

Submission to the Inquiry into the Ecological Carrying Capacity of the ACT and Region.



By: Greg Delaney

I would like to start off my submission to this inquiry with the following quote from Sir David Attenborough:

"Instead of controlling the environment for the benefit of the population, perhaps it's time we control the population to allow the survival of the environment."

I would also like to make the point that I believe that those who derive profits from constant population growth, particularly property developers, should not be provided the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. This is because they have a vested interest in ensuring that many, many more people live in the ACT and region (refer to statement by Stephen Byron, of the Canberra Airport, that 900,000 people should live in this region). Their submissions will be biased towards maximising the population of the region for their own greedy purposes.

As I have also indicated in my initial submission to the framing of the Terms of Reference of this inquiry I do not believe carrying capacity is a useful indicator upon which to base future population growth. Carrying capacity shows the long term maximum population that can be sustained. This is not the optimal population upon which to achieve a combination of environmental and quality of life objectives.

Tim Flannery, in his submission to an earlier inquiry to Australia's population carrying capacity, entitled "Biological considerations in determining an optimum human population for Australia"

<http://www.science.org.au/events/sats/sats1994/Population2040-section4.pdf> says:

"Australia's high rainfall variability and fragile natural environment mean that special care should be taken. It would appear to make good sense to observe the "golden rule" of population in determining Australia's carrying capacity."

A consequence of the recent increase in population growth, driven largely by overseas migration, has been the dramatic fall in housing affordability and quality. In March 2001 medium sized blocks (450 – 650 m²) averaged \$61,600 and large blocks (650 m²+) averaged \$89,000. In the past 10 years the size of blocks available for sale has shrunk to be generally less than 500 m², and have quadrupled in price. This has resulted in a loss

of quality of life due to the "death of the Aussie backyard". Only the very rich can afford to have a house on a block of land with a backyard. Others are forced to live in Yass or Goulburn to have the "luxury" of a backyard.

The answer to housing affordability is apparently to reduce the quality of housing. Affordable housing is to be provided in the form of medium density accommodation in outlying suburbs.

As Gungahlin Community Council Ex-President said in his news letter of August – September 2009 on the housing density debate:

"People have a right to choose to have a yard."

"Ever shrinking blocks are all the ACT Government is making available to Canberrans."

"Gungahlin residents are telling us at GCC. They are sick of the ever shrinking blocks we are being forced into, and they are sick of being treated like some social experiment."

One area that needs to be investigated is the reliance that the ACT government has upon land sales for revenue. If such an investigation shows that the ACT is reliant upon continuing land sales then this is not sustainable. Clearly, the ACT government cannot rely upon continuing levels of land sales for housing ad infinitum. This means a continual expansion of the urban boundaries of Canberra and continual land clearing OR a continuing policy of urban infill and high rise developments.

Water is another resource that must be managed well in an inland city like Canberra. One might be tempted to be complacent about the problem of water given the recent return to average rains. However, we should not forget the years of drought that we recently experienced and that resulted in drastic water restrictions. To cope with the projected increase in population a \$300 million dollar expansion of the Cotter dam has begun. We shouldn't allow this increased capacity to be used as an excuse for a greater population in the region. The possible consequence is the necessity to expend even more on infrastructure to support the water needs of much larger population.

Let us not also forget that by expanding the Cotter dam we are not creating more water but stopping whatever rain that may fall from the skies from reaching rivers. With the possible need to divert more water into the Murray Darling basin to achieve necessary environmental flows we cannot persist with increasing storage capacity to feed the water needs of a growing population.

The Australian Conservation Foundation has recently released analysis (*Healthy Rivers – Economic benefits of a healthy river worth billions, Australian Conservation Foundation, 20 October 2010, http://www.acfonline.org.au/articles/news.asp?news_id=3189*) showing that healthy rivers and wetlands provide economic benefits to communities and industry

in the Murray-Darling Basin worth around \$2.1 billion a year. There are no healthy rivers without adequate water.

Water has been over-allocated for decades throughout the Basin, including to the ACT. The recently-released Guide to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the product of the best science, states that returning 3,000 billion litres of water to the Basin's rivers will give only a low certainty of achieving a healthy outcome while returning 7,600 billion litres will give a high certainty. To achieve even the 3,000 billion litres, water allocations throughout the Basin, including those in the ACT, will need to be cut about a third on average.

