



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023

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ACT Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023

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Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, self-funded, non-government organisation of medical doctors in all Australian states and territories.

DEA's work is based on the premise that humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils capable of producing nutritious food, a stable climate, and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way. We are therefore interested in environmental protection and restoration to promote human health and social stability.

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) supports the Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023 as outlined in the explanatory statement.

Environmental harm hurts humans

The 2023 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change¹ provides the evidence base for the concept that the right to a healthy environment is a critical foundation to the current human rights outlined in the ACT Human Rights Act 2004.

In particular, the following global level findings are applicable to those living within the ACT:

- When compared with data from 1990-2000, **heat related deaths** in people over 65 were more than double those expected without the impact of global warming. In the ACT, our semi-arid climate is particularly susceptible to extremes of heat, which places our population at higher risk.
- **Heat-related reductions in labour capacity** were significant, impacting both productivity and income. In the ACT, this is likely to impact people's standard of living and ability to provide for their families.
- **increasing food insecurity** — as a high-income country, Australia has not yet felt the full force of food insecurity. However, as noted by the Climate Council, more frequent and intense heatwaves and extreme weather events are already affecting the seasonality, quality and availability of food, as well as increasing prices.²

DEA has also collated a significant body of evidence relating to the effect of climate change on human health. This includes low birth weights, lung disease from bushfire smoke, heat stress, particularly for those with cardiovascular and kidney disease, infectious diseases and ecoanxiety.³

Protecting the environment protects people

DEA supports the proposal that all Canberrans have a right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The following supports the particular benefits outlined in the explanatory statement.

Better health outcomes

Protecting the environment promotes better health outcomes for Canberrans as well as protecting ecosystems for both present and future generations.

¹ [Visual summary - Lancet Countdown](#)

² [Feeding a Hungry Nation: Climate change, food and farming in Australia](#)

³ [How Climate Change Affects Your Health](#)

In particular, the benefits of trees to human health include helping to manage heat, microclimates and mental health.⁴ The importance of trees to human health are outlined in DEA's recent report in partnership with WWF.⁵

On a broader scale, biodiverse ecosystems, including forests, provide benefits for moisture cycling, air and water quality, pharmaceuticals, promoting connection to Country for Indigenous Australians as well as providing habitat for pollinators that are vital to much of our food supply.³

Stronger environmental laws, governance and access to justice

A strong environmental protection legal framework and equitable access to justice for environmental harms that are enshrined in law are critical to long-term sustainability for ecosystems and the human health that depends on them. Along with effective compliance and enforcement, these are vital to establishing and maintaining real protections on the time scale required for ecological preservation.

It will be important to include all areas of government policy and programs in strengthening governance to ensure there is consistency of purpose. For instance, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment should include town planning to enhance green spaces and tree canopy to reduce urban heat islands⁶ and promote physical activity and its important health co-benefits.

The provision of health care is a key responsibility of the ACT government and another area of government policy that must be cognisant of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.³ Healthcare sustainability is a key area of interest and activity for DEA. In conjunction with the Australian Medical Association (AMA), we have produced a report outlining opportunities for net zero emissions from the healthcare sector.⁷ Please contact us for expertise in this area.

Environmental and social justice

Improving access to justice for environmental harms through legislative change is a significant step toward protecting people as well as the environment. Reducing environmental injustice is particularly important for people who are already experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation or disempowerment, as they are more susceptible to the risks of climate change. This includes those in lower socioeconomic groups, with insecure work, living with disability, the elderly or those with chronic health conditions.³ For instance, having fewer choices in housing or workplaces makes it challenging to escape extreme weather including heat. In addition, food insecurity for those in poverty will only be exacerbated through the effects of climate change.²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are also more likely to be affected by environmental degradation and climate change. Indigenous Australians have been, and remain, subject to political and institutional discrimination along with wider social and cultural disadvantage. The health and wellbeing impacts of this history are profound, with a higher proportion Indigenous Australians dying younger or living with chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney and cardiovascular disease than non-Indigenous Australians.⁸ All of these

⁴ [Why We Need Forests And Native Vegetation For Our Health](#)

⁵ [Trees: The Forgotten Heroes for our Health](#)

⁶ [The race to boost tree canopy and tackle heat islands in Melbourne's west - ABC News](#)

⁷ [Net zero carbon emissions: responsibilities, pathways and opportunities for Australia's healthcare sector](#)

⁸ [Indigenous health and wellbeing - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

factors increase their exposure to the effects of climate change. Addressing environmental injustice has much potential to reduce inequity in health.

In conclusion, DEA commends the ACT Legislative Assembly for proposing this Amendment Bill for its potential to promote health and social justice, as well as to protect the environment upon which we all depend.