

From: David Turbayne
Sent: Friday, 12 November 2010 4:54 PM
To: Committees
Subject: Submission - Inquiry into Carrying Capacity of ACT and Region

Inquiry into the Ecological Carrying Capacity of the ACT and Region
- Submission by David Turbayne

I am making this submission to the Inquiry because I believe the concept of carrying capacity is of fundamental importance in making decisions about how we can live sustainably within our region, in Australia and on the Earth. We are at an environmental turning point where carrying capacity needs to underpin public policy, especially in the areas of population, environment, energy, transport, food production, land use planning and housing.

At its simplest, I see carrying capacity as living within our global means, that is, within the planet's finite natural resource base, particularly its water, arable land, energy resources and biodiversity. While the concept of carrying capacity has ecological sustainability as its goal, it crucially involves the issue of population, that is, "the maximum population size...that can be supported by a given area without depleting resources"(Inquiry Discussion Paper 2.6).

It will be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve ecological sustainability, including reducing global warming and maintenance of our finite resource base unless a population limit is set for the ACT and region and nationally, using carrying capacity as the basis. This necessarily involves the ACT, other States, the Northern Territory and the Federal Government acting together, especially as immigration is the main policy area where population levels can be altered. It should be noted that reducing the immigration intake to achieve a desired population level does not mean there needs to be a reduction in Australia's humanitarian refugee program or a reduced commitment to multiculturalism.

The ACT Government does influence the rate of population growth in the Territory through a range of economic, environmental and social policies and programs such as 'Live in Canberra'. I suggest this promotional and incentive scheme be discontinued as one step towards achieving a sustainable population level in the ACT.

In the areas of food, water, energy, transport and housing there are a number of ways in which the ACT and region can reduce its environmental footprint and move further closer to ecological sustainability. Population growth and demand for housing leading to urban sprawl is one reason for the loss of arable land. Sydney's growth has led to the loss of nearly all the market gardens in the greater Sydney area and this will put increasing pressure on already limited arable land in the region surrounding the ACT.

A positive development has been the rapid growth of farmers markets such as that at EPIC where local region growers can sell their produce directly to consumers. Such markets promote the buying of fresh, locally grown food and reduce the food miles of products being transported to centralised wholesale markets such as Sydney. The ACT Government should be providing support to establish more farmers markets in the ACT.

In relation to energy use, the ACT and region should continue its development of renewable energy, especially solar and wind power. Cost effective, long term interest free loans for householders to install solar hot water systems should be introduced by the ACT Government. In addition to scaling up its photovoltaic feed-in tariff scheme to a commercial level, the ACT Government should also see if the CSIRO's waterless solar thermal technology can be introduced. Solar farms such as the one to be established in Bungendore should be supported elsewhere in the region.

Transport is a significant greenhouse emitter in the ACT and region. There needs to be greater emphasis by government to get freight onto trains. Reducing car usage through better public transport and more cycle ways, walking and community sensitive urban infill should continue to be promoted. Free parking in the Parliamentary Triangle needs to be abolished with any funds from parking fees going directly into improving public transport. A light rail system between the main town centres in Canberra would be the best public transport option (with small feeder buses connecting to it) and the ACT Government should review its cost-benefit analysis, taking into account long term greenhouse reduction benefits and peak oil. Car sharing schemes need to be promoted through the use of registration concessions and incentives such as favoured access to city and town centre parking.

Reducing the spread of Canberra through urban infill is another important aspect of achieving ecological sustainability. However, it needs to be done sensitively, with community support and avoiding such problems as overshadowing, high rise 'wind tunnels' and loss of views. Similarly, in the surrounding region where towns are growing it is important to preserve water supplies, arable land and biodiversity. An environmental assessment based on carrying capacity should be undertaken before any new development is undertaken in the ACT or towns in the region.

Water is a critical resource on which the ACT and surrounding region depends. It is vital environmental flows into the Murrumbidgee, Snowy and other rivers enable their full ecosystem regeneration. Water availability is one of the key factors that will determine the population level in the ACT and region. If the population of the ACT is to reach over half a million by 2056 as projected in the Inquiry Discussion Paper (2.26), it is necessary such a level be reached within the Territory's water carrying capacity without water piped from outside the region and produced by desalination plants.

The Murray Darling Basin Commission's proposal to reduce the ACT's water allocation by more than a third should be accepted as its carrying capacity entitlement, even if this means population growth needs to be stabilized at half a million people or less. It is a good example of where the Territory's carrying capacity must be at the centre of decision-making about an important public policy issue.

Increasing opportunities for recycling in the ACT is another way of reducing the Territory's ecological footprint. With Canberra's total waste increasing by 87% between 1994-5 and 2006-07 (Inquiry Discussion Paper 2.23) it is an area where the ACT Government could be doing more to encourage recycling and reuse by households and industry. The ACT should introduce free electronic waste recycling and establish drop off centres around the ACT. There should also be more kerbside 'swap' days for people to swap or give away unwanted goods.

In conclusion, the concept of carrying capacity and its related goal of ecological sustainability are fundamental to the Earth's and humankind's well being and indeed survival. A regular 'Ecological Sustainability and Carrying Capacity Update' for the ACT and region should be provided to the Assembly and to the community as part of a State of the ACT Environment Report. As importantly, carrying capacity needs to become part of the community's and decision-makers way of thinking so that it is central to any discussion about how we can maintain the Earth's eco-system health on which all Life ultimately depends.

David Turbayne