



WaRDS association

## Background to this submission

*The purpose of the discussion paper is to scope some of the key areas central to the preparation of a sustainability charter and to canvass input from a wide range of local and state governments, researchers, businesses, industry and community associations and individuals. The aim of this paper is to assist and challenge those who may make a submission or otherwise assist the committee in the inquiry<sup>1</sup>.*

### The WaRDS association

The 'Ways and Realistic Development to Sustainability' (WaRDS) is a newly formed association based in Wards River NSW 2422. It was formed to respond to the needs expressed<sup>2</sup> by the local government (Great Lakes LGA), the Catchment Management Authority (Hunter-Central Rivers) and Land & Water Australia as well as to address the challenges associated with global warming and the loss of biodiversity in peri-urban areas.

The association aims at establishing a centre for effective engagement in Natural Resources Management processes which will become of conduct between NRM knowledge sources and users of that knowledge.

## Discussion paper overview

The discussion paper states that:

*The charter should be aspirational. It must provide targets for the Australian community to meet and, once those targets have been met they must be re-assessed so new targets can be put in place.*

*The Committee is now inquiring into and will report on key elements of a sustainability charter and identify the most important and achievable targets, particularly in relation to:*

- 1. The built environment;*
- 2. Water;*
- 3. Energy;*
- 4. Transport; and,*
- 5. Ecological footprint.*

<sup>1</sup> House of representatives standing committee on environment and heritage - Discussion Paper

<sup>2</sup> refer to Great Lakes SoE, CMA Catchment Action Plan and LWA 'Knowledge for Regional NRM'



WaRDS association

*The Committee invites submissions from individuals and organisations with an interest or expertise in these matters.*

The discussion paper describes a number of components, issues and a possible vision for sustainability. It also offers a comparison between a Swedish model and an Australian model (WA). It touches on a number of key-issues including cities, monitoring/reporting on performance targets and incentives for achieving those targets at the state level.

The paper then asks a number of questions which will guide this submission.

## Understanding sustainability

In his book 'Confronting the Future' (1975) Charles Birch quoted the economist E. F. Schumacher "an attitude of life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth - in short materialism - does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited."

In the concluding chapter (The Eye of a Needle) Professor Birch talked about *the problem of government* in these terms: "without effective governments the chances of reforming society are slender and tenuous. Yet in the 'free world' governments do not work any more. Uncontrolled inflation, unemployment, deterioration in services, inability to control selfish factions in unions and selfish captains of industry are evidence of the lack of control by modern governments. Governments of the Western nations have grown large and unmanageable. Their decisions are increasingly influenced by experts making democracy vulnerable. To remain in power with their slender majorities they see themselves obliged to compromise with the greedy and their short-sighted interests."

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development, in a report titled *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report), recognised that sustainable development meant adopting lifestyles within the planet's means.

The report also clearly identified that the current patterns of economic growth could not be sustained without significant changes in attitudes and actions.

Australia's response has been to adopt and further refine the concept of sustainable development, **taking into account our unique natural environment, the aspirations and values of the Australian people and the prevailing patterns of economic production and consumption.**

The result is Ecologically Sustainable Development - ESD. Put simply, ESD means using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that



WaRDS association

ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and quality of life for both present and future generations is increased. It requires changes in the nature of production and consumption so that they can better satisfy human needs while using fewer raw materials and producing less waste. The key to ESD is integrating environment and development considerations in decision-making.

The committee's Sustainable Cities report showed that whilst these principles were outlined nearly 20 years ago they are still relevant to, and underpin the concept of a sustainability charter.

### WaRDS association views on sustainability and development

The WaRDS association strongly agrees with the views expressed by Charles Birch and those of the Brundtland Report concerning life styles and the limitations of natural resources.

It also endorses the views expressed by Professor Ted Trainer (University of NSW) in his paper 'The Simpler Way' (an outline of the global situation, the sustainable alternative society, and the transition to it).

"Our industrial-affluent-consumer society is extremely unjust and ecologically unsustainable. The argument below is that these problems cannot be solved in a society that is driven by obsession with high rates of production and consumption, affluent living standards, market forces, the profit motive and economic growth. A sustainable and just world order cannot be achieved until we undertake radical change in our lifestyles, values and systems, especially in our economic system."

The Australian Government must play a vital role in shaping not only the future of our nation but also in providing leadership to other Western and developing nations at a time of global crisis. The policy makers must no longer be swayed only by selfish captains of the industry or scientific experts, but must take into account our unique natural environment (with its limitations) and the aspirations of the Australian people. As to the prevailing patterns of economic production and consumption they have to be assessed on the basis of their long-term social benefits.

The distribution of this discussion paper and the invitation forwarded to community associations and individuals to contribute to the Sustainability Charter is an indication of the policy makers' intention to take into account the aspirations of the Australian people. However how is the Standing Committee for Environment and Heritage going to identify our environment current and future limitations (eg. due to the global warming effects) and convey - via the



WaRDS association

Sustainability Charter - these limitations to the captains of economy (including state governments, small businesses and corporations) in order to modify those prevailing patterns of economic production and consumption that have a detrimental impact on our environment and our social development.

The commitment to sustainability demands more than a good charter; it demands (from individuals and particularly decision makers) vision, courage and a sense of connectedness with fellow humans now and yet to be born. This is the domain of cultural education and social engineering which is unfortunately out of reach for the Standing Committee for Environment and Heritage and where local groups (like WaRDS association) can intervene and contribute to a sustainable future.

## Sustainability proposed targets

The discussion paper proposes the following targets:

- built environment
- water
- energy
- transport
- ecological footprint

These targets are strongly related to the development of cities and the prevailing patterns of economic production and consumption. It would be recommended to include targets in education, mental health, cultural development and invention/innovation.

