supporters across the country and achieved solutions for the environment through an approach that is rational, practical and science based.

In Australia, as internationally, WWF works through collaboration rather than confrontation, in the belief that industry, people and nature can, and must, co-exist in harmony.

WWF Australia operates from 6 offices and a host of regional outposts around the country, with more than 180 projects across Australia and Oceania, investing nearly $6.5 million directly in conservation programs, thanks to our individual supporters, government and corporate sponsors.

WWF in the Western Region

From tropical forests to temperate woodlands, deserts to monsoonal rivers, coral reefs to cold oceans, the Western Region is a vast area of ancient yet vulnerable land and sea-scapes - and one undergoing an exceptional loss of habitat and species.

Our long-term vision for this region is that its globally recognised biodiversity and ecological processes are conserved through the joint work of local communities, government and businesses.

WWF has identified eight globally significant ecoregions (areas of great biodiversity value that are under threat) within an overall area described as the “Western Region” – incorporating Western Australia, part of the Northern Territory and part of South Australia.

WWF has worked in Western Australia for over -six years, developing significant conservation projects in the Southwest Australia ecoregion – one of the top 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world, containing the highest concentration of rare and endangered species on the continent.

The Regional Program

A bigger Regional Program is being established, to intensify and expand our work in the Region.

Our work in Southwest Australia to date has primarily focused on promoting and providing support to on-ground projects relating to threatened species, biodiversity and vegetation protection, through programs such as Woodland Watch and the

Threatened Species Network (TSN). We have also been instrumental in facilitating the development of market-based initiatives that promote conservation by the private sector e.g. Bush Brokers and Bush Bank for native vegetation blocks; and the Marine Stewardship Council accreditation for fisheries e.g. Western Rock Lobster. In this way, WWF is often the link between government, industry and community groups.

There are now 12 staff in the Western Region Team – with eight people based in Perth and field staff based in Northam, Bencubbin, Kununurra and Alice Springs. The Western Region program currently has nine Trustees – who devote their time, expertise, networks and resources to help develop WWF's work in this region.

The outcomes WWF aims for through our partnerships over the next 20 years are:

- Conservation of the natural environment becomes a key objective of rural development in Western Australia;
- Local communities, private landholders, local authorities and traditional owners play a leading role in the conservation and rehabilitation of native vegetation;
- Attitudes, policies and allocations for water and wetland use reflect the finite nature of the resource and the biota;
- Marine and coastal zone conservation policies reflect the conservation values of the biota and are reinforced by strong community and industry partnerships; and,
- WA-based industries play a leading role in promoting and implementing environmentally sound fishery, forestry and mining practice within the Asia-Pacific region.

Needs, Benefits and Opportunities for a State Sustainability Strategy

WWF welcomes the initiative to develop a State Sustainability Strategy, since it opens up the following opportunities:

1. There is an opportunity to **establish what the achievement of sustainability will mean in practice**, providing indicators that will enable the measurement of progress in the state towards this. Sustainability is a mis-used term and is often interpreted as economic or financial sustainability e.g. the Commonwealth "Sustainable Regions" Program – or the pursuit of economic development whilst paying some regard to the environment and social issues e.g. in mining, agriculture or forestry. Another example is the "sustainable yield" estimates for water extraction – many of which do not include environmental water allocation for water-dependent ecosystems and only consider maintaining human uses, as these are considered "higher value" uses.
2. There is an opportunity to **identify the need for consistency in sectoral policies and to stimulate cross-sectoral actions** e.g. for improving water efficiencies and to meet international, national and regional biodiversity conservation targets. This would lead to a more efficient, collaborative approach in government and between government, business and the wider community.
3. There is an opportunity to **raise awareness of the benefits of investing in the sustainable management of natural resources**, that underpins people's well-being and ecological health. This includes raising awareness and understanding of the full values of conserving the natural environment (including biodiversity and ecological processes) and the linkages between biodiversity, human health and productive land and water management. There is still a long way to go in WA to describe and assess biodiversity, ecosystem and cultural values associated with

natural and semi-natural environments. This is especially true with regard to Aboriginal communities and traditional owners.

