Sustainable Development in Australia
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Background

Unique circumstances guide Australia’s approach to sustainable development.

As an island nation covering an entire continent and bordered by three oceans, Australia has responsibility for a considerable area of the marine environment. A relatively small but highly urbanised population concentrated in the coastal strip has a significant impact on those oceans. We have a range of climates and a correspondingly vast range of ecosystems and are one of the earth’s mega-biodiverse countries. In our federal system political responsibility for environmental matters is shared between the national government and eight state and territory governments.

Australia has approached ecologically sustainable development largely on a sectoral basis. It soon began to emerge that each sector would need to take responsibility for developing its own approach. The ecologically sustainable development process, launched in Australia in 1989, was the first formal government initiative aimed at institutionalising sustainable development in decision making. Nine working groups, including representatives of industry, unions, community groups, conservation organisations, scientists and the federal, state and territory governments, were established to consider the implementation of ecologically sustainable development principles in those sectors of Australia’s economy which have major environmental impacts: agriculture; forest use; fisheries; mining; energy production; energy use; manufacturing; tourism; and transport. Final reports of the working groups were published in 1991 and made more than 600 recommendations.

An inter-governmental process was then established to convert the outcomes of the ecologically sustainable development process into something that all Australian governments could endorse. In 1992, Australia produced the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development. The strategy, which was endorsed by all Australian governments and the Australian Local Government Association, has provided a broad national agenda for sustainable development in Australia. Some of its specific recommendations for the various sectors of the Australian community are no longer...
relevant, or the objectives of the recommendation have been achieved by other initiatives, but it still provides a nationally agreed checklist of objectives against which outcomes can be compared.

Acknowledging that Australia is a federation in which environmental responsibilities are shared, an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment was established in 1992. The agreement set out the roles of the parties and established ground rules under which the signatory governments would interact on the environment. Although the agreement was about roles and responsibilities in relation to the environment, rather than sustainable development, it identifies integration of economic and environmental considerations as a principle of environmental policy and as essential to the adoption of sound environmental practices and procedures. Similar principles were embodied in other processes such as the development of Australia's first National Greenhouse Response Strategy in the early 1990s.

The trend towards fostering sustainable development on a sectoral and specific cross-sectoral basis is identifiable in most aspects of the way Australia manages its environment. Our commitment to sustainability has been characterised by collaborative (inter-governmental and cross-ministry) approaches to regulation, to engaging the commitment of all stakeholders and providing funding to those most directly involved in managing an issue, and to coordinating and improving our information base for decision making.

Internationally, Australia’s overseas aid program assists developing countries reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development. The program’s focus on the Asia-Pacific is an expression of Australia’s strong engagement with the region and its commitment to working in partnership to meet its considerable development challenges. Australia responds generously to humanitarian crises and emergencies and contributes to development needs in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The aid program also has a strong multilateral component.

Natural resources management

Oceans

Australia has sovereign rights over 11 million square kilometres of ocean, and up to 15 million square kilometres when the claimable continental shelf is included. This area is nearly twice the landmass of Australia. It is one of the most diverse Exclusive Economic Zones in the world both in terms of its geographic spread and in its physical and biological diversity.

Australia’s oceans are inhabited by 4,000 fish types of the 22,000 species known worldwide, and 30 of the world’s 58 seagrass species. They include the largest area of coral reefs in the world. Such diversity brings with it the opportunity for Australia to greatly benefit from the rights we enjoy over these ocean resources. Australia earns A$30 billion per annum in income from ocean based tourism and recreation, oil and gas production, shipping, fishing and aquaculture. Our marine areas are still in relatively good condition but are under increasing pressure both from a range of marine industries and from the cumulative impacts of activities in our coastal catchments.

