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The West Australian State Sustainability Strategy – 2003

It is now 11 years since the 1992 Earth Summit and Agenda 21, and 10 years since the World Scientists Warning to the World. Despite the severity and sincerity of many such warnings from both international and Australian scientific, environmental and social sectors, the problems are still not being adequately addressed.

I offer the following information as a way of providing some kind of context to my response. I am studying Sustainability at Murdoch University (postgraduate, part-time). I have been involved in environmental and social groups and organisations for the last 12 years (paid and voluntary). I am currently a member of three community groups, two specifically environmental and the other a coalition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people trying to protect environment and culture. I am **Incredibly worried** about the widespread and irreversible changes being inflicted on nature and the consequent collapse of the health and functioning of ecosystems. My deep desire to work towards restoring environmental health and improve social wellbeing led me to study sustainability. I have not been reassured by what I have studied so far, yet all the while we are running out of time.

Why in a world that relies so heavily on scientific 'expertise', have the reactions and necessary changes to the numerous scientific findings regarding environmental degradation, been so half-hearted and ineffective? I posit that such inappropriate collective action to what are such catastrophic global threats, is largely due to two related influences. Firstly, capitalism and countless other powerful economic and political institutions and structures, which have over time, ensured increasing power to economic rationalism at the expense of virtually everything else. Secondly, on more of a social or personal level, these same structures have pervaded and changed our social and cultural actions and expectations drastically. Incredible fears and/or disillusionment and consequent apathy, now seem to overshadow the genuine wants and needs of the majority, to change the nightmarish direction humanity is heading for all life on this earth. Capitalism, inequity, consumerism and globalisation, all continue to promote ridiculous practices and aims like exponential growth, cheaper mass labour resulting in bigger profits for the few, larger inequities between people and species, etc. At the same time we are forced to ignore or downplay the real costs and impacts of human activities on the environment – on which **ALL** life depends. We worry about what car to drive or how fat we look, whilst we largely ignore global ecosystem stress and possible collapse, deteriorating air and water quality and disappearing species of non-human life.

The majority of humanity has been compelled to contribute to and reiterate the interests of the already rich. So much of how we now live and what many now also believe (growth at all costs) is unsustainable and based on principles of inequity and greed. Power-holders seduce and/or bully people to comply with their vested interests and constantly reinforce the same paradigms that have created the global mess that we now face.

The SSS must address the need for a shift in cultural and social paradigms on international as well as local levels that are supported and furthered by all levels of governance and society.

I recognise that this document is an attempt to address some of these global problems but herein lies one of what I see as the biggest potential danger of this document. Will it, and the strategies it wants to encourage, really lead to **different courses of action** or will the document provide further justification for 'business as usual' but with a sustainable rubber stamp alongside all the others. We learn that environmental legislation is a relatively recent phenomenon and that this could be seen as a sign of increased environmental awareness and action – but is this **really how it translates?** Supposedly, Australia has what is considered globally, as strong environmental legislation with democratic options for public protest and rallies etc. How does this then relate to Australia being the world's 5th worst land clearer or to any of Ian Lowe's finding as highlighted in the **SSS** consultation draft (pg23). Working in community groups for the last few years we have come up against environmentally and/or socially unacceptable proposals put forward by organisations and agencies that claim to adhere and support sustainability principles. In reality though they do not want to share decision making (power) with any more groups or people than they absolutely have to. Community consultation seems so often to work in the following way. A proponent makes decisions about what they intend to do. They are bound either by legislation or public relations to be seen to seek community or stakeholders input. They engage in tokenistic consultation. The proponent makes their original decision anyway, unaffected by community or stakeholder opinion. Proposal goes ahead and if anyone tries to object they are rebutted because of the supposed community consultation. Decision makers want to make decisions that benefit themselves and don't really want to have to listen to objections that will jeopardise their own vested interests.

- On the one hand, we in Western Australia could feel happy that we are getting a sustainability strategy at all. On the other, what actual differences will this strategy really make to 'business as usual' in a state that relies heavily on gas, oil, minerals, heavy metals and ore extractions.
- How does the SSS even address, let alone try to educate or reverse, economic rationalisation. If this is basically why sustainability was developed in the first place – to counteract the tendencies of Western cultures to prioritise economic gain – surely it is of great importance then, that this SSS addresses the prevalence of our economically orientated paradigm.
- Community consultation and participation. All too often, government departments decide to undertake community consultation, yet the parameters have already been decided **before** the community has even been informed of

the supposedly participatory process. If the consultation is to be genuine and 'from' community, the community must be given the opportunity to inform those seeking community opinion exactly how and when they would like to be consulted. If the process is to be genuinely 'bottom up' resources and support **must** be provided to allow the community to make decisions regarding both the form and the content of participatory processes.

