

26 February, 2003

Professor Peter Newman
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Dear Professor Newman

RE: FOCUS ON THE FUTURE: THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY, CONSULTATION DRAFT.

What sustainability means

Further to my submission on the original consultation paper on this topic in April 2002, I am pleased to note that the definition for 'sustainability' has been changed in this later document. However I still have some difficulty with the use of the word 'improvement' when applied to sustainable environmental management. While it may be necessary, in order to achieve sustainability, to improve on past management practises, it can be argued that past ill-advised 'improvement' to our natural systems is what has caused much of the present degradation!

I feel that this new consultation paper has made a good start in the task of presenting the different facets within this issue and to begin the process of integrating the different perspectives necessary to achieve a sustainable future.

Character of the strategy

It is proposed 'to incorporate the social dimension into sustainability by demonstrating that it is possible to create a stronger economy and a healthier environment by more fully integrating the social dimension' (page 25). This will demand a huge social change within established authorities, both private and public, and the community generally. As mentioned in my earlier submission "Sustainability is essentially a practical discipline. It is necessary to implement the principles of sustainability before it can be achieved". This State Sustainability Strategy is, in my opinion making a good start, and its success will depend on political will to implement it.

The debate of what sustainability means, and how to implement it, will be a source of entertainment for some time to come. Hopefully it will eventually become an obvious and undisputed necessity in our daily lives.

List of Proposed Actions:

Sustainability Assessment – The environment has been left out of this proposed sustainability assessment loop. Based on previous track records such a process would fail to produce sustainability as recommended in the Strategy. The basic environmental elements of biodiversity conservation, clean air, soil and water require a strong advocate in any proposed Working Group on Sustainability Assessment.

Institutional Change – I support these proposed actions.

Embracing Sustainability in Government Agencies – The concept of sustainability would need to be seen as a common purpose so that a 'whole of government' approach would be the basic guiding philosophy. The proposed new Biodiversity Conservation Act, when ratified, will need to be taken into consideration here. The State Weed Plan needs to be included and implemented as part of this Sustainability Code of Practice and Action Plan.

In the present climate of cutting-back budgets and staff levels within State Government Departments it is unlikely that this Proposed Action can be achieved to an effective level.

Partnerships for Action – For this action to produce the required outcome it would be necessary for local community environment and landcare groups to be represented within this Partnership. These groups contain a very large proportion of the skills, knowledge and ability within West. Aust. to manage our local and regional reserves that protect the quality of our air, soils and water. Many local governments depend on their local landcare, bush, wetlands and river-care groups to help manage these natural assets. These groups are largely unrecognised or appreciated by the larger community and yet their activities already contribute an essential practical component for sustainability and lead the way for implementation.

Planning for Sustainability – There is an over-emphasis here on the Department for Planning and Infrastructure. This proposal would be in conflict with the “Partnerships for Action” as proposed in 1.8 – 11. The Department of Planning and Infrastructure does not have the confidence of those experienced in environmental management in this state. If Sustainability is seen to be as ‘meeting the needs of current and future generations through simultaneous environmental, social and economic improvement’ this proposed action would form a major stumbling block to achieving sustainability.

Sustainability in the Regions – Any Regional Development Commissions and Sustainable Business Investment proposals would need to be planned in conjunction with the Department of Environmental Protection, The Department of Agriculture, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Biodiversity Conservation Act and the state’s responsibilities under Federal biodiversity agreements. A system of criteria and monitoring would need to be created to establish ‘ethical’ investment within a sustainability model.

Indigenous Communities and Sustainability – Sustainability will require partnerships of technical and practical training between all parties involved in the management of natural assets in order to protect the asset and conserve it for the future. A common aim for long-term sustainable custodianship of the lands and waters should provide opportunities for sharing of knowledge and skills.

Research and Development for Sustainability – I support these proposed actions with the proviso that there is a need here to consider bio-security. We have one of the world’s 26 biodiversity ‘hot spots’ in our South West – a National treasure that needs protecting from exploitation and degradation.

Sustainability Information Online – This proposal would be an opportunity to include the information service required under the State Weed Plan.

Population, Development Aid and Environmental Technology – Western Australia’s own sustainability must not be jeopardised by overseas commitments. Also, activities by Western Australian projects should not jeopardise the sustainability of overseas countries.

The proposal at 2.5 is excellent. The population and consumption debate, like the sustainability debate, is long overdue. These issues need to be considered together as they cannot be separated if the debate is to have any credibility.

Maintaining our Biodiversity – Weeds and feral animals are undermining sustainable management practises within Western Australia. It is absolutely abysmal that there is no weed science section within the Department of Conservation and Land Management (DCLM), or that the Herbarium cannot secure funding to complete its collection and reference library of weed species. Weeds and feral animals are recognised as a major degrading influence on the sustainable management of our natural assets. Each breeding season sees an advance in the degradation of our natural resources. The quality of our rivers, lands and oceans provides our essential production stocks and require careful management if they are to remain viable into the future.

There is a desperately urgent need for well-trained technical weed and natural systems management personnel to assist land managers in weed mapping, control and public education. A recent question by Christine Sharpe MLC in State Parliament revealed that DCLM spent some trifling amount around \$30,000 on weed management annually. The majority of landcare and 'friends' groups would manage significantly more funds than this in a voluntary capacity. Because of a lack of support and training from the State agencies the continued existence of many of these groups is in doubt. Their loss will undermine future attempts to sustainably manage our biodiversity.

SUMMARY:

Rather than continue with individual comments on the proposed actions, I would submit that my comments above form the basis for my concerns and can apply to the remaining proposed actions. These concerns can be summarised as:

- There is still some lack of understanding of the meaning of sustainability and the pivotal role our natural environment plays if we are to achieve a sustainable future.
- Success will depend on the understanding and acceptance of the concept of sustainability within agencies, authorities and the community.
- Voluntary community environment managers need to be represented on sustainability strategy bodies.
- The environment needs to be an equal partner in any process that seeks to achieve sustainable management practises. As stated on page 9 of the Draft ".....that an activity that only addresses two of the dimensions simultaneously (say provides both economic and social gains but 'trades off' the environment) is ultimately not sustainable". This equality is lacking from many of the proposed actions.
- That present agency structures and entrenched cultures may not be able to function in the best interests of sustainable management.
- Sustainability needs to be a 'whole of community' discipline. A sustainability code of best practise needs to be written into all our activities.
- Without funding and resourcing it is unreasonable to expect that our already over-stretched public-service agencies can adequately address and implement the cultural change and actions as proposed in this Draft.

The meaning and acceptance of the concept of sustainability is still developing, This document is a good beginning in what will hopefully be an ongoing process of understanding and eventual implementation. The thought of failure is too depressing.

Yours sincerely,

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