

Submission to Land and Biodiversity White Paper Process 22 June 2007

The earth and its environment, in which we live and share with other humans and other species, is affected by all elements of social and economic activity within Victoria (the global effect on climate associated with actions in Victoria and the interconnected nature of nature, establishes the validity of this statement). As the generation whose turn it is to inhabit this earth we have a responsibility to ensure that the earth which is experienced by future generations is in as good, if not better, condition that how we received it.

Unfortunately, future generations will have little to thank us for if we continue to live how we do. The social (including political and cultural) and economic processes that structure our lives, and which inform our materialistic and consumerist lifestyles, not only impacts upon the quality of our lives (what Clive Hamilton calls Affluenza), and the lives of many other people who are in a less fortunate situation than us only ('Our' social and economic systems effectively condemns other people - for example many aboriginal Australians, and those in parts of Africa, Asia and the Pacific - to lives of abject poverty, displacement and misery), it also degrades the environment, and impacts upon the evolutionary destiny of other species (extinction is for ever).

It is also clear that 'more of the same' is not the answer, as is recognized by the independent assessment of the health of Victoria's catchments, that was provided by the Victorian Catchment Management Council in 2002, and the assessment by Morgan in 2001 of Victoria having the most stressed landscapes in Australia (a significant proportion of the state is subject to multiple threats). Further evidence of the magnitude of the issues is provided by the growing recognition of the reality of climate change, and the growing awareness of the implications of peak oil.

This raises the question of what type of policy change is required. Hall (1993) provides a three tiered model for considering levels of policy change, as follows:

- First order change – where change occurs at the level at which different policy instruments are set even though the overall goals and instruments of policy remain the same (e.g. increased funding for a particular program);
- Second order change – where the goals are the same but the basic techniques to attain them are altered (e.g. the increased use of duties of care, stewardship payments and market based instruments relative to existing approaches), and;
- Third order change – where change occurs simultaneously in all three levels of policy; the instruments settings, the instruments used, and the hierarchy of goals behind the policy.

Within the context of the above evidence of the magnitude of the challenges facing Victoria, and the failure of past and present approaches to adequately address the issues at stake, it is clear that the White Paper process needs to embrace, reflect and promote third order policy change. This means that 'more efficient use of resources' or 'new ways of providing funding to landholders' is but a small part of the reform program required. In order to be in any way credible and effective the White Paper process must fully engage with other dimensions of change, so that the reform agenda of the White Paper not only establishes new projects and programs, but also establishes

policy goals and directions and legislative frameworks which are informed by new ways of thinking about, making sense of, and approaching the questions presented by the decline in biodiversity and land degradation.

In relation to the hierarchy of goals (or ways of thinking about the environment) that informs a new approach to land and biodiversity, there is a serious need to rethink how we conceptualise land and biodiversity. This is important because the way in which we think about nature, the environment, and how we live on this planet significantly shapes what can be considered as sensible, or necessary to do (There is a growing recognition of the importance of our language, concepts and categories in giving shape to reality, rather than merely providing a straightforward description of it). Lockie, for example highlights that 'our' understandings of nature, the environment, and environmental problems are shaped by social processes of knowledge generation and communication, such that this requires us to recognize that the terms we use to describe 'our' environments do not refer to universally applicable objective features of those environments, but to socially valued categories and understandings that are liable to change across space and time and social groups (2004, p29).

Therefore, to speak of nature and the environment, as natural resources, natural capital, or natural assets that provide ecosystem services, is to reduce the diversity and significance of the earth to mere commodities to be considered within an economic framework and traded between consumers (only some of whom have the capital needed in order to expression their consumer preferences). However, it seems self evident that nature and the environment represents something much more significant and essential than mere commodities, and the White Paper process should be instrumental in exploring and establishing new ways of conceptualising, and hence managing, land and biodiversity.

The arrogance of past and present approaches is clearly demonstrated by the claims, spectacularly repeated in recent Victorian Government strategies (as well as the consultation paper), that it is 'Our Environment', 'Our Forests', or 'Our Water' etc, which promotes an individualistic, materialistic and possessive approach to conceiving of the environment (the fallacy of this approach is clearly indicated when you think about whether or not we need the environment more than its needs us). This attempt to own and control the environment can be seen in the commodification of the environment through transferable water entitlements, and proposals for emissions trading. Continuing to think about, and manage, the places that we share with other species in this way is surely a recipe for the further despoliation and reduction in the diversity of life on earth. While there are no magical solutions to rethinking how we deal with land and biodiversity what does need to drive the White Paper process is an opening up of the discussions around the way in which we relate to, and live in, the environment.

It is recognized that governments cannot bring about immediate social and economic change. However, the Victorian Government, as a sovereign political entity within Victoria, has the unique responsibility to ensure that its actions, and the frameworks and regulatory environments that its uses to govern the way that businesses, industries, communities, groups, and individuals who operate, visit and live, in Victoria, respect and enhance the rights of other species, as well as people. Importantly, every specific activity of the Government is an opportunity to bring about this change, and

every time it fails to do so represents a clear indication that it does not value biodiversity as highly as it does other objectives.

In order to bring about this change in thinking, acting, and living within 'their' environment (the environment of other people, other species and future generations) I suggest that the White Paper process:

- Revisit the questions raised and the language used and reframe the debate ((some of questions effectively frame the issue as 'managing the impacts of external drivers which cannot be altered' (e.g. trade offs (a really dated way to be looking at the issues – more integrated approaches are required), global markets, water trading, increasing population, urban development etc)) so that the protection, enhancement, and restoration of biodiversity and land become non-negotiable (in the way that economic growth is often thought about). This is necessary because little will change if the debates continue to be framed in the same way;
- Start from the premise that any activities that negatively impact upon biodiversity or land are open for debate (the exclusions listed on page 14 could be read as excluding the primary industries portfolio from scrutiny). This starting point is also based upon the recognition that what happens in other portfolios (e.g. Treasury), and industry sectors, may have more impact on biodiversity and land, than any remedial programs delivered from within an environment portfolio;
- Open the consultation and dialogue processes beyond the minimal processes currently established – there may be lessons from the landmark State Conservation Strategy that was released in 1987 (i.e. don't just rely on a reference group or two, and then the green paper, when there is the potential to create processes for ongoing dialogue and input with the general public to participate in, in advance of the release of the green paper);
- Generate and sustain a community dialogue on the central importance that the environment has for 'our' lives, and the lives of other species and other people;
- Further shift the debate from what people can do as individual consumers (e.g. behaviour change, and consumption choices) to a much broader focus on ecological citizenship whereby people significantly rethink their responsibilities as citizens, workers, members of the community, and consumers, and;
- Ensure that the White Paper adopts an integrated, and integrating approach, that is whole of government, whole of economy, and whole of community, in its scope, directions, and reform agenda.

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References

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