4. In turn, a greater awareness and understanding of environmental and cultural values should lead to **more effective assessment of proposed developments by government**, that recognises and counts non-market economic values. This is relevant, for example, to decisions such as the proposed tourism development at Maud's Landing and the proposed large-scale irrigated agriculture developments in the Ord floodplain. Currently, the environmental case for or against a development is examined in great detail by the Environmental Protection Authority, while the economic case for development is often assumed to be valid and is not subject to a thorough cost-benefit analysis that is open to public scrutiny. While the distribution of any economic benefits and the spread of economic risk across the community are critical issues in terms of a sustainability test, they are not effectively factored into the decision-making process.

Facilitating change

- WWF believes that sustainability can only be achieved through effective partnerships between government, business/industry and the wider community.
- In this context, we recognise that community-driven programs for sustainable development and natural resource management are the most effective in the long-term. This is true both for the urban and rural environments.
- Community-based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) play a very significant role in working with communities to facilitate change through capacity building, development of partnership projects, promotion of good practice approaches and by bridging cultural gaps between different stakeholder types. Environmental NGOs have an especially important role to play in facilitating new approaches to private land management.
- Governments can be most effective in this process in providing support to the community in the form of technical advice, incentive schemes, regulatory mechanisms and finance. In the context of Natural Resource Management, we feel that the Commonwealth and State governments can best act as service-providers – to facilitate on-ground action according to a strategic framework of priorities.
- There should also be a strong role by government in facilitating sustainable business opportunities.
- Business can be most effective in the development of innovative approaches to help achieve sustainable development e.g. measures to increase domestic and agricultural water efficiencies or environmentally-sound farm forestry options.
- Business and industry in WA should also play a leadership role in developing and implementing voluntary environmental standards for natural resource management e.g. through internationally recognised accreditation mechanisms such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).
- Academic institutions play an important role in providing insights into sustainability issues, testing the hypotheses that underpin sustainability (environmental, social and economic) and ensuring that actions are based on the best available scientific information.

Best-Practice Examples and Applicability in WA

Certification Schemes
Probably, the greatest failing of government management of natural resources has been the inability to balance the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of natural resources. Many of the most significant areas for biodiversity conservation occur on private land and waterspace, outside the current public reserve system. State and regional legislation tends to encourage "economic development" by providing incentives or concessions to industry at the expense of other priorities, such as environmental protection. Industry self-regulation through the development and implementation of independently audited environmental standards is one approach which allows industry to demonstrate its commitment to the environment, in ways recognised by international markets.

In contrast with some other sectors, public performance of the natural resources sectors is influenced more by environmental importance than any other issue. Natural resource companies with poor on-ground performance tend to influence the public opinion of the industry as a whole. Those companies that can demonstrate a track record of high standards of on-ground performance in future are likely to be better placed to access the resource.

Hence there is a growing need for product differentiation in the market place on the basis of on-ground performance. Commodity-based sectors such as forestry and marine fisheries have started to use a combination of independent certification and labelling to this end – via the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). These certification schemes differ from environmental management systems and ISO standards in prescribing levels of importance to be attained. They also do not constitute a product label. The history of development of the FSC and MSC and a proposal for a mining certification feasibility study has been published by WWF (Rae and Rouse, 2001; www.msc.org and www.fscoax.org).

Status of certification schemes and applicability for WA:

MSC Fisheries
The WA Rock lobster fishery is the world's first fishery to receive MSC certification. Approximately 15-25 fisheries worldwide are in various stages of MSC assessment. Currently, the biggest consumer market for MSC certified fish is in Europe and North America. MSC will have a regional Asia-Pacific presence based in Sydney from the middle of 2002, which will increase its ability to deal with the growing interest in accreditation expressed by industries around the country, including WA, at the recent Seafood Directions conference in Queensland. This presence will also concentrate on raising awareness of the scheme amongst the Asian consumer market, which will have considerable benefit to many Australian fishing industries. Currently WWF is in consultation with the Western Rock Lobster industry, WAFIC and individual industry councils over continuing and new accreditation.

