

SUBMISSION BY THE CONSERVATION COUNCIL ACT REGION INC. TO THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY INQUIRY INTO THE ECOLOGICAL CARRYING CAPACITY OF THE ACT & REGION

Given the level of detail provided to this Inquiry by a number of our member organisations, this submission will simply address the key points of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. I trust that there will be further opportunities to expand and expound in more detail upon these at a future stage of the Inquiry.

Scope of the Inquiry

We believe the scope of the Inquiry is wide-ranging and integrated, albeit somewhat ambitious. However, we are unsure of how the Inquiry will influence other policy and decision-making actions of the Government, in particular the Canberra Spatial Plan.

As stated in our cover letter, we believe it is essential to consider the ecological functioning of the ACT in the broader biogeographic landscape in which it sits (Southern Tablelands & Alps), especially in regard to the provision of essential resources (such as water), and with respect to connectivity for species and biological communities across the landscape.

A. Resources Available to the ACT

Any assessment of resource availability must be undertaken with careful consideration of two critical factors – the likely future population of the region (and that is a debate in its own right – 82.8% of respondents to our March random survey stating that Canberra was either “too large” already or “about right”) and the probable impacts from a changing climate (drought, fire, storms, temperature etc). These influences operate in a synergistic manner with resource availability and require scientific modelling to determine possible constraint levels. The community is very much aware of some of the limits to growth in Canberra as evidenced by the fact that 76.8% of our survey respondents indicated that water was a major constraint to future population growth.

Energy resourcing is difficult for the ACT jurisdiction to control as most of our electricity is supplied through the national grid. However, strong moves by the ACT Government to increase renewable energy (40% target), coupled with a fairly generous feed-in tariff, will build householder commitment to reducing energy use based upon non-renewable resources. This Council strongly rejects any proposals to burn timber for electricity generation as we consider that this is not a wise or ecologically sustainable use of our forest resources, is an inefficient way to utilise solar resources, and would increase greenhouse gas emissions.

While the concept of food-miles is well understood, the implications of recent UK research needs consideration. This work found that the manner in which food was grown can contribute a higher energy-carbon cost than the actual miles travelled to consumer. For example, rice grown ‘naturally’ in Thailand might have a lower ecological/carbon

footprint than irrigated rice grown with herbicides and fertilisers in Australia. It is sometimes more important how the food is grown than where it is grown. Nevertheless, obviously the most sustainable outcome is locally grown organic food with no chemical fertilisers.

B. Effective measures for assessing ecological footprint and carrying capacity

This Council, and its members, worked actively with the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment (OCSE) in developing new indicators for State of Environment Reporting. We believe that OCSE would be the appropriate independent auditor for sustainability indicators, and a core set should be evaluated and measured, and presented, to the Legislative Assembly on an annual basis.

C. Current Levels of resource use by ACT residents

It is clear from previous years' OCSE reports that the ACT has the highest footprint of any Australian capital city. This is totally unacceptable.

This trend is not improving. A major contributor to our carbon footprint is transport, yet we continue to build new Greenfield suburbs with no employment and poor public transport, thus encouraging additional car use. Our consumption patterns would appear to indicate increasing per capita energy use (although we have no data to support this contention). A factor that is rarely taken into account is the energy required to manufacture and transport the new consumer goods that householders desire. The element of 'built-in obsolescence' encourages owners to 'buy new' rather than repairing older equipment. The decline in community connectedness in the ACT mitigates against sharing of expensive infrequently used appliances (eg lawnmowers). All these factors, in a whole-of-life-cycle carbon/energy analysis, contribute to our increasing carbon footprint.

D. A sustainable level of resource use

We will never manage to reduce our ecological/carbon footprint until:

- (a) Government sets clear and realistic annual targets for energy use, water use, recycling, greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficiency in buildings and households etc.
- (b) Provides incentives for individuals and households to achieve personal reductions in their footprints
- (c) Subsidises installation of energy meters in households to demonstrate attaining personal targets
- (d) Constructs and manages a public transport system that is available, frequent and attractive for all sectors of society – this is an integrated issue with designing a more compact Canberra with higher suburban population densities, the provision of fast inter-node light rail/ tramways, an end to Greenfield development, and the provision of employment where people live.

- (e) Improves urban design criteria and building codes that encourage walking and cycling, with their attendant health advantages

E. Appropriate ecological carrying capacities

- (i) Current Consumption Levels: The Council believes that we have already exceeded our carrying capacity. We need to urgently introduce measures that will redress this situation. The recent easing of water restrictions by ACTEW was a premature step in the wrong direction, as was the virtual abandonment of the feed-in tariff by the NSW Government.
- (ii) Higher Consumption Levels: We consider this would be totally unsustainable, and would lead to severe environmental stresses and negative quality of life impacts from water restrictions, loss of open green spaces, greater energy consumption, loss of biodiversity, and loss of ecological functioning in our rural areas.
- (iii) Lower Consumption Levels: This could, with extremely careful design and management, return the ACT to a sustainable carrying capacity, and could even, under the following assumptions, permit a modest increase in population growth (which is probably going to occur irrespective of Government policies or decision-making):
 - * cap Greenfield development at its current state and move all new residential housing into existing urban centres as medium density development below the tree canopy height (keeping the low density nature of outer suburban areas);
 - * encourage employment opportunities close to where people live thus encouraging walking and cycling, and the use of frequent public transport;
 - * provide a raft of incentives to encourage households to take personal responsibility for reduced energy use and consumption;
 - * ensure potentially productive agricultural land is allocated to food production, and ensure urban design provide opportunities for community food gardens;

