



A GREEN BLUEPRINT

Following a parliamentary report on sustainable cities, the next step is developing a strong, inclusive sustainability charter, writes Don Henry, Executive Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation.



“**A** vision for sustainability must engage Australians and have meaning—it must close the gap between policy makers and the lived reality of Australians who will, ultimately, be the practitioners of sustainability principles.”

I really like this statement from the *Sustainable cities* report, tabled in September last year by the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee. It sets an ambitious, yet practical, tone for the next stage of the process—the development of an Australian sustainability charter. It makes a point

that the charter must be inclusive, engaging the broad spectrum of the Australian community—not only policy makers—and must strike a balance between broad aspirational aims and very specific concrete goals. If it is to work, it will need to be outcome-oriented and will need to set targets for governments, for industry, for the community.

This approach—*aspirational and measurable*—is precisely the right one to take if we want to see real results flow from the inquiry. The bipartisan cooperation we’ve witnessed so far in pulling together the excellent *Sustainable cities* report and the

current moves towards developing a charter give hope we will see some genuinely good results for Australians, for our environment, for our future.

Let’s be in no doubt, there is an urgent need to turn around our increasing environmental degradation.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Measures of Australia’s Progress 2004, the health of Australia’s natural landscape is continuing to decline. The ABS notes that between 1993 and 2003, the number of terrestrial bird and mammal species listed as extinct, endangered or vulnerable rose by 40

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per cent from 118 to 165. In the same period the federal government's "Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment" 2001 noted that nearly 3,000 whole ecosystems across Australia are now listed as threatened.

The condition of our rivers and water supplies also continued to deteriorate. The ABS noted about one quarter of Australia's surface water management areas are close to, or have exceeded, sustainable extraction limits. It also noted that in 2000 about 5.7 million hectares of Australia were assessed as having a high potential to develop dry-land salinity through shallow or rising water tables. Although we've made some progress, Australia remains one of the highest per capita water users even though we live on the driest inhabited continent.

For our human settlements, the ABS rates overall air quality in Australia as relatively good and records that it generally improved during the 1990s. However, there was a decline in air quality in 2002 mainly due to severe forest fires and dust storms, particularly affecting Sydney. And the ABS notes that fine particulate pollution has been linked to the deaths of up to 2,400 people a year in Australia with an associated estimated cost of \$17.2 billion per year, so there is no room for complacency.

Likewise, while there's reason for encouragement about aspects of the condition of Australia's coastal and marine regions—about 50 per cent of our estuaries are in near pristine condition—of the fish stocks managed by the Australian government, in 2002, 16 of the 75 principal species were over-fished compared to only five a decade before.

On important global environment measures, the ABS noted that per capita we have one of the world's highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, although our per capita emissions are decreasing. They noted that our heavy reliance on fossil fuel burning for energy, the structure of our economy and the changes in land use are three factors influencing our high rate of emissions.

Perhaps highlighting the timeliness of this House of Representatives inquiry into a sustainability charter, most ABS

measures across the economy and society have shown significant improvements over the last decade, while most across the environment are showing serious, continued decline. There are many good initiatives being pursued around Australia to arrest environment decline. However, as the ABS measures of progress highlights, an enhanced and effective effort is required if we as a nation are to turn around current trends of decline.

In a sustainable city, remnant urban bushland is valued, protected and enjoyed by people. Workshop participants said they wanted to live close to parks and natural spaces. These areas are important for recreation and visual beauty and as a reminder that the other species inhabiting our cities are crucial to the health of our urban ecology.

Importantly, our participants saw social, economic and environmental benefits as intertwined and complementary.



Car dependent cities are becoming gridlocked.

In the process of developing *Recipe for a liveable Sydney*,¹ the Australian Conservation Foundation held a series of workshops with our Sydney-based members. We asked them to articulate their hopes and dreams for the city they live in. What emerged was an inspiring vision of what Sydney could be with the right policies and direction.

The workshop participants came up with a vision for a sustainable city that interweaved social, economic and environmental goals. They saw the "most liveable neighbourhood" as consisting of people from a range of ages, cultures and occupations, living in a well-planned mix of affordable and accessible housing types. By accommodating different types of housing, people wouldn't have to relocate to distant suburbs when age and frailty make them less mobile and children wouldn't have to move far away when they leave home.

They imagined liveable neighbourhoods as places where you can safely walk and cycle to work and the local shops, where homes and workplaces efficiently use energy, water and materials. Public transport is easy and convenient and suburbs are not dominated by car traffic.

Compact, well planned cities mean more efficient public transport, less time commuting, lower travel costs, better health and more time with family and friends. They saw addressing disadvantage, homelessness and isolation as fundamentally linked to ecological sustainability.