Pressures from marine industries include over fishing and bycatch, damage to the sea floor from trawling and scallop dredging, impacts of exotic marine species introduced through ballast water and hull fouling, pollution from toxic anti-fouling paints and damage to anchors and moorings. Pressures from land-based activities include storm water, sewage and soil erosion run-off, and the degradation of estuarine and coastal habitats (which can in turn impact on deep sea species and ecosystems).
Australia’s Oceans Policy was launched in December 1998. It sets out a framework to apply sustainable development principles to the management of Australia’s oceans and to address in an integrated way these competing pressures. The policy’s vision is: ‘healthy oceans: cared for, understood and used wisely for the benefit of all, now and in the future’.

To integrate sustainable development into Australian oceans governance, regional marine plans, based on large marine ecosystems, are being developed. These plans allow the integration of sectoral interests with conservation requirements. They also provide the framework for a structured and orderly process to achieve the ecosystem-based allocation of resources within and between all sectors. The plans also have the potential to improve coordination between the Federal Government and the states and territories so that jurisdictional boundaries do not hinder effective planning and management. The Regional Marine Plans epitomise Australia’s Ocean Policy and Australia’s approach to sustainable development generally in that both the integration of environmental, economic and social concerns at every level of planning, and extensive public consultation, are built into the process.

The development of Australian fisheries management regimes also demonstrates sustainable development in action. The regimes are controlled to allow commercial fishing of resources while aspiring to an ecosystem approach to biodiversity conservation. Each fishery in Australia with an export component is subject to environmental review to ensure its management benefits both commercial and biodiversity objectives. Because our understanding of both the marine resource base and the cumulative impacts of resource use is limited by our capacity to collect marine information, funds are being provided to support rapid assessment of our marine biological resources and of human impacts, and to develop marine sustainability indicators.

Land, Water and Biodiversity
Since Europeans arrived in Australia, land clearing for urban development and agriculture has resulted directly in the loss of many plant and animal species and endangered others through habitat loss, changed microclimates, soil erosion and raised water tables, as shallow rooted crops and pastures ‘leaked’ water below the root zone. Rising water tables, as a consequence of removing native vegetation, are the main cause of our current problem of salinity.

Much of Australia is arid and drought is common. Prior to the 1980s, there was a strong focus on the development of water infrastructure and some water use was subsidised. In 1994-95, Australian governments adopted the National Agenda for Water Reform, for the efficient and sustainable reform of Australia’s rural and urban water industries. Pricing practices were reformed to reflect the full economic cost of resources, including the cost of providing adequate water for the environment. Water service providers must now operate on a commercial basis. Trade and use of water is underpinned by a comprehensive system of water allocation and entitlements. New investments in rural water supplies are limited to projects which are both ecologically sustainable and economically viable.

Landcare in Australia had its origins in the community. It developed from small beginnings in the mid-1980s as a way to engage local farmers in tackling soil degradation. The concept spread rapidly, and the Decade of Landcare (1990-99) gave impetus to adoption of the landcare model as a way for communities, including increasingly urban and urban-rural communities, to come together to tackle environmental problems.

The landcare concept has been embraced by rural and urban groups, and by those working on private land and public land. It is applied in remote areas and in Indigenous communities. There are now more than 4000 groups. Close to 40 per cent of farmers belong to landcare groups. The Natural Heritage Trust is the largest ever suite of biodiversity conservation, sustainable development and natural resource management initiatives in Australian history. The trust focuses on five key environmental...
themes - land, vegetation, rivers, coasts and marine, and biodiversity - funding environmental activities at a community level, a regional level, a state/territory level and at the national level. The trust has increased community management in sustainable land and water (as well as coastal and marine management), involving almost 400,000 Australians in more than 12,000 projects. Much trust funding has gone to projects initiated and implemented by landholders and managers or community groups. For example funding has supported the erection of 19,000 kilometres of fencing for improved natural resource management. Since the Natural Heritage Trust began, the areas of trees and shrubs planted on agricultural land has increased from 30,000 hectares a year to over 150,000.

