

The Draft Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy – How Focused on the Future?

Introduction: Ethical Foundations

It was argued in our organisation's previous submission in the ongoing process to establish a Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy that:

“The fundamental ethical values society should embody and thus promote through the actions of its defining institutions are the building of community between people and the protection of the natural environment. In this way is the full spectrum of God's creation at least protected and ideally strengthened.”

Recommendations for Government Policy

Working through the implications of this argument, the following recommendations were made:

“Government must act preventively to ensure that renewable natural resources are not exploited to such an extent that they can no longer regenerate themselves. Likewise, wherever possible, reliance on non-renewable resources should be replaced by sustainable exploitation of renewable resources. This will protect not only the physical environment but also employment and human community.

“However, such change to the way we currently exploit our environment for the provision of human needs cannot be rapid and painless. Sustainability must ultimately be a human project or else it is doomed to failure. Sustainability must be an inclusive project that actively finds a place for those in the new order who formerly made their living through unsustainable environmental practices.

“Therefore generous assistance must be provided to those who bear the short-term cost of shifting society to a more sustainable environmental footing. Generous financial assistance must also be made for those on low incomes who will undoubtedly face higher prices for many goods and services under a true sustainability policy. Many goods and services prices have been artificially

low due to the unsustainable environmental exploitation that has underlain their production. Inevitably these prices, including especially for many utilities, will rise under a true sustainability policy.”

Inadequacies of the Draft Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy

In summary, it was – and is – the view of our organisation that the two keys to achieving true sustainability in Western Australia are:

- absolutely limiting exploitation of our environment to levels that allow the environment to regenerate itself without assistance; and
- compensating temporary losers from the subsequent changes in the way our State would operate.

Thus it is a matter of concern that neither step appears to have been given sufficient priority in the Draft Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy.

Concern No. 1: Treating the Natural Environment as a Rights-Bearing ‘Legal Person’

First, proposals to absolutely limit exploitation of the Western Australian environment need to be extended beyond those specific measures in the Draft Strategy. There is a need for a much broader *paradigm shift* in which Western Australia’s natural environment is treated not as an abstract entity but rather as a defined ‘legal person’ with defined legal rights over natural resources. In our litigious, legal rights-based society treating the natural environment as a legal rights-bearing ‘individual’ would be a hugely powerful step in signalling a commitment to sustainability. An independent Natural Environment Rights Protection Trust, or something similar, could be established with initial and ongoing grants from government and the community to pay the legal costs of defending the natural environment’s rights when infringed.

An example of assigning ‘rights’ over natural resources to the natural environment is granting the ‘right’ of river systems to a minimum environmental flow. Humans could then only remove water from river systems in excess of that flow. Another example would be to grant all farmland the ‘right’ to minimum levels of contiguous native vegetation coverage consistent with the maintenance of native ecosystems in farming districts. The right to farm would be subject to not

clashing with the environment's rights in such lands. The urban environment could be granted the 'right' to enjoy sufficient green corridors and wetlands to maintain its native ecosystems. Urban development and the system of property rights it relies upon would then only be exercised when not in conflict with those 'rights' of the urban environment.

Concern No. 2: Estimating Compensation Costs of the Transition to Sustainability

Second, there is insufficient recognition in the Draft Strategy of the likely costs of change to certain sections of the community in adopting a truly sustainable path. These costs will be associated particularly with changed employment patterns and, at least temporarily, upward movements in the prices of many goods and services.

Fundamentally, achieving sustainability in Western Australia requires change in the behaviour of the state's human population. The recommendations in the Draft Strategy all boil down to human behavioural modification in some form or another. Thus achieving true sustainability requires widespread community recognition and acceptance of such behavioural changes. Given the democratic nature of our society, achieving sustainability in Western Australia thus will rely upon the state's people voluntary actions as much as it will rely upon the actions of the state apparatus.

Such popular behavioural change will not occur widely enough to allow the transition to sustainability to occur as quickly as possible if the transition to a sustainable future promises to produce a wide gap between relative 'winners' and 'losers'. Until the likely costs of change – and more particularly their *distribution* throughout the community – are worked out the state government is likely to find itself unprepared to swiftly buy off opposition to the necessary changes in production practices and goods and services prices needed to achieve sustainability in Western Australia. In the state government being thus unprepared the chances of achieving sustainability in Western Australia as quickly as is possible will be lowered greatly.

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