

25 November 2003

Secretary
Environment and Heritage Standing Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Emailed: environment.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into Sustainable Cities 2025

The Urban Bushland Council (UBC) is the peak community organisation for the recognition and protection of urban bushland in Western Australia. It comprises 59 community conservation groups concerned about urban bushland. The Urban Bushland Council is involved in local action and networking, policy development, lobbying and raising public awareness.

The protection of bushland in and near cities and towns is important environmentally and socially, and can make a significant contribution to sustainability. We define urban bushland as naturally occurring vegetation with its structure and floristics basically intact and which is in an urban area or affected by urbanisation (Keighery & Gray 1992).

The urban bushland is part of our heritage, bushland provides a sense of place, connection with nature and identity with our surrounds. It is also somewhere to enjoy the outdoors and relax in a natural setting. Bushland is a green space in the urban sprawl. It stabilises the urban environment, cleansing the air and providing other ecological services. It provides habitat, plays a key role in the protection of groundwater resources and contributes to the alleviation of greenhouse effects. It also has scientific values as bushland plants are a genetic storehouse and can provide valuable information for research into areas such as medicine and pharmaceutical products. Urban bushland, being so close to schools, provides a great opportunity for research and fieldwork by students.

The key values of urban bushland can be summed up as nature conservation, biodiversity protection, scientific, educational, heritage, environmental, recreational and aesthetic.

The committee's discussion paper includes reference to the preservation of bushland. It states that "as urban areas expand, a harmonised rather than frontier approach is required to retain Australia's biodiversity". The UBC agrees that bushland should be an integral part of urban settlement, but would also say that the need for ongoing urban expansion should be rethought.

Urban expansion around Perth and Mandurah is a major cause of habitat Loss on the Swan Coastal Plain - in a biodiverse region recognised as one of twenty five biodiversity conservation hotspots in the world. Perth is a low density, sprawling city and continuing this expansive pattern of development will see more bushland lost and the region's biodiversity diminished. This is not necessary however. There is considerable scope to better use existing urban land through higher density and better integrated development and support for development in regional centres and country towns that have experienced crippling population decline. Sustainable cities must include proactive planning to retain bushland and manage urban growth. The WA Government recently held Dialogue with the City - a stakeholder forum with some 1,100 people to discuss future planning of the Perth region. Protection of the natural environment and an end to urban sprawl were amongst the top priorities agreed by participants. The Wildflower Society and others have proposed creation of an urban growth boundary to contain urban expansion and focus development within existing urban lands. We are yet to see whether the strategic plan for the region will reflect these community views.

Community and local government involvement in the protection of urban bushland is critical. An initiative worthy of mention is the Perth Biodiversity Project run through the WA Local Government Association. With funding from the Natural Heritage Trust this project is building the capacity of local governments to identify, protect and manage biodiversity, especially bushland, within their municipal boundaries. We think this important work needs to continue so further funding is critical. An important outcome will be local biodiversity plans that include strategies to protect urban bushland.

The UBC is also keen to see a requirement for such plans under statutory planning policy in WA.

The committee proposes a national map of issues and approaches regarding sustainable settlements. We suggest that recognising the value of urban bushland and ensuring its long-term protection is an essential ingredient for sustainable cities. Urban bushland protects biodiversity and natural resources and contributes to a sense of place. Unfortunately urban expansion and inappropriate use is degrading bushland. Approaches to address this should include:

- Urban growth management including urban growth boundaries and targeted redevelopment to limit urban sprawl
- Greater awareness and information on the importance of bushland for biodiversity conservation and natural resource management, especially amongst land use planners and local government decision-makers
- Capacity building and statutory guidance at local government level to enhance urban bushland protection, important here is the preparation and implementation of local biodiversity plans (also called local greening plans)
- Funding for local government and community initiatives to retain, manage and connect urban bushland - including Natural Heritage Trust funding linked to regional natural resource management planning
- Funding and effective development control to identify and secure high conservation value bushland threatened by urban development.

The UBC hopes these comments will be considered by the committee and would welcome the opportunity for further input.

Regards,

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