G. Environmental, economic and social impacts of reduced consumption and sustainable population

1. Environmental

The nature of the Bush Capital would be retained, any further clearing of native vegetation would be prohibited, and urban green and open spaces would not only be retained but, due to higher community values and use, would attract better resourcing for maintenance and rehabilitation. The importance of Canberra Nature Park to people's physical and spiritual health would be recognised and appropriate management regimes (including scientifically-based weed and fire control) funded and implemented. Professional bush management teams would be supported by enlarged and resourced community parkcare groups. Residents in near bushland suburbs would engage and implement the principles established by the Bush-on-the-Boundary Reference Groups.

Remaining naturally vegetated areas in the ACT (especially, but not only, along the northern rim, the Molonglo Valley, the Majura Valley, Hume/Williamstown, and the Red Hill areas) would be protected and managed sympathetically for their nature conservation

and ecological function values through a system of new reserves and conservation leases. Critical landscape connectivity, both within the ACT and regionally into NSW, would be protected through reservation or appropriate planning controls, which would also ensure that opportunities to improve connectivity through rehabilitation of degraded areas are not foreclosed.

The current decline in biodiversity across the ACT will be halted, and innovative rehabilitation and restoration programmes (such as is currently being undertaken in Mulligan's Flat Nature Reserve and as proposed in a wider context under the Chief Minister's Woodland Restoration Project) will enhance the ecological quality of our woodlands, grasslands and wetlands and ensure their viability in perpetuity.

Changes in residential development planning will see a re-focussing upon neighbourhood parks so that all children will have easy safe access to green spaces within 300-400 metres of all homes.

Economic

The ACT exchequer will need to diversify and become far less dependent upon land sales as a revenue base. The value of biodiversity and ecological services to the health and well-being of the population needs to be factored into economic analyses and any measures of the sustainability of the ACT. The economic value of improved health and lower greenhouse gas emissions through reduced car use should be balanced against the cost of further road infrastructure and accidents.

Social

The creation of revitalised inner suburbs will create vibrant connected communities with sufficient critical population mass to ensure retention (and growth) of educational, medical and retail facilities within easy walking/cycling distance for most people. A completely redesigned public transport system will be based upon a combination of fast frequent inter-city light rail (also to hospital and airport), frequent suburban buses feeding to main nodes, and transport-on-demand within local neighbourhoods to ensure all sectors of society have access to transport without dependence upon private cars. Car use for work commuting purposes will drastically decline, although the very nature of Canberra is likely see continuing car use for recreational and inter-state trips and bulky items transport.

H. The role of the ACT in the region

The ACT's relationship to the region in which it sits must be evaluated holistically. The balance between population growth and resource limitations needs to be assessed across the area of the ACT's influence. Currently the ACT's consumption patterns have implications for a number of resources outside the ACT (e.g. water, energy from coal-fired powered stations, firewood, people movement etc.). There is little advantage in moving population growth outside the ACT into NSW regional centres such as Queanbeyan, Bungendore, Sutton etc, if the impact of such growth is also ecologically unsustainable.

I. Relevant infrastructure issues

Infrastructure planning needs to address ways in which it can maximise a move to a sustainable ACT with a vastly reduced ecological and carbon footprint. This might see abandonment of further Greenfield suburbs (with their extensive infrastructure of roading, water supply, energy distribution, recreational open space etc), no new arterial roads, construction of rapid transit public transport systems (eg light rail) and associated hub infrastructure (park-and-ride, bike-and-ride), and enhanced infrastructure in urban open spaces to sustainably manage increased public patronage.

J. Any other matters

The key element that has been missing in decision-making on the future of the ACT and its sustainability has been a true partnership between government and the community. Government alone cannot achieve sustainability without individuals taking personal responsibility for their own ecological footprint. We need a citizens movement to bring this issue into the mainstream, and to make such objectives achievable; facilitated and encouraged by appropriate government policies, decisions and incentives.

The Conservation Council would suggest the formation of a Sustainability Commission involving representation from science, academia, the professions, business and industry, the conservation and social sectors, and the community – to work with officers from DECCEW, TAMS, ACTPLA, DHCS etc to advise government in setting realistic targets and strategies. Such a Commission could be resourced by either the Office of Sustainability and Environment or by the Conservator of Flora and Fauna, and should be charged with reporting to the Assembly on an annual basis. The workings of the Commission should be fully transparent and public to ensure community support and ownership of the outcomes.

Attachments

Submission by the Conservation Council to Vision 2030

The Australia Institute Random Survey of ACT Residents for Cons Council, March 2010

Submission on proposed amendments to EIS Procedures

Submission on Strategic Assessment for Molonglo

Submission on Estate Development Plans for Coombs and Wright

References of Possible Value for the Inquiry

<http://www.worldchanging.com/cities/>

http://itdp.org/documents/2010-OurCitiesOurselves_Booklet.pdf

<http://green-changemakers.blogspot.com/2010/01/10-things-that-make-great-green-city.html>

<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/11/stephen-teeple-shows-social-housing-can-be-green-gorgeous.php>

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24056306/>