FSC Forests
The FSC label is the only internationally recognised label that signifies that forest products has been sourced from sustainably managed forests. There is a growing demand for FSC products in the USA and Europe that is currently outstripping supply. Over 18 million hectares of forest have been certified to the FSC standard – ranging from small community-owned forest operations to major national forests – in temperate and tropical climates. Non-wood forest products, such as honey, are also being certified. There is interest from some small forest plantation growers in WA to

pursue an FSC approach and there is growing support for FSC national initiative. We therefore believe that there is considerable potential for the FSC to be influential in raising the environmental standards in plantation forests in WA and to act as an additional incentive to promote appropriate new planting as a contribution to the State Salinity Action Plan. In the longer term, it would be appropriate to consider the applicability of an FSC process to the management of native forests.

WWF recommends that relevant industries, the government, NGOs and other stakeholders
- **facilitate the extension of MSC to other fisheries in WA;**
- **participate in the development of a national FSC initiative;**
- **participate in the feasibility study for mining certification**

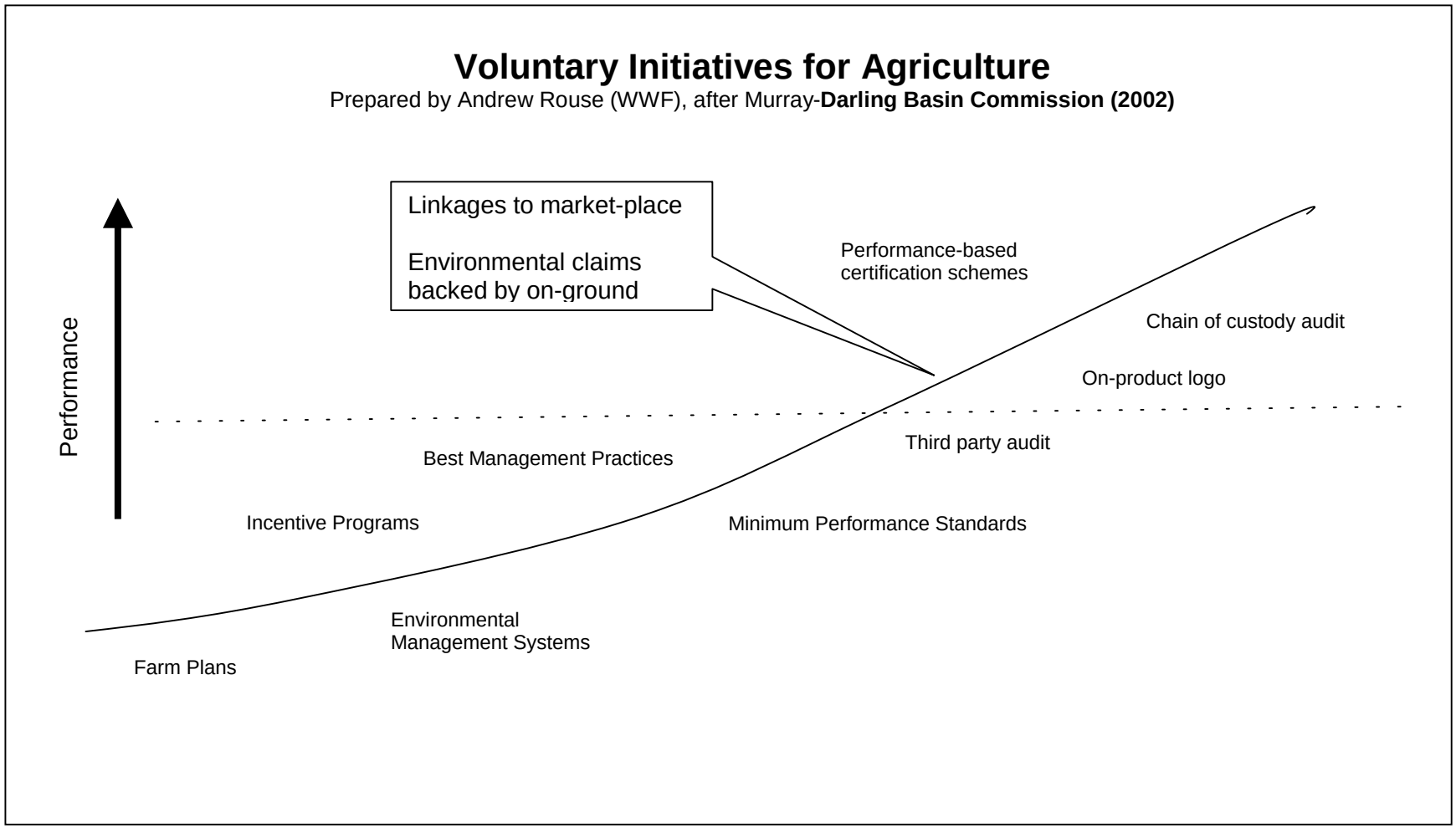
Agricultural certification and incentives schemes

