

Keith Ross

The Secretary

Inquiry into Ecological Carrying Capacity of the ACT and Region

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Submission

Dear Secretary

I have lived in the Australian Capital Territory for some thirty years. During that time Canberra has grown exponentially with ever expanding population as the driver of that growth.

When I arrived in the ACT, Woden and Belconnen area were newly built, Tuggeranong was just beginning to arise and bush marked the areas where Gungahlin now lies. None questioned whether the rush to expansion and growth were deleterious to the ecology of the region or in the best interests of the majority of its citizen. I welcome this enquiry into the carrying capacity of the ACT and region.

I find it difficult to see how the Committee can answer a question as to the 'carrying capacity' of any area of human habitation. During the period after the Second World War in what is known as the 'Cold War', the city of Berlin, under the control of occupying forces other than the Russians was completely surrounded and isolated by the latter forces. Its entire population was maintained by a massive and hugely expensive airlift.

Most thriving cities in the world are surrounded by an immediate hinterland of fertile land that can supply their needs, and of rivers that can supply the necessary drinking waters. Indeed the very rationale for many early cities was the ready accessibility of water. Canberra is located in a dry inland location without adequate arable land or sufficient water supply. It must be maintained by food and supplies transported a distance from water held in dams that are increasing found to be inadequate. Like Berlin, its carrying capacity in terms of population might be said to be immeasurable were sufficient resources are allocated to supplying its needs. I would submit that it is not possible to look at the carrying capacity of the ACT without considering the effect that a growing population will have not only on the ACT but on the ability to meet its needs in its inland position. Its ecological footprint might be said to be greater because of its position.

We live in a world of exponentially expanding population at a level never experienced in human history. Arable land is diminishing, fish stocks are vanishing; potable water is increasingly in short supply. It might seem as if these vital resources have some inherent shrinking defect rather than the fact of consumption by the every increasing population

that is the problem. If population growth does not abate, life on earth will be much more difficult for the children and grandchildren of those of us alive today.

The Australian population is for the main part located on the Eastern coast where the main cities have become great conurbations that are struggling to provide infrastructure to swelling populations. It is a population that has one of the highest growth rates in the world, a growth that is fueled by immigration. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has rejected the idea of a 'Big Australia' choosing instead a 'Sustainable Australia'. Just what is 'sustainable', like the term 'carrying capacity' are words of imprecise definition. Even so, sustainability is a concept that has been rejected by the Chief Minister of the ACT choosing growth.

In my own interpretation both sustainability and carrying capacity have the meaning of a use that enables some preservation or longevity of the resource; using the interest but not the capital. It is difficult to apply to any urban area and particularly a city like Canberra that is somewhat artificial at the outset. Nevertheless, in my submission it should be recognized that Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory are part of Australia and the wider world, that policies that encouraging population growth in the ACT are not in the best interests of the majority of its citizens, Australia or the world at large, that the carrying capacity of the ACT should not be measured simply by the ability to put in place infrastructure to meet a swelling population, and the so-called 'ecological footprint' would be better placed elsewhere.

Keith Ross
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