The outlook for water for irrigated agriculture and for Canberra is poor since most climate scientists are in agreement that climate change will reduce rainfall in southern Australia while increasing evaporation rates through temperature rise (2, 3). Despite the recent rain, the South Eastern Australian Climate Initiative, a collaborative research project between CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and other Government agencies, has reiterated that drier conditions well into the future are to be expected in south eastern Australia (4). The Garnaut Report stated that irrigation in the Murray-Darling Basin will have declined by 92% by 2100 (4).

The rivers and the farmers and the towns that serve them throughout the Basin have been doing it tough from lack of rainfall during the past 13 years, whereas Canberrans have learned to live successfully with Stage 3 water restrictions. The rivers, then farmers, should surely have preference over a Canberra that does not need to grow further. To indulge in programs, such as the 'Live in Canberra', that promote population growth is irresponsible. I ask that this Inquiry recommend its termination and the adoption of a policy to eventually stabilize Canberra's population growth.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions are another area that will be harder to tackle with an ever increasing population. Recent legislation has been passed to set a target of reducing emissions by 40% by 2040. This aspiration reminds me of the "No waste by 2010" campaign. It is certainly true that we can reduce per capita emissions but if the number of capitas is increasing then the task is made harder, even unachievable. Unless the plan is to reduce people's standard of living to achieve the emissions reduction. As part of the plan to reduce total emissions there should be a goal of stabilizing our population.

In support of my submission to this inquiry I have attached the following articles:

1)

The Australian Conservation Foundation's nomination of "Human population growth in Australia" as a key threatening process under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. (Also, refer to website address http://www.acfonline.org.au/uploads/res/EPBC_nomination_22-3-10.pdf). Charles

Berger, ACF Director of Strategic Ideas, says in a media release accompanying this nomination:

"The bigger our population gets, the harder it is for us to reduce greenhouse pollution, protect natural habitats near urban and coastal areas and ensure a good quality of life for all Australians."

"More people means more roads, more urban sprawl, more dams, more transmission lines, more energy and water use, more pollutants in our air and natural environment and more pressure on Australia's animals, plants, rivers, reefs and bushland."

"We need to improve urban and coastal planning and management of environmental issues, but we can't rely on better planning alone to protect our environment. Rapid population growth makes sustainable planning nearly impossible, so stabilising Australia's population by mid-century should be a national policy goal."

2)

A media release by the ACF's Strategic Director Charles Berger on Sustainable Cities.

3)

An opinion piece by ACF president Professor Ian Lowe discussing the need for a serious debate on population for the sake of future generations.

4)

Population Growth and Australia's 2020 Greenhouse Gas Emission Commitments (by Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy) – This shows that 83% of the forecast increase in Australia's greenhouse emissions will be attributable to population growth. It concludes with the following statement:

"The population option has been ignored by most participants in the greenhouse abatement debate, perhaps because few of them appreciate the crucial role of population growth in Australia's emission burden."

5)

Australia's Population "Carrying Capacity": One Nation – Two Ecologies. A report from this inquiry was prepared by the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies (Chair – Barry Jones MP, December 1994). This report can be viewed at the National Library or the Parliamentary Library.

6)

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies for Long Term Strategies Inquiry into Australia's population carrying capacity by the Population 2040 Working Party.

7)

Joint Statement of the Population 2040 Working Party which says:

"In our view, the quality of all aspects of our children's lives will be maximised if the population of Australia by the mid-21st Century is kept to the low, stable end of the achievable range, ie to approximately 23 million."

N.B. 23 million: Instead Australia's current population is 22.5 million and we are rapidly heading to a population of 40 or 50 million by 2050. Such an outcome is cheered on by the Property Council, Business Council and, most disappointingly, by our Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, who nominates a population of at least 500,000 as the most desirable for the ACT.

The only sensible option is to pursue a policy whereby population will eventually stabilise. This can be achieved by reducing net migration to levels of around 70,000. Natural increase will in turn gradually decline. A stable population is the best way in which we can protect our environment and quality of life for future generations.

Thanking you for allowing me to have my say on this very important issue.

Greg Delaney

