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Prof. Peter Newman,
Director,
Sustainability Policy Unit,
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197 St. George's Tce.,
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Dear Peter,

Thanks for the copy of the draft Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy. It makes very interesting (if heavy) reading. A massive content of information; beyond the grasp of many in the community, the spare time allocation of busy Executives, and the attention span of Politicians!

Some points could do with more work – in the attached Submission, I have tried to confine myself to important broader issues.

There is so much for the many committees to do that progress could be bogged down for ages. Would it help if separate brief Action Brochures set out what immediate action is expected of different groups, such as (a) the general community; (b) Public Servants; (c) Business Executives; (d) Politicians; etc?

I'm sure we all agree on one thing – the need for immediate and concerted action to restore sustainability. But if we are to succeed, all must remove rose-coloured glasses and face the glare of ecological reality! I doubt if it can be done – but what other choice do we have?

Yours in hope,

Graham Chittleborough.

COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT WA STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY
Sept. 2002

By R.G. Chittleborough

As others will no doubt focus very competently upon specific terms within the Draft Strategy, I shall confine my observations to broader (but no less vital) issues.

I was somewhat surprised at the opening remark (p.16) that "Sustainability is a relatively new concept..." It was applied to fisheries and forestry resource management prior to 1950. In 1951, I was assigned to a sustainability study of humpback whale stocks (see my new book. "Gone Whaling", now in Press). At that time, this was far from 'a fuzzy concept' (p. 24 of Draft Strategy), having a sound mathematical basis within the field of population dynamics.

While many of the items discussed in the draft (mainly relating to reducing *per capita* consumption) are very pertinent, they should really have been pursued very energetically though the past 16 years, following the adoption by Government of an earlier Strategy. If those items had already been commenced, the community would now be better prepared for the additional steps which were unacceptable earlier. But that is all history.

One vital principle has omitted from the set of Principles presented on p. 28 of the Draft Strategy. As I pointed out in my earlier Submission, a truly Sustainable Population Policy for Australia is absolutely essential for the successful achievement and maintenance of sustainability. Without this principle in place, even great strides with the other principles will still come to nought.

In the Draft Strategy, sustainable Population is seen as a global issue (Ch. 4). Australia's relatively high rate of population increase (fertility plus immigration) appears to be of no concern, despite Australia's extremely low and declining carrying capacity. As I have pointed out repeatedly, successfully reducing *per capita* resource consumption will be negated quickly if at the same time, our population re-doubles. We can no longer pretend that we must patiently wait for a 'natural' stabilisation of our population. Events are simply overtaking us.

A second major failing of the Draft Strategy, is the absence (in most cases) of specific targets and time frames for their achievement. Having delayed real action for so long, we cannot afford to continue the attitude of promising to do the best we can on each aspect (voluntarily), then later see how we are going.

The tone of the Draft Strategy does not convey much sense of urgency, nor of the accelerating seriousness of our problems through recent decades.

If those advising Government are unable to postulate specific sustainability targets to be achieved quickly for each item, they should nominate precautionary targets to be adopted while further studies enable sustainability targets to be refined. For

example, recognising that there is still much debate over a sustainable population for Australia, I recommend a Precautionary Population Policy Target of 12 million for Australia (even if we are fairly successful in cutting our per capita consumption). To have no population target at all, simply ensures all other good moves will be negated – we don't need further studies to verify that!

These days, some politicians extol the value of carbon sequestration plantations; carbon rights legislation; & carbon credits trading (pp. 86-89 of the Draft Strategy). While seeming attractive commercially, carbon credits from tree planting may very well prove to yield mainly a spurious confidence that effective measures are in place to restore sustainability. The failure of carbon credits is partly due to the fact that carbon sequestration by trees is only temporarily effective during their earlier years. But of *far* greater significance (and most often overlooked) is the fact that marine carbon sinks remove more than ten times as much excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than that taken up by vegetation sinks on land. As pointed out in my book "Shouldn't our Grandchildren Know?" (Fremantle Arts Centre Press; 1992), if one or two of the vast marine sinks for carbon dioxide should fail (& the signs are already evident), such feedback loops will set up a runaway increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide, accelerating climate change and outstripping any of the carbon benefits of planting on land.

Tree plantings **do** have other real benefits: let's not exaggerate their success as permanent major carbon sinks.

There seems to be a deep fear of alerting the community to the urgency and seriousness of our situation. It is sad to have one's submissions repeatedly pushed aside without having made any effort to respond. Sad for future generations; as well as for the present generation which is being given a warm feeling that the problems are all in hand.

Incidentally, within Chapter 4 of the Draft Strategy, the glowing promise for future energy, the Hydrogen Economy – is presented as if this will resolve all our present problems of climate change due to emissions from fossil fuel energy. That glosses over further potential problems such as the recent discovery that hydrogen escaping to the ozone layer can catalyse the breakdown of ozone, further eroding the ozone shield, allowing more ultraviolet radiation to penetrate to the Earth's surface. Another case for applying the Precautionary Principle?

Let's make a real – and urgent – effort to implement the 'fuzzy concept' of sustainability!

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