Farmers in WA are becoming increasingly interested to embrace environmentally acceptable ways of farming, aware that "clean and green" farming systems are likely to open up greater markets in future. In this context, "clean" means food is produced free of contamination, while "green" means the food is produced and processed through environmentally acceptable means.

There is a need to assist catchment groups by helping them define the technically feasible and economically viable options for sustainable land management. Additionally, there is a need to go beyond the traditional "grant approach" to stimulating landowner interest in taking action that contributes to environmental improvement on a landscape scale.

The need to provide incentives and economic options for biodiversity and ecosystem management is considered a high priority. However, there are tensions created through measures that provide incentives for one group, yet disadvantage another – for example, rate reductions for landowners with remnant vegetation impacts on Local Government revenue and therefore their ability to provide necessary services. These issues need to be addressed.

WWF recognises that there are a range of voluntary initiatives for agriculture which can act as incentives for improved environmental performance, from effective clearance controls, through grants for fencing remnants, to Environmental Management Systems and meeting performance-based standards. Whilst there is an expectation from many that some of the earlier steps, such as achieving farm plans and establishing an EMS process, will provide market benefits, WWF considers that in reality these market benefits will only be realised where credible performance-based standards are met and are subject to a third-party audit and chain of custody processes (see Figure below, prepared by Andrew Rouse, WWF). WWF Australia is currently developing a national feasibility study to investigate the potential for globally recognised agricultural certification schemes, together with the agricultural industry, environmental sector and government. This will aim to establish what it would take to establish agricultural certification schemes – and on what basis this might best occur i.e. at the product or farm system level, or for regional agricultural systems.


Voluntary Initiatives for Agriculture
Prepared by Andrew Rouse (WWF), after Murray-Darling Basin Commission (2002)
Linkages to market-place
Environmental claims backed by on-ground
Performance-based certification schemes
Chain of custody audit
On-product logo
Third party audit
Performance
Best Management Practices
Incentive Programs
Minimum Performance Standards
Environmental Management Systems
Farm Plans

While there are ambitions for a market-led system to lead the "greening of agriculture" in the south-west of WA, in practice, farm businesses are generally at an early stage in the pathway. Whilst WWF would support moving towards a market-led approach, we feel that there are some short-term incentive schemes and trialing of EMS style approaches, that could help build capacity in the farming community towards this end.

We recognise that some good examples and a range of types of incentives for private land conservation exist in WA. However, there are some notable gaps. Together with farmer contacts and industry groups, WWF are currently investigating the use of tools such as bush tendering, whole farm planning and biodiversity-focussed environmental management systems. We anticipate distributing a discussion paper on these topics in early June. We note that there has been some progress in developing and testing EMS in broad-acre agriculture in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland (e.g. see www.grdc.com.au/growers and LWRRDC Project LPM2). Another approach, which WWF is involved in trialing in the Liverpool Plains, NSW is the "conservation auction" or "bush tendering" model (see below). This has been adapted from the USDA model.