Can a sustainability charter help us make this vision of the future a reality? If it sticks to the inquiry's "aspirational and measurable" approach, I believe it will be an extremely useful document in helping shape a sustainable Australia. Measurable goals are the way to track our progress. Targets will ensure we respond to environmental, economic and social needs with the right mix of policies to achieve real benefits.

Let's look at three key areas the charter will need to address: water, energy and transport.

WATER: A reliable supply of clean water for drinking, industry, recreation and ecosystems is vital to the well-being of all Australians. The best scientific evidence tells us climate change will significantly reduce the amount of water flowing into our southern and eastern rivers and reservoirs. Two approaches will be absolutely essential if we are to continue

to enjoy reliable supplies of fresh water; we're going to have to get much better at saving water and recycling water.

By investing in water recycling infrastructure, rainwater tanks and by promoting efficiency, most Australian capitals could halve their water consumption by 2030. This is an achievable target. The ACT government recently announced a 40 per cent water use reduction target for Canberra. This is a positive step.



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To achieve a 40 or 50 per cent water use reduction target we need to reduce the demand for water at household, neighbourhood and metropolitan level, as well as invest in new ways to harvest and recycle water. Rainwater tanks can create a 'virtual dam' from the urban roof catchment. By capturing rainwater for gardening and plumbing, each household would take less water from our rivers and reservoirs, meaning expensive and environmentally damaging new dams won't be needed. At the neighbourhood and metropolitan level, harvesting stormwater and treating wastewater has great potential.

Desalination plants shouldn't be the first option for fixing urban water problems. Efficiency and water recycling can make a massive difference, so they

should be where we look first. The charter with its targets can help ensure Australians' willingness to save water is translated into measurable achievements that secure the future of our precious water resources.

ENERGY: Australian cities are big per capita greenhouse polluters. Most have been designed to rely heavily on cars. Most city buildings waste huge amounts of energy.

Many of our major cities hug the coast, making them particularly vulnerable to certain impacts of climate change. While no single extreme weather event can be directly attributed to global warming, the impact of Cyclone Larry on North Queensland earlier this year was a powerful reminder of what the expected increase in severe storms and tropical cyclones could do to some of Australia's cities and towns.

Climate change will also mean some health problems could be more severe. Research released last year by the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Medical Association showed that if we continue to allow greenhouse pollution to increase, by the end of this century 8,000 to 15,000 Australians could die every year from heat-related illnesses. No action to cut our emission levels could see the climate in heavily populated south-east Queensland and even Sydney become suitable for dengue fever transmission.

Climate change will impact on every person and every sector of the Australian economy unless we act now. A report on the business impacts of climate change, released in April by the Australian Conservation Foundation and six leading Australian businesses, showed the cost to the economy will be significantly less if we take action now. Delaying action will increase economic pain.

Fortunately, we already have many of the solutions. We can set out a pathway for reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 60 per cent by 2050. Other countries are working towards this target, including Tony Blair's government in Britain.

TRANSPORT: Sustainable cities are built around good public transport. When car dependent cities like Melbourne and Sydney become gridlocked and people spend many hours commuting to and from work each week, it is not only the environment that suffers. In the outlying suburbs of our capital cities, where public transport is often not a

convenient alternative, car dependence is further entrenching social disadvantage. A NSW State of the Environment report showed the number of vehicle kilometres travelled is increasing 25 per cent faster than population growth.

The urban sprawl encouraged by our dependence on cars means the cost of energy, water and transport is greater because the infrastructure has to reach further out. In fact large amounts of energy and water are lost through the cables and pipes before they make it to where they are needed in the suburbs.

To make our cities more resilient to international trends like rising fuel prices and climate change, we need to plan more compact cities and institute policies that will improve public transport services and infrastructure. One such sensible policy is the recommendation in the *Sustainable cities* report that the Commonwealth government review vehicle fringe benefits tax arrangements and import duty concessions for large 4WD vehicles. Public subsidies for unsustainable transport options cannot be justified. The proportion of public spending on roads and public transport should be reversed to rebalance our national transport infrastructure priorities.

Water, energy and transport are just three concerns of the parliamentary inquiry into a sustainability charter. The House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee has said it will also examine the built environment and ecological footprints.

This is an important inquiry. Bipartisan support is needed to meet the long term crucial challenge and opportunity of achieving a sustainable Australia. Most of all it will need the participation of the wider community if it is to "close the gap between policy makers and the lived reality of Australians". The best way for this to happen is for Australians from a variety of different places, industries, communities and experiences to contribute to the inquiry's collective knowledge so the resultant charter is 'owned' by all Australians and we can all get on with the job of genuinely making a difference for the future today. ■

For more information on the inquiry into a sustainability charter visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/envirom or email environment.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4580.

¹ Australian Conservation Foundation, *Recipe for a liveable Sydney* (2005).