Questions were asked concerning sustainability in general, built environment, water, energy and transport. The WaRDS association submission does not attempt to answer all questions but feels that it can engage effectively in the overall debate and offer a number of options based on its members' experience and expertise in natural resources, and processes as well as in the dynamics of community groups.

### Answers to general questions

- The Sustainability Charter should contain both aspirational statements and targets. As indicated the charter must convey the environment limitations to those making decision about prevailing patterns of economic production and consumption. Targets are an effective ways of communicating these limitations. Aspirational statements are also necessary to communicate to



## WaRDS association

individuals and those concerned about the future some sense of direction and direct action in a unifying and synergetic manner.

- The research needed to support the implementation of a Sustainability Charter can be divided in three fields:
  - Sociology / anthropology (social engineering, cultural development, etc.)
  - Economy (value of ecological services, alternative economy, natural resources trading, etc.)
  - Environmental (standards, biodiversity monitoring, etc.)

It is understood that research must not be the sole responsibility of universities and CRCs and should involve specific participants in experiments and data collection.

- There are a number of standards (international, national and industry specific) which would be suitable, however most standards demands compliance and audit processes in order to be effective. The question is not so much what standards to apply but what level of compliance and what verification/incentive to associate with the acceptance of these standards.
- The integration of the charter into all level of government is not only desirable but also possible. The use of targets can assist this integration by specifying performance and compliance levels to be achieve by States or councils.
- Considering the accumulated damage to the environment and the continuation of unsustainable practices by a number of industry sectors (eg. Coal mining) the introduction of targets is likely to introduce additional operational costs, however the potential for economical gain is also evident and some industry leaders have already demonstrated their ability to turn potential costs associated with corrective/remedial actions into competitive advantage. It is not realistic to expect the industry or the government alone to bear the cost associated with sustainability targets and a balance must be found based on economical research as to what proportion must be allocated to those who benefited directly from damaging the environment and to the government who failed in its duty of care. Obviously the cost of sustainability targets must be weighted against the risk of a total collapse of an economy sector due to natural causes (eg. Water shortage<sup>3</sup>).
- Using the State of the Environment report mechanism is appropriate to report on sustainability targets, however the distribution of the current SoE report might need to be revised to ensure that those involved in addressing those targets are given the feedback they deserve.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to a recent presentation by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) in New Delhi in February 2006 by Robert Martin - Program Director.



WaRDS association

- The NCP is described as a rewarding mechanism at the State Government level. Whilst it appears to be adequate to distribute incentives for meeting sustainability targets established by the charter, how are other contributors being rewarded? The NCP does not cover this aspect and might need to be complemented.
- The payment of incentives is usually linked to performance benchmark or compliance with standards. However this might not be sufficient to reward all efforts particularly individual and group action. Therefore other modes of incentive payment (not necessarily in dollars) must be considered in the charter.
- The measurement of cultural/social values is a challenge similar to the evaluation of ecological services in economical terms. It cannot be done without the input of scientists and the community. As indicated above it must be reflected in the sustainability targets.

### Answers to water questions

- The notion of water quality is relative to its usage. In the guidelines produced by the NRM Ministerial Council (National Guidelines for Water Recycling - Managing Health and Environmental Risks, Oct 2005) the following statement is made about the quality of recycled water and is relevant to the water question of the Sustainability Charter discussion paper.  
*As it is neither physically nor economically feasible to test for all parameters equally, monitoring effort and resources should be carefully planned and directed at key characteristics and hazards identified for the recycled water system. Key characteristics to be monitored for verification include:*
  - *microbial indicator organisms*
  - *salinity, sodicity, sodium, chloride, boron, chlorine disinfection residuals, nitrogen and phosphorus*
  - *any health-related characteristic that can be reasonably expected to exceed the guideline value, even if occasionally*
  - *any characteristic of relevance to end use or discharge of the recycled water, which can be reasonably expected to exceed the guideline value, even if occasionally.*
- A more comprehensive understanding of the water cycle and associated environment limitations is necessary to answer the question of targets focusing on reduced consumption and increased re-use of water. Meanwhile as a precautionary approach both should be encouraged or prescribed.
- Again the question of water health in the catchment is a complex one and is related to the measurement of biodiversity and ecological capacity.



WaRDS association

## Answers to energy questions

- The question of measuring and encouraging renewable energy requires a complex answer as technical and economical issues overlap. Ian Lowe<sup>4</sup> warns "There are alternatives to oil as a transport fuel, but most of them pose problems."
- He also indicates that energy targets might need to be combined with life-style measurements. "Some European nations have now adopted the goals suggested by the Wuppertal Institute of reducing energy use to a quarter of the present level and reducing material use to 10 per cent of the present level; they see those as realistic targets."

## Answers to transport questions

- The issue of transport efficiency is highly related to the community context. The measure of transport efficiency and the infrastructure requirements are commensurate to the population level and life-style.
- The reduction of private transport is obviously a good indicator of life-style change and of individual citizen reducing material/energy use.

## Concluding remarks

The WaRDS association endorses the proposition that the Sustainability Charter should be aspirational for Australian citizens and should set targets for different levels of government. These targets should cover the five areas mentioned and be extended to cover issues beyond the cities and beyond the economic realm. The Swedish model encompasses some of those extra-dimensions (human health, cultural heritage).

The WaRDS association sees sustainability more as a state of equilibrium rather than a journey.

Signed:

Pierre Louys (executive member)  
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<sup>4</sup> Integrating the many dimensions of sustainability: energy systems