Following the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the federal, state and territory governments agreed to a framework for the sustainable management of Australia’s forests. The National Forest Policy Statement has three principles as the basis for sustainable forest management in Australia: maintaining the ecological processes within forests (the formation of soil, energy flows, and the carbon, nutrient and water cycles); maintaining the biodiversity of forests; and optimising the full range of environmental, economic and social benefits to the community from all uses of forests.

Twenty-year Regional Forest Agreements have been developed. The agreements are based on comprehensive scientific regional assessments of forest values and uses, and on consultation with stakeholders. The agreements balance the range of environmental, social, economic and heritage values that forests provide to current and future generations. They have established a world-class forest conservation reserve system of more than 10 million hectares and complementary sustainable forest management systems outside reserves.

Australia is geologically and climatically prone to concentrating salt in the landscape. Two and a half million hectares (five per cent) of Australia’s cultivated land is currently affected by dryland salinity and a further 5.7 million hectares are at risk.

The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality is the first concerted and targeted national strategy to address the salinity problem. It was endorsed by Australian governments in November 2000 and committed federal, state and territory governments to support regional action by communities to tackle salinity and water quality problems. Targets and standards are being developed collaboratively by the federal and state governments, as are comprehensive integrated catchment plans. The plan’s centerpiece is the development of community-based regional bodies that will develop and implement integrated catchment or regional natural resource management plans, relevant to their regions.

Australia’s low agricultural tariffs and low levels of subsidisation have also led to more efficient use of natural resources and inputs by our farmers with direct payoffs for the economy and the environment. More efficient use of water, pesticides, herbicides and land use generally all contribute to more sustainable farming practices and long-term environmental benefits.

Information for decision-making

One of the major constraints that has traditionally limited Australia’s capacity for integrated decision making which addresses environmental, economic and social objectives has been the lack of comprehensive information on the state of the environment, and, in particular the state of our land, water and biodiversity. Australia now has in place a range of policies and delivery frameworks that assist in national coordination of information, including a national State of the Environment Report, which the Federal Government is required to produce every five years under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, and a comprehensive National Land and Water Resources Audit which seeks to improve land, water and vegetation management by providing better information to resource managers.
Mining

To strengthen the environmental and economic performance of mining operations in Australia and internationally, the Australian Government works in partnership with mining companies, their industry bodies and community groups to foster environmental performance as well as respect for Indigenous culture as part of their core business.

The Best Practice Environmental Management in mining program started in 1994 and has since been recognised as world’s best practice by the World Bank, who described it as the current benchmark for the industry. With tools ranging from workshops, booklets and training kits, the program helps mining firms improve their environmental performance through all phases of mineral production.

The booklets include examples of current best practice management in mining from some of the recognised leaders in the Australian industry. They present practical, cost-effective approaches to environmental protection that focus on ‘beyond compliance’ and exceed requirements set by regulation.

Together with the development of a code of conduct for mining companies (The Australian Minerals Industry Code of Environmental Management, a mining industry initiative) Australian mining companies are now leaders in good environmental practice worldwide.

Sectors involved in the Light Metals Action Agenda (aluminium, magnesium and titanium) have focused on sustainable development in the 2001 report Australia Leading the Light Metals Age. These industries will be looking for opportunities to increase industrial ecology and regional synergy outcomes as well as recycling of light metals.

The Australian Government provided substantial support for the Australian Minerals, Mining and Sustainable Development projects under the mining industry’s Global Mining Initiative, as well as for the initiative itself.

The government also has the Working in Partnership program, to support and encourage cultural change in the mining industry - Indigenous communities relationship and to promote long term partnerships between Indigenous communities and the exploration and mining industry.

Greenhouse policy

The Australian Greenhouse Office is the world’s first national agency established to address climate change. Through the office, the government has developed a balanced mix of policy responses including voluntary industry programs such as the Greenhouse Challenge, mandatory requirements such as the Renewable Energy (Electricity) Act 2000 and grant programs to support development and uptake of renewable energy technology and greenhouse gas emission reduction.

