

I've been asked to give a sustainability report card on how NSW is shaping up. Most of you here today probably expect me to say that things are in pretty shoddy shape because that's my job.

Well how about we start with the NSW Government's own reports into the state of the NSW environment where we can be assured of unbiased reporting? We'll get to what I think later.

The next state of the NSW environment report comes out at the end of this year. In all likelihood this year's State of the Environment Report will confirm declining trends across most environmental indicators. Will that be cause for concern? Most definitely. Will it be cause for alarm and action? Unfortunately most probably not.

The fact of the matter is we are living off a growing debt to future generations as we consume resources faster than they can be replenished and drive more and more species to extinction because of our lifestyles.

The last State of the Environment report was in 2006 and it contained statistics which highlighted that the residents of the greater Sydney metropolitan area have a slightly larger per capita footprint than the NSW average, which is, in turn, larger than the average Australian consumer.

Australian footprints are large by Western standards anyway and the NSW per capita footprint continues to grow over time.

The report states that "continued growth, as shown in the NSW figures, is not sustainable over an extended period." We'll come back to that.

A whopping 87% of the ecological footprint is due to consumption of general goods and services while energy, transport, water and waste together make 13%. The report: "General household consumption is a significant pressure driving resource depletion and general environmental deterioration without any technological change. The NSW per capita footprint is expected to continue to grow for as long as the economy grows and consumption patterns remain substantially unchanged."

Is this sustainable? Of course not. Sustainable development? Wrong again. And if that's our aim there must be a time, and soon, that we challenge consumption patterns head on, because we simply cannot continue depleting resources, buying things and discarding things the way we are doing without expecting our children to pay heavily for the price.

And if we decide this is ok, we'd better stop using the term 'sustainable development'.

The largest single component of our footprint is retail trade, which includes general distribution, packing, transport and storage. The next largest is services provided by restaurants and clubs, followed by consumption of meat, meat products and clothing. The top five components all strongly reflect consumption and lifestyle choices.

Further to lifestyles, the number of households are increasing, our houses are getting bigger, while the average household size is falling. The number of air conditioners and dishwashers are increasing.

Many pressures on the natural environment are intensifying not abating – particular pressures are coastal and urban development and expansion of cropping.

One-third of the world's extinct mammals since 1600 AD are Australian.

Between December 2002 and April 2006, the number of endangered ecological communities has increased by more than 22%.

Of the 89 species of forest mammals in NSW, eight are presumed extinct within the State and 40 are currently threatened. However, 34 of the 41 non-threatened species are also in decline. It is expected that most forest mammals of NSW will continue to decline as the human population expands and demand for prime land increases.

Now all of those facts were taken from the NSW 2006 State of the Environment Report – we haven't even started with what an environmentalist thinks about all this. Let's start.

Any assessment of our environmental performance must include a snapshot of what is happening globally – partly of course because of the interconnectedness of the air, oceans, freshwater and soil and also because it brings home how important it is that we conserve what we are so lucky to still have.

WWF's 2008 Living Planet report stated that global biodiversity has declined by 30 per cent in the past 35 years. Humanity's demand on the planet has more than doubled over the past 45 years, with many countries now only able to meet their needs by importing resources from other nations.

Most of the world's commercial marine fisheries are fully exploited or over-exploited while marine protected areas cover less than 1% of the world's oceans.

The sustainable harvest levels of many of NSW's fisheries aren't assessed and too many species are being fished at unsustainable levels. The out of sight out of mind mentality continues almost unchecked in much of the world's oceans, with NSW no exception as activities such as ocean trawling continues to destroy marine ecosystems and bycatch from netting activities is still unacceptably high.

There are a few worthy achievements of the NSW Government over the last few years such as its Great Eastern Ranges project, however unfortunately many deservedly fail sustainable development 101.

We continue to clear endangered ecological communities. Despite them being endangered. Did you know that for every 100 hectares of southern woodland cleared, an estimated 1000–2000 birds can die?

The NSW Government is pressing ahead with its decision to dam the Williams River in the Hunter Valley – an insane proposal in this day of age when the environmental consequences of dams are well-known. The dam, which will be around the size of Sydney Harbour, will flood 2,500 ha of prime agricultural land and mean the local populations of very active and healthy platypus and wild bass will most likely become extinct – killed by the flooding no doubt – which will also displace 90 farming families.

This dam has not only been put *before* demand management solutions but it is being used as a complete *substitute* for them with IPART stating recently it 'did not consider there is merit in expanding their demand management programs... because of the dam'.

Another report card 'fail' is the state government's continued approval of longwall mining licences for coal despite the Department of Environment and Climate Change listing the 'Alteration of Habitat as a result of longwall mining as a key threatening process'. From the

Department's website: Subsidence due to longwall mining can cause deformation of ground surfaces as well as cracking of valley floors and creeklines. This can affect natural water flow regimes and water quality, depending on such factors as the width of the crack, riverbed steepness, the riverbed material and the presence of organic matter. Subsidence can also destabilise cliff faces *and cause swamps, water courses and aquifers to drain away.*

A