We also note a report currently being prepared by Mainstream Environmental Consulting, economists Jeff Bennett and Stuart Whitten, and WWF, for the Commonwealth called "Incentive Measures for Conserving Freshwater Ecosystems" concludes that while Australia has a considerable range of such incentive measures operating today, many are being applied in a piece-meal or *ad hoc* fashion. In addition, many of the new incentive options identified in this report are considered as worthy of further review and possible trial (such as wildlife ranching, bonus development rights, mitigation banking, biodiversity credit schemes, performance bonds etc).

WWF recommends that the government responds to and acts on advice from the environmental and agricultural industry groups concerning the establishment of a suite of voluntary initiatives that build the capacity of the farming communities to address environmental objectives.

We recommend trials of the most promising schemes. WWF recommends the investigation of the "conservation auction" or "bush tendering" approach in WA, as one implementation mechanism to deliver regional natural resource management targets at a local scale across the landscape. This is a mechanism that can facilitate tightly targeted actions (types and location) by encouraging individual landowners to develop innovative proposals to provide environmental and salinity benefits.

Environmental Services up for tender – the conservation auction approach:

What is a conservation auction?

An economically efficient method of targeting expenditure on land-use change and environmental services. It provides not only a direct economic incentive for land use change and environmental outcomes, but also contributes to sustainable regional development. It is becoming increasingly well accepted that sustainable communities and sound regional economic growth must be founded on maintaining ecosystem health.

It provides a delivery and implementation mechanism for those areas identified in the Framework for Investment of Public Funds (SSC) where the required and currently available land use change is marginally profitable, unprofitable or unproven. In this approach, the provision of environmental services is treated as a new industry. This achieves three objectives:

- Creates a viable industry now while others are in development and trial
- Builds future regional growth on environmental principles
- By utilising public money to buy these services, it provides recognition of the value of environmental services, as well as the more traditional "cash-crops" to the general economy

It serves to create a market opportunity for valuing and paying for environmental benefits and services. Business propositions are developed by landowners to change the land use and provide catchment/landscape-scale conservation/ environmental services. Funds are provided via a contract between two parties, with the buyer (public money through Government or regional group) paying for a service that the business operator (farmer) provides.

How might it work?

- Locally specific land use guidelines developed based on regional strategies and targets
- Criteria called an Environmental Benefits Index formed (this ranks particular types of land, land uses and management activities according to the environmental benefits they provide
- Individual landowners bid to provide services and change land use (including opportunity costs and activity costs)
- Bids assessed against the EBI – to evaluate the most cost-effective options for providing land-use change and environmental services
- Contracts developed between the landholder and Steering Body (representatives of Government/ regional group/public)
- Land-use change/management actions undertaken in accordance with the contract

Why this approach as well as everything else?

This process addresses a root cause of environmentally unsustainable practices – the lack of markets for environmental benefits and industries matched to the ecological capacity of the land. The benefits of this approach include:

- Provides an economic underpinning to land-use change – not relying solely on volunteers motivation and goodwill.
- Transparent, targeted method of spending public money on the environment
- Translates regional targets into strategic local action over the whole landscape
- Engages landowners' own expertise and knowledge, as well as engaging experts when necessary
- Contributes to regional economic growth
- Minimises structural adjustment cost

Water Management

It is generally accepted by government that the sustainable use of natural resources is essential to underpin both rural development and ecosystem functions. The management of water is inextricably linked to the management of all other natural resources within a catchment or a groundwater unit. WWF therefore believes that it is essential that the future natural resource management frameworks fully integrate the targets, decision-making processes and the various monitoring and management plans that affect water resources and water-dependent ecosystems with those for the management of other natural resources. This is the goal of "Integrated Catchment Management", which is a concept that has been endorsed by the Commonwealth government, and worldwide, through a variety of Conventions and initiatives, such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Global Water Partnership.

In this context, WWF welcomes the development of regional, catchment-based NRM strategies but is concerned about the current separation of decisions on water allocation from the strategies and plans of the regional NRM groups. In view of the predicted sharp increase in pressure on the state's water resources in the coming decades, this concern is likely to heighten.