The level of expenditure on a broad range of policies and measures, coupled with the commitments made by Australia’s states and territories, places Australia among the leading nations addressing climate change.

Australia is working cooperatively with other countries to address climate change and will continue to work with developing nations, industry, business and science to create effective climate change solutions.

There are a number of examples of Australia’s domestic action on greenhouse.

• The A$400 million Greenhouse Gas Abatement Program (GGAP) established in 1999 supports large-scale, cost-effective and sustained abatement by industry and the community. It is expected that projects under GGAP from energy, transport fuels, mining, industrial processes and agriculture will abate over 26 megatonnes of carbon dioxide annually.
• The Greenhouse Challenge is a joint voluntary initiative between the government and industry with more than 700 members. Under the program, Australian industry has volunteered to cut expected emissions by 23 million tonnes per year. There are more than 600 members in the challenge (including small and medium-sized businesses) to which the government has committed A$27 million.

• The Australian Government’s Mandatory Renewable Energy Target is a world first in creating a national renewable energy market that is backed by legislation. In force since 1 April 2000, the target of an additional 9500 gigawatt hours by 2010 will mean a 60 per cent increase above 1997 levels of renewable energy generation. To complement renewable energy legislation, more than A$300 million has been made available by the government to develop the renewable energy industry to 2004 – providing a major boost to the commercialisation and uptake of renewable energy.

Cities for Climate Protection™, an initiative of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), began in 1993 as a global campaign to reduce emissions that cause global warming and air pollution. CCP™ Australia began in 1997 with 29 councils in a pilot program and it is now a world-leading program with the fastest uptake by councils and the highest number of participating councils of any CCP™ campaign (148 local governments representing more than 60 per cent of the Australian population).

Business sustainability

Businesses rate environmental protection and economic growth as equally important, so the Australian Government works closely with industry to improve environmental performance and move toward sustainable economic growth. Our low tariff regime and low levels of industry subsidisation have also ensured the more efficient use of our resources by producers, resulting in economic and environmental benefits.

The Business of Sustainable Development initiative (2000) built on previous programs to encourage greater environmental and economic efficiency in industry. The government has entered into partnership agreements with 24 industry associations to encourage their members in more than 350,000 companies to use resources more efficiently and measure their performance, thus reducing pollution, waste and industry costs. It has developed a framework to help Australian companies make voluntary public environment reports. It works with industry to help them integrate environment principles into product design and environmental accounting into their business practices. A national Building Environmental Rating System to rate the environmental performance of Australia’s residential, commercial and industrial buildings is close to completion.

The government is encouraging the Australian finance sector to take a stronger lead in driving sustainable development by encouraging the investment market to take on some of the principles of Socially Responsible Investment. It also supports the national A$8.6 billion environment industry to maximise its growth, employment and export potential.
Air quality

Australia's urban air quality is of high concern to the Australian community, and through targeted programs, it has generally improved or stayed constant in recent years. Air quality has an important impact on the health of Australia's population, especially that of children at key developmental stages, people suffering from respiratory ailments and older people.

National programs have targeted motor vehicle exhausts and wood heaters, the main contributors to urban air pollution, set national air quality standards and increased our understanding of how air quality affects our health.

To combat city traffic pollution the government has phased out leaded petrol and developed tougher petrol and diesel vehicle emissions standards. It has legislated for Australia's first national fuel quality standards to prepare for the introduction of vehicles with improved engine standards and tighter emission controls from 2002. Cleaner fuel and cleaner engines will help cut pollutants associated with respiratory and cardiovascular diseases by up to 76 per cent in urban areas by 2015.

