

4 Blueprint for saving our

How should Australians deal with environmental degradation to ensure the ecologically sustainable management of the nation's natural heritage? If the House Environment and Heritage Committee inquiries into catchment management and public good conservation provide an indication, the response will be national, co-ordinated, highly innovative and involve all the community. In the Committee's view, it is the only way to deal with what the Committee has called "the most pressing contemporary public policy issue facing the community".

Recently the House Environment Committee tabled the first of two reports this year that examine Australia's environmental degradation crisis. The reports are the result of long-running and detailed inquiries, first into catchment management and then into the effect on landholders of public good conservation measures.

The first report, *Co-ordinating Catchment Management*, looked at the approach used for land and water resource management on a catchment basis. It made specific recommendations for delivering effective and environmentally-sound catchment management while providing for the transition to ecologically-sustainable but economic land use practices. In particular, it focused on the institutional and financial arrangements required for the ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems.

The report was bi-partisan and attained media attention because the Committee made two recommendations that have caused some public debate:

- that the Government establish a national catchment authority to carry out remedial work in response to environmental degradation; and
- that the Government examine the feasibility of a national environment levy to fund programs to repair environmental degradation.

The second report, to be tabled in September, will focus on public good conservation and what needs to be done to foster public good conservation measures.

Environmental degradation affects all Australians, rural and urban.

'Public good conservation' refers to conservation activities that a landholder may undertake which do not benefit the landholder alone or at all. Such conservation measures are contrasted with 'private' good conservation activities, where the beneficiary is largely or completely the landholder.



Members of the House Environment and Heritage Committee inspecting public good conservation activities at Wilabalangaloo Station near Renmark in South Australia. The station is operated by the National Trust South Australia.

Both inquiries have received considerable support from the community and reveal the deep concern and care that the community – whether rural or urban – has for their natural environment. The catchment management inquiry received over 150 submissions while the public good conservation inquiry has received over 250 submissions to date.

The submissions proved extremely valuable. Many submissions made similar suggestions for improving catchment management and better promoting public good conservation. These suggestions found their way into the Committee's deliberations and recommendations.

The submissions also demonstrate successful programs and highlight unsuccessful and problematic areas. Importantly, the submissions provide a direct line from practitioners to legislators.

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This matters because the practitioners can highlight places where policy may be driven more by theory than commonsense and practical knowledge. This in turn alerts legislators to the need to make the changes.

Over the past 18 months, the Environment Committee has held hearings in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Canberra. It has made site visits to regional areas of Australia. The site visits in particular provided an opportunity for communities to meet directly with Members and speak frankly with them on the most pressing public policy issue facing the nation: environmental degradation.

Traditional approaches to policy development need to be re-cast.

The Canberra hearings provided the Committee with an opportunity to question officers from Commonwealth departments, thereby ensuring some measure of accountability for the many programs that have an effect upon the environment. In particular, the Committee was able to put to departmental officers the problems faced by practitioners, brought to the Committee's attention in submissions and site inspections.

Two points have emerged clearly from the inquiries:

- environmental degradation affects all Australians, rural and urban; and
- much more needs to be done, especially in areas that, traditionally, are thought to have only a marginal effect upon the quality of the environment.

Traditional approaches to policy development, as well as the underlying theory, need to be re-cast and, in some cases, abandoned.

A case in point is the use of markets to provide for environmental outcomes. While these have been championed by a number of commentators and government departments, it is clear from the evidence received that such an approach will not alone provide the comprehensive and reliable coverage that the problem requires. Markets are but one part of the solution. The most feasible approach will involve a mixture of private activity, public investment, institutional development and individual as well as community effort.

The inquiries have highlighted the role of government in fostering more appropriate management of the environment, and the central role of the Commonwealth as the major contributor to environmental improvement. In the past the Commonwealth has been thought to have only a marginal role. However, it was clear to the Committee, from submissions it received and discussions it had with community members, that not only does the Commonwealth have a role, but that the community expects the Commonwealth to play a key role.

Such a role is in keeping, the Committee suggested, with the aims and purpose of Federation a century ago: to do things as a national community that individuals or individual States cannot properly do alone. Consequently, the Committee recommended that the Commonwealth adopt a lead role. This role for the Commonwealth has also been endorsed by the Prime Minister when launching the National Salinity Strategy.

The Committee's report on catchment management made a wide range of recommendations, from institutional reform and creating new institutions, to law reform, taxation reform and community capacity building. The recommendations contained in the report bear out the Committee's observation that the "ecologically sustainable use of Australia's catchment systems is the most pressing public policy issue facing the community". As a result, the Committee:

- found that environmental laws between all jurisdictions should be harmonised, coordinated and streamlined to produce outcomes that are environmentally and economically appropriate;

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Above and top of page: Banrock Station near Renmark in South Australia, operated by BRL Hardy, combines vineyards with a wetlands project.