We note the recent proposal from the State Salinity Council to develop "Regional Water Management Plans", but consider that this may further dislocate decisions on water management from other NRM concerns. While this proposal intends, for example, to ensure that the upstream-downstream and cross-catchment impacts of proposed deep drainage proposals be considered in a broad context, we see serious limitations in considering these issues in isolation from the targets and measures for native vegetation and socio-economic issues.

Whilst there has been considerable attention given to the impact of current domestic use on Perth's future water supply, little attention has so far been given to the rising water consumption and low water efficiency of the agriculture and mining industries in WA. WWF believes that the State water policies and strategies for water conservation must respond effectively to the pressures and impacts of all sectors. In addition, to meet sustainability criteria, the equity issues in water allocation must be more effectively addressed, for example incorporating the cultural values of water and water-dependent environments into decision-making processes for water allocation.

In order to achieve sustainable natural resource management, it will be necessary to ensure that targets that affect water quality and quantity and the health of water-dependent ecosystems are consistent across all decision-making processes at the catchment and regional levels. We believe that it will also be necessary to bring catchment planning under the framework of State NRM legislation.

We note that Western Australia and Tasmania are the only states where catchment planning processes have "advisory" status, while Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland have developed stronger frameworks for Integrated Catchment Management Processes. WWF would also like to point to the European experience, where successive European-wide legislation on separate aspects of water management (e.g. Nitrates Directive, Urban Waste Water Directive) have failed to be implemented in the majority of states. This has resulted in a new Directive that pulls together all aspects and acts as a framework for all previous legislation - the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). This Directive sets out a framework for European Community action and a process for setting standards, according to former

ecological reference conditions, for all water bodies within a catchment unit, that is relevant to the entire continent. The Directive provides a timescale within which measures must be taken to improve the ecological status of all water bodies and water-dependent ecosystems, and it provides an effective framework for monitoring and reporting, that is comparable despite widely differing environments and pressures on water resources in different states.
Another important aspect of the EU Water Framework Directive is that an economic assessment of water use is required within each catchment unit, to inform the application of measures and economic incentives that address efficiency and demand management. Full cost recovery, including the environmental externalities, is a target that all Member States are required to work towards.

WWF has worked with the European Commission and stakeholders from across Europe over the last 3 years to identify best practice approaches to Integrated Catchment Management and to establish practical guidelines for the Member States (see www.panda.org/europe/freshwater). This approach might form a useful model for Australia.

In the context of sustainability of water resource management in WA, we believe that too little attention is given to achieving economically efficient use of water to date. WWF asserts that the environment remains on an unequal footing with economic principles in decision-making by jurisdictions, despite this being a fundamental aspect of environmentally sustainable development.

The COAG reforms require that economic instruments such as water trading and water pricing be used to maximise the contribution to water to the national income subject to ecological, physical and social constraints. Whilst significant benefits to the environment could be achieved through the use of water trading, water pricing and other mechanisms, there are few examples so far in Australia where these have materialised. So far, the bulk of the economic benefits resulting from water trading, for example, are shared directly between the buyers and the sellers of water and have resulted in increasing total extractions, rather than the maintenance or enhancement of environmental flows. It is vital that in future water trading does not act to provide an economic incentive to activate sleeper or doser licences. The implementation of price rises is too slow and “full cost recovery” does not include the full environmental costs or conform to definitions accepted by COAG.

WWF Australia believes that there is a strong imperative to increase the rate of progress made in incorporating environmental issues into the economic frameworks for decision-making. In the context of seeking long-term sustainable solutions to water management, it will not be acceptable to delay the incorporation of environmental costs on the basis of potential negative social impact. Such an approach is based on short-term political perspectives and fails to reflect the increasing willingness of communities within the state to take action to secure environmental values.

WWF have worked in the Eastern States to determine how economic instruments can best be applied to water management, to provide environmental benefits - with a focus on the Murray Darling Basin. There are a number of technical documents available on this matter. While the results are not directly applicable to WA, due to the vastly different environment and water allocation procedures, there are some principles and lessons that can be readily transferred. WWF is therefore keen to work with the State government and the Water Corporation on these issues.