Australia has also invested in a trial of fuel cell technology buses with zero tailpipe emissions to help cut public transport emissions, and in an Alternative Fuels Conversion program to help convert bus and truck fleets to cleaner fuels. To help build on these efforts, Australia has also targeted other sources of urban air pollution by setting national air quality standards for the six major air pollutants, developed a national code of practice for wood heater installation and is encouraging Australians to use more sustainable transport options. The government is also investing heavily in developing better information on air toxics, including Australia's first air quality forecasting system.

Australia is a world leader in phasing out the use and release of ozone-depleting substances. With cooperation between all levels of government and industry, Australia has been able to act in advance of international obligations to phase out ozone depleting substances. The Australian Strategy for Ozone Protection is based upon agreements between government and industry, with the regulatory framework for phasing out the substances an incentive for industry to develop alternatives and new equipment. Community involvement in purchasing ozone friendly products has also been critical in helping Australia meet and exceed our targets.

Waste

Australian end-use regulations for recovery, recycling, reprocessing and disposal are complemented by industry initiatives which establish practical, self-sustaining recovery, recycling, reprocessing and destruction infrastructure and systems.

Australian industry has been quick to learn that cutting waste leads to big savings. The economic benefits of reducing our waste also translate into environmental benefits such as reduced waste going to landfill and reduced inputs into production processes. The government is working closely with industry to make major inroads into waste minimisation in the packaging, paper, organics, construction and demolition, finance, automotive and electrical sectors.

Great progress has been made in collecting and recycling waste oil as much as 100 million litres of waste oil is thought to be dumped each year) by levying oil sales to fund incentives to recyclers. A substantial recycled organics initiative seeks to divert more than eight million
tonnes of solid organic waste from landfill. Cooperative efforts with construction companies have diverted up to 90 per cent of demolition waste from landfill.

Australians now recycle 70 per cent of newsprint, 92 per cent of paper packaging, 64 per cent of aluminium containers, 60 per cent of liquid paperboard used for milk and juice cartons and 40 per cent of steel cans through community action supported by governments at all levels. The National Pollutant Inventory provides the Australian community and governments with yearly information on pollutants emitted to the environment by industry and also non-point sources of pollutants.

Indigenous ecosystem management

To European settlers, Australia’s environment was unfamiliar, unique and largely pristine despite providing an Indigenous population’s food, shelter and cultural resources for tens of thousands of years. Land and its flora and fauna are central to Indigenous Australians’ world view; underpinning their history, culture and spiritual beliefs.

Europeans’ practices in their alien surroundings would ultimately lead to debilitating and often irreversible environmental damage. Decisions were taken without adequate scientific information and with little appreciation of Aborigines’ and Torres Strait Islanders’ environmental knowledge.

Indigenous people now directly own 15 per cent of Australia. Clearing, overstocking and introduced pests have degraded some of the land being returned to Indigenous people. Effectively managing these problems requires culturally suitable support measures.

Joint management of national parks delivers social, cultural and economic benefits to the Indigenous communities involved as well as positive environmental outcomes. Indigenous landowners help to manage and protect Australia’s rich biodiversity by contributing some of their land and natural resource management expertise to the National Reserve System.

The government established the Indigenous Protected Areas Program to support Indigenous landowners to protect natural and cultural features. By 2001, there were 3.6 million hectares managed in 15 Indigenous protected areas across Australia.

Indigenous people’s land management knowledge and their sustainable biodiversity use is acknowledged under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

Sustainable development is everybody’s business

The Australia State of the Environment Report 2001 concluded that ‘the key to Australia’s sustainable future lies in ourselves: our attitudes towards the environment, our heritage and each other’. We have come a long way in the past decade, but we are still learning about this ancient land and its seas, how complex ecosystems function and how human activity has modified these systems.

As we develop new ways of living and working and applying new technology to reduce the pressures on the environment, sustainable development in Australia is everybody’s business. It is daily work for every organisation and citizen.
More information
Environment Australia – www.ea.gov.au
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia – www.affa.gov.au
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