

## POLICY E2: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE POPULATION and NATURE Submitted by the Executive

This policy replaces the 1986 Population and Resources policy. It also supersedes general references to 'population' in other Nature Conservation Council policies.

### Background

The objects of the NCC constitution are:

*'the conservation of nature, the protection of the environment and the attainment of an ecologically sustainable society'*

NCC is the 'Voice for Nature' in NSW, and speaks out to protect nature. **Population** is one of the major issues impacting on our environment. Survival of the human species on a long-term ecologically sustainable basis will not be possible unless concepts of unlimited human population growth and consumption are discarded. We live on a finite planet and humanity must accept these limits. Increasing population threatens not only the ecosystems (and ecosystem services) on which all species rely, but also *our own* well-being and quality of life. Increasing population also counteracts strategies to reach a truly ecologically sustainable future.

There have been two estimates by scientists for an ecologically sustainable population for Australia at consumption levels similar to those of today. The first was 10 million people by ecologist Prof. Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University. The second was 6-12 million by Prof. Tim Flannery of Macquarie University<sup>1</sup>. Both estimates are **substantially lower** than Australia's current population of 22.7 million (as of July, 2011)

Key aspects of population impact have been expressed in the formula  $I = PAT$ , or Impact = Population X Affluence X Technology. This can be simplified to population X per capita consumption. The world and Australia's impact due to population is thus determined by both our population but also our consumption and the technology we use. Another key aspect of population growth is the world's carrying capacity or *ecological footprint*. Currently humanity's numbers and impact would require *1.5 Earths* to provide this sustainably, and if everyone on Earth lived the lifestyle of the average American we would *need 5 Earths*<sup>2</sup>. We of course only have *one Earth*. This is why ecosystems are under stress and 60% of the Earth's ecosystem services are currently being degraded or used unsustainably, and the extinction rate is 1000

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/quantum/info/q95-19-5.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world\\_footprint/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/)

times natural levels (MA, 2005). Each year humanity's ecological footprint continues to expand as we increasingly overshoot the biocapacity the world can provide.

Australia's current population and lifestyle are not ecologically sustainable in terms of our impact on the ecosystem services that support us and our native species. Australia's population is going up by around 1.5% per year (and will double in less than 50 years)<sup>3</sup>.

This is one of the fastest rates of increase in the developed world. This is partly due to policies such as the Baby Bonus that encourage childbirth, and partly due to high immigration rates. Australians are the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases in the OECD<sup>4</sup>.

Ultimately we cannot roll back denial of climate change unless we roll back our consumer worldview, as the 2010 State of the World Report explains in detail (ref) Preventing the collapse of human civilisation requires nothing less than a wholesale transformation of dominant consumer culture (ref) Consumption has gone up sixfold since 1960 and (population) numbers have grown by a factor of 2.2. Consumption expenditure per person has almost tripled (ref).

## **Aim**

**To protect nature through addressing issues of population and consumption.**

## **Principles**

1. Population growth is a key *ethical* issue. NCC upholds ***the intrinsic value of nature***. The natural world has a right to exist *for itself*, not just as something to be used by humans. We have an ethical and ecological responsibility to achieve and maintain ecologically sustainable ecosystems for all species on this planet into the future.
2. Nature needs adequate natural areas to survive. The whole world ethically ought not to be *purely* for human use. Human population and consumption must thus be kept within limits that allow natural ecosystems to flourish into the future. This is the basis of true ecological sustainability, where humans and nature coexist sustainably.
3. The principle of *inter-generational equity* in Ecologically Sustainable Development requires that we *leave the Earth in as good or better condition than we found it*. To do this we need to reverse the current population and consumption trend, and reach an ecologically sustainable population as soon as possible in ways that are both humane and minimise environmental impact.
4. Humans are dependent on ecosystems to survive. Ecosystems provide our food, timber, fibre, medicines, and clean our air and water.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.garnautreview.org.au/chp7.htm>

5. There are *limits* to both population and consumption, beyond which the life support systems of the Earth degrade, ecosystems collapse, species extinction escalates and essential ecosystem services decline. These limits are being exceeded globally and within Australia. If continued, it will lead to major ecological collapse, with large social impacts. The solutions must involve *action to reverse both population and consumption*.
6. Population growth and high consumption levels ***exacerbate climate change***, one of the most serious issues humanity faces. Climate change alone could cause the extinction of 35% of the Earth's species (Thomas et al, 2004) and degrade ecosystems, food production, water supplies and flood coastal areas (Pittock, 2009)

## **Actions**

### **Actions for the NCC**

NCC should develop and keep updated an Action Plan that urges governments to address the environmental impacts of population and consumption.