The current SSS held workshops only during the week. I heard of regular forums only in the city, with occasional ones at Midland TAFE. However, I am studying sustainability and so am part of networks that keep me informed. Most people in the Perth metropolitan area would not even know about this SSS. The onus for community participation cannot remain with community to inform themselves. Apart from the 'how can one know what one doesn't know' dilemma, there are also equity and ownership issues. The workshops seem to have been designed for those who happened to find out about them and according to the convenience of those holding them, rather than for the convenience of those who might have wanted to attend.

The SSS consultation draft was a long and dense document and whilst the need for the information to be comprehensive is understood the scope of those people who would even consider reading a document like this would be very small. One of the main stakeholders in sustainability are the younger people who will be left with the consequences of the damage we are causing, yet most youth would find this document daunting or boring. Who was this document trying to reach?

The same small circle of stakeholders and active community members who still even bother to participate in the seemingly futile hope that maybe this time something will actually be different? At times it seems like the community is given only two choices – participate even though it never seems really make a difference or, not participate only to be told later that community was asked but chose not to comment! From my experience, what community really wants is to be treated as the 'valued' stakeholder it is claimed, and to feel that we have appropriate and genuine opportunities to both decide **how** and **what** is decided on. More effort needs to be made to make workshops and participatory models more interesting and attractive to community. Different workshops need to be held that appeal to different sections of our communities. If people don't attend this shouldn't be seen as a failure of community rather a failure on the part of the organisers. If not enough people are attracted then this should be counted as 'inadequate community attractiveness' and the participatory process or part thereof needs to be redesigned and re-pitched. Processes that fail to attract community interest should not be allowed to proceed until this is rectified. This would stop agencies from purposefully making community participation so boring and unattractive, that no one comes, and decisions are made with the convenient assumption that community must have not minded because they didn't bother to object or participate.

- The Conservation Commission claims that it's new Draft Forest Management Plan will adhere to sustainability principles yet this apparently will also mean

the continuation of clear felling high conservation areas and logging old growth trees.

- We know now that Australia has one of the fastest rates of disappearing species in the world yet we are the 5th worst land clearer despite having a National Sustainability Strategy.
- Most Australians now recognise the devastation that colonisation has had on Aboriginal people, their communities and culture. Despite wide protest from Aboriginal people, themselves, and non-aboriginal peoples, this government has allowed the expansion of industry in Karratha which will potentially ruin Aboriginal artwork and sacred sites in the area. Apparently this would be acceptable according to the proposed State Sustainability Strategy (SSS).
- No sustainability-specific legislation will be introduced; therefore there will be no legal way of enforcing or stipulating sustainability principles unless an activity is covered by other legislation anyway. "Incorporating sustainability principles and practices into the legislation administered by relevant government agencies as it comes up with review or drafting". This is unacceptable and 'weak' in what changes it will necessitate. For example, The *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, supposedly our 'principal biodiversity conservation legislation' is being updated in 2003, 53 years after it became legislation. Getting legislation changed is timely and difficult and not often successfully initiated by the community.
- Recently one of the groups I am a member of – EARTH- learned of a project proposed by the Water Corporation, WA that claims to adhere to sustainability principles in its decision making and to involve and listen to community. Their proposal is to totally clear 50 acres of healthy 120 year old native vegetation in what is proposed National Park and within the Mundaring Weir Priority 1 recovery catchment. The proposed site currently provides habitat for numerous endangered or in need of special protection fauna and flora. The Water Corporation wants to clear the native bush for huge water storage tanks and a chemical treatment plant they claim is needed because of the deterioration water quality of the Weir, specifically due to land clearing and other soil disturbances. So despite a supposed commitment to sustainability principles including a recognition of community needs and wishes, the Water Corp is pushing ahead to clear native vegetation despite community opposition and many negative social and environmental ramifications.

Unless the SSS ends up stopping proposals like this one by the Water Corporation it will not be an effective tool or strategy, from an environmental or community point of view, for the kind of social and environmental changes we so desperately need.

Given that current paradigms and institutions are **so** geared around economic gain, perhaps what is now needed to regain balance for the environmental and social against the economic, is for us to increasingly assume that the economic will remain the primary motivation for most human activities, and for us to focus our attention on protecting our social structures and our environment.

Please ensure that whatever Sustainability Strategy does get implemented, will result in 'on the ground' changes and increased environmental and social protection. For the sake of human and non-human futures alike and the quality of life in our planet.

Yours sincerely

Jael Johnson