WWF recommends that, in the framework of the State Sustainability Strategy, the State Water Conservation Strategy sets out a framework for action, including

- **the future legislative requirements and institutional frameworks for delivering Integrated Catchment Management**
- **the actions needed to reduce water consumption and increase water efficiency in all sectors**
- **the application of economic instruments to maintain and enhance environmental values, as part of ESD**

Integrated Marine and Coastal Management

There is currently no vision and overarching business plan with measurable targets in Western Australia, to guide sustainable ocean and coast management. Although there is a growing commitment towards ecosystem based management approaches within sectors, the reality is that different sectors and Government agencies hold inconsistent views on fundamental issues of sustainable ocean management, such as protected areas and resource access. These are issues that will ultimately determine whether we can manage our marine and coastal resources into the future. WWF has been involved with the development of the National Oceans Policy, and we see the benefit of developing an integrated, ecosystem based management approach to both ocean and coastal management in WA with improved cross-sectoral coordination. As part of this approach, endorsement of the Oceans Policy by WA would be beneficial to integrated marine management when the Regional Planning Process reaches WA.

Resourcing for 1/3 of the country's coastline needs to be commensurate with the task. Whilst increased Government funding should be part of this, industry and community co-management arrangements should be explored to enable more effective management of our coastal and marine resources. WWF works actively with industry to promote and facilitate self-management, for example with MSC, and with communities around Australia and the globe to facilitate community-led local approaches to ocean and coastal planning and management. Within WA, WWF supports the aims of the Save Ningaloo Campaign and is actively involved in exploring an alternative sustainable future for the Ningaloo/ Cape Range region based on identifying the limits of the natural systems and then designing prosperous local community options and wilderness experiences for visitors, within these limits. A separate submission on this alternative and the opportunity it presents for regional sustainability has been prepared by WWF and the Save Ningaloo Campaign.

Meaningful and equitable participation in planning, decision making and management by the community is a key component of sustainable ocean and coastal management. Although there is clear State Government commitment to participation, many processes required to involve the public are token exercises of consultation with no real citizen input into the process or decision. Similarly, there is frequently confusion within such processes as to the degree of citizen control over either the process, eventual decision or both. We welcome the recent initiatives of the Citizens and Civics Unit, but these principles especially of transparency and social justice are not as yet reflected in many decision-making fora – particularly with regard to coastal development. Equally necessary are better provisions for inclusion of cultural diversity within participation processes, especially for indigenous people.

Education of the general public of most ocean ecology, issues, threats and methods of conservation needs to be increased dramatically to raise the level of awareness of the ocean and coast as vulnerable, finite resource. The proposed Biodiversity Strategy for Western Australia, or an integrated business plan for ocean management as recommended above, would be potential avenues to explore varying community values of the ocean, and increase understanding of its biological and physical values.

Decision making for sustainability is dependent on quality environmental, social and economic information. Commitment to securing technical data regarding oceanographic, biological and ecological processes must be increased if we are to have an adequate information source upon which to base sound decisions. However, there are also many sources of data, both socio-cultural and biological, that are informal and anecdotal. We need to improve our integration of information from technical, informal and traditional sources of knowledge – and to design information management systems that can utilise these different sources of knowledge, and at the same time inform the public. The Sustainable Regional Development Kit (Dore, Keating, Woodhill, and Ellis, 2000) provide an overview of a variety of approaches on this issue, and the Avon Catchment Network website (www.avonicm.org.au) and associated links is a good working example of the type of information management systems we will require.

We welcome the inclusion of coastal targets for regional natural resource management strategies accredited under the National Action Plan, but are concerned about parts of the country which fall outside of the NAP priorities, or where no functional regional groups exist. State wide targets need to be developed, and interpreted at a local level, and the formation of regional NRM groups fostered and encouraged in regions where they are currently missing.

WWF recommends that an overarching vision and plan is developed for WAs oceans, based on ecosystem management principles, that sets goals, objectives and targets for both the development of the plan and its implementation.

WWF recommends that a Coastal Strategy is finalised from the various draft documents currently available and others in writing, incorporating recommendations of the Coastal Taskforce and additional reports from the Coastal Planning Coalition.