### **Actions for the NSW State Government**

Successive NSW governments have failed to acknowledge or address increasing population and consumption as key environmental problems that require control. Strategies such as the Metropolitan Strategy Review (2011) contained no actions to control Sydney's population growth. Nor did it assess the stresses such population growth will put on natural areas in and around Sydney, or suggested ways to control these. NCC thus calls on the NSW Government to:

1. Immediately require its departments to consider NSW's increasing population and consumption as key problems the State faces in terms of environmental impact.
2. Develop and adopt a plan for NSW to reach an *ecologically sustainable population*. In particular Sydney needs to halt (then reverse) its population growth so as to stop increasing impact on surrounding natural areas.
3. Adopt resource and land development policies compatible with an ecologically sustainable and equitable society. The planning system needs to be changed to minimise and reverse the impact due to population growth and consumption (possibly through a SEPP).
4. Require State departments to develop strategies to educate the community on the need to lower population and consumption, and how this can be done.

### **Actions for the Commonwealth Government**

The Commonwealth Government has not accepted the need to acknowledge population and consumption as key issues for Australia's future. Historically, Commonwealth action has been aimed at *increasing* Australia's population. The 2011 'Issues Paper on a Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia' failed to

acknowledge that the Commonwealth Government *could* in fact reduce population growth, and instead focused on where population should be located. It also gave little discussion on the environmental impact of increasing population and high per capita consumption. The NCC accordingly urges the Commonwealth Government to:

- Reject those concepts which hold that increased population numbers and consumption are a requirement for economic growth and social wellbeing.
- Establish a statutory structure to move towards an **ecologically** sustainable population for Australia, one *smaller than our current population*. The Government needs to develop a strategy identifying the target, how to reach this target and by when. There should be regular independent reporting on progress towards reaching this target.
- Consider both population and per capita consumption in determining an ecologically sustainable population for Australia.
- Change policies that encourage population growth and increasing consumption. This includes **removal of the Baby Bonus**, and a rapid movement towards **ecologically sustainable migration** for Australia within a specified timeline.
- Promote a 'steady state economy' underpinned by **ecological** sustainability in the long-term. Measures such as a Green GNP should be applied rather than GDP. A steady state economy (with a stable sustainable population lower than our current population) would provide opportunities such as renewable energy development, thus leading to job creation.
- Establish an independent **Ecological Sustainability Commissioner**. The role of the ESC needs to be set in legislation, and would consider issues of population, consumerism and environmental (or ecological) economics.
- Move from being one of the most wasteful of societies to being a world leader in ecological sustainability. Australia should become a hub for sustainable and appropriate technology (e.g. renewable energy). The Federal government should adopt a program to reduce the per capita impact of Australians and conserve resources. Consumption that is wasteful and/or which undermines wellbeing must be minimised, for example by reducing wasteful packaging. Consumer goods must be designed to last and be 'cradle to cradle' reusable.
- Support improved education, including family planning education at home and abroad particularly supporting education and empowerment of women and low income households (SOW, 2010). This should be accompanied by literacy programs to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of what family planning means and what advisory services are available. Australia should contribute a greater percentage of GDP to Family Planning information and services *overseas*.
- Undertake education programs intended to increase public awareness on the need for an ecologically sustainable population and how to achieve this globally and locally. This would involve 'below replacement level' fertility and

a 'no growth' economy to meet the need to conserve our raw materials (and those of other countries). The school curriculum should be changed to incorporate this

### **Actions on the international level**

On the international level, there is need to control population growth through education (especially of women and low income households, SOW, 2010), through policy and through other incentives. There is also the need to control consumption. The rich nations consume more than their fair share of the Earth's resources, and need to reduce this consumption. At the same time, the developing world is increasing its consumption and needs to be supported through *appropriate* technology to minimise environmental impact. Australia should take a lead role in such international debates.

### **References**

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### **Glossary**

**Ecological footprint** measures how much land and water area a human population requires to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and other wastes.

**Ecological sustainability** is about taking action to solve the Earth's environmental crisis by monitoring, restoring and supporting the biodiversity and ecosystems (including ecosystem services) that support us. It means that we ensure we do not exceed the Earth's carrying capacity.

**Biocapacity** is the capacity of an area to provide resources and absorb wastes. When the area's ecological footprint exceeds its biocapacity, unsustainability occurs and the ecosystem is degraded.

**Ecosystem services** are the benefits humans (and all species) derive from nature, such as food, disease management, pollination, soil formation, water purification and regulation, climate regulation, spiritual fulfilment and aesthetic enjoyment.