MELVILLE CONSERVATION GROUP

28/2/03
Sustainability Policy Unit
Department of the Premier and Cabinet

Submission on Focus on the Future – The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy

The State of the Environment Report has identified Western Australia's critical environmental problems and widespread degradation that must be repaired. This has been well documented and members strongly support every effort to protect and restore the environment.

Sustainability & Governance: After the Productivity Commission submissions on this matter, following the UN Environment Conference in Rio so long ago, it's surprising to be still talking about government agencies and sustainable development.

Contributing to Global Sustainability: Members expect Australia to set an example that displays environmental responsibility to the world. Population growth in every inhabited continent needs stabilisation. Australia's fragile, arid environment cannot be conserved, unless population growth is stabilised.

Sustainable Use of Resources: Unless population is stabilised there will be no hope of sustainable resource management. Land-clearing and biodiversity loss will continue as we plunder the planet for resources.

Sustainability & Settlements, Sustainability & Community: On the presumption that consumption will decrease and a technological fix will be found, we may end up with a huge population, facing famine, disease and warfare. This is the fate of previous communities that could not read their landscape and unwittingly committed ecological suicide. Tinkering around with methods to ration water or shuffling households closer together in higher density housing does not solve the problems of population pressure. It results in making a lot more discomfort for a lot more people.

Sustainability & Business: Many professionals have no biological or even environmental training – perhaps this should be addressed in the education system. Major industries, such as the real estate, building and construction and oil and motor industries strongly promote high population growth and have no concern for the environmental consequences. Business needs to learn to function without a steady influx of people, as this cannot continue forever, unless we have a few more planets at our disposal. Governments need to listen to Australia's scientists, instead of flat-earth economists, with no scientific understanding of Australia's urgent, environmental degradation, caused by the impact of population pressure. The increasing demands on the environment for the three basic necessities of life alone – food & water, shelter (housing) and fibres (clothing), can never be adequately met, unless population is stabilised.

Over the years, members have written countless, lengthy submissions on these issues, but feel that there is no genuine commitment at any government level to face up to reality. NSW's Premier, Bob Carr has shown leadership and focussed on the future and Britain's Minister for the Environment has also indicated that it is time to focus on our survival. There will be no future unless each nation stabilises population. Australia's scientists are signalling clear warnings also, but as Prof Ian Lowe said "we are driving in the dark, with the lights off".

Olive Langham.

End of the world is nigh – it's official

Ignore the optimists: the global warming horror stories are all true

Michael Meacher
Friday February 14, 2003
The Guardian

There is a lot wrong with our world. But it is not as bad as many people think. It is worse. Global warming is slowly but relentlessly changing the face of the planet.

We are only in the early stages of this process, but already carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has reached 375 parts per million, the highest level for at least half a million years. Temperatures are projected to rise by up to 5.8 C this century, 10 times the increase of 0.6 C in the last century, and by 40% more that this is some northern land surface areas. This means temperatures could raise by up to 8.1 C in some parts of the world.

Does this matter? The evidence suggests that it does. In China severe floods used to occur once every 20 years; now they occur in nine out of every 10. The number of people affected by floods globally has risen from 7 million in the 1960s to 150 million now. In 1998 two-thirds of Bangladesh was under water for months, affecting 30 million people. In the UK, 5 million people and 185,000 businesses are at risk.

Flooding is only the beginning. The number of people worldwide devastated by hurricanes or cyclones has increased eightfold to 25 million a year over the past 30 years. The oceans are steadily warming, and since they currently absorb 50 times more CO2 than is contained in the atmosphere, even a tiny reduction in CO2 absorption by the sea could cause global temperatures to rise significantly.

Even more seriously, 10,000 billion tonnes of methane (a greenhouse gas 20 time more potent that CO2) are stored, according to the US Geological Survey, on the shallow floor of the Artic, in sediments below the seabed. If the temperature surrounding methane warms, it becomes unstable and methane gas is released, causing temperatures to increase further. Warming oceans also cause the waters to expand and the sea level to rise. Sea level is predicted to rise by 3ft over the next century, leading to huge areas of Bangladesh, Egypt and China being inundated.

We don't know the limits of nature – how much rain could fall for how long a period, how much more powerful and frequent hurricanes could become, for how long droughts could endure. The ultimate concern is that if runaway global warming occurred, temperatures could spiral out of control and make our planet uninhabitable.

Five times in the past 540 million years there have been mass extinctions, in one case involving the destruction of 96% of the species then living. But while these were the result of asteroid strikes or intense glaciation, this is the first time that a species has been at risk of generating its own demise.

James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis conceives of the planet as an active control system. It posits the existence of feedbacks at the global level which, so far, have served to keep the earth's surface habitable within a tolerable range, despite significant external changes, including changes in the radiation from the sun. However, with severe human-induced activity, that is now beginning to change.

We have almost become our own geophysical cycle. There are many examples of this trend. On a global scale our biological carbon productivity is now only outpaced by the krill in the oceans.

Our civil engineering works shift more soil than all the world's rivers bring to the seas. Our industrial emissions eclipse the total emissions from all the world's volcanoes. We are bringing about species loss on the scale of some of the natural extinctions of palaeohistory.

We face a transformation of our world and its ecosystems at an exponential rate, and unprecedentedly brought about, not by natural forces, but by the activities of the dominant species. Climate change is only the most dramatic example. At a time when scientist say the world should be reducing its CO2 emissions by 60% to stabilise and then reverse global warming, they are projected to increase by around 75% on 1990 levels by 2020.

The dinosaurs dominated the earth for 160 million years. We are in danger of putting our future at risk after a mere quarter of a million years. The force of the Gaia thesis has never been more apparent. When an alien infection invades the body, the body develops a fever in order to concentrate all its energies to eliminate the alien organism. In most cases it succeeds, and the body recovers. But where it does not, the body dies.

The lesson is that if we continue with activities which destroy our environment and undermine the conditions for our own survival, we are the virus. Making the change needed to avoid that fate is perhaps the greatest challenge we have ever faced.