WWF recommends that the Ningaloo/ Cape Range Region initiative is supported as a case study for regional sustainability under the State Sustainability Strategy.

Ecoregion-based conservation

An ecoregion is a relatively large unit of land or water that contains a distinct assemblage of natural communities sharing a large majority of species, dynamics and environmental conditions. They are suitable units for conservation planning. Examples in WA include the South-West, the Kimberley and the Central Arid ecoregions.

Ecoregion conservation uses a broader view of biodiversity and addresses overarching threats i.e. those operating over multiple areas within and outside an ecoregion. The basic approach is for a biodiversity vision and targets to be clearly defined as a first step, through a process of identifying and assessing biological attributes and key processes, the direct and over-arching threats and conservation status. This vision forms a basis for establishing priority areas and issues for action. It also helps to identify any synergies or contradictions with visions, objectives and attitudes of other stakeholder groups. Through further assessments, the legal, policy, institutional, financial, social and economic aspects of the region and their links to biodiversity can be outlined and refined. This leads to an improved understanding of what interventions, tools and approaches to biodiversity conservation might be the most feasible and desirable. The final action plan would identify key strategic actions (e.g. institutional) and priority projects (e.g. landscape, site-scale). It would clarify *who* should take action, *which* tools and approaches are needed and a suitable timeline for implementation.

The Southwest Australia ecoregion of WA is one of the top 25 "biodiversity hotspots" of the world. It encompasses nine IBRA regions ranging from the northern sandplain heaths to the Swan coastal plains and wetlands, the tall forests to the woodlands and granites of the wheatbelt and the mallee and heaths of the south coast. The protection of these natural assets and the ecological integrity of this region is vital as a basis for sustainable development. The indirect impacts of vegetation clearing on private and public assets through dryland salinity, is a stark example. Poor management and neglect of native vegetation, encroachment of urban and peri-urban development and degradation of precious soil and water resources also lead to the depletion of this critical natural capital.

The protection of these unique values will require better-coordinated strategies between government agencies and non-government organisations that address conservation of both the private and public estate. There will also need to be better integration of policies and economic instruments that influence the behaviour of the public and private sector in natural resource management.

The Salinity Taskforce recognised these needs in their report this year, calling for "a tangible long-term vision for the landscape of south-west Western Australia …to guide coordinated action" (Recommendation 3.1) and "better integration of government actions for NRM and sustainable development" (Recommendations 5.5). They further recommended that a government-NGO Working Group is established "to develop a Nature Conservation, Vegetation and Biodiversity strategy for public and private lands across the south-west of Western Australia" (Recommendation 5.6.2).

The Department of Conservation and Land Management is charged with the responsibility of developing a state-wide biodiversity strategy. In addition, the regional catchment councils are being charged with the responsibility to develop regional natural resource management plans (e.g. for the Avon Basin), which include regional targets The development of ecoregional visions and action plans will provide a link between these two levels – translating the broad policy direction of the state strategy down to the ecoregional level and highlighting the priorities for each catchment council. The inclusion of NGO's such as WWF in this work will help to ensure community involvement and also to raise international and national awareness and financial support for the program.

The expected outcomes of the ecoregional program are:

1. A clearer understanding of the root causes of biodiversity loss in the region, how they interact and the best "entry points" for actions to address policy and market failure.
2. Development and articulation of desired future scenarios for the SW ecoregion, together with a vision, goals and objectives that inspire all organisations that can influence the region.
3. Biodiversity targets that reflect priorities for conservation drawn up at the ecoregion level – to inform state and regional group Natural Resource Management plans, all levels of government and NGO strategic plans.
4. Coordinated strategies and initiatives for protected areas and effective conservation on all land tenures, that influence business and implementation plans.
5. A greater regional, national and international awareness of the conservation challenge in the south-west of WA and an increased ability to attract funds to the partnership, linked to the joint action plan.

WWF recommends that a government-NGO coalition be established to progress an ecoregional planning process for the Southwest Australia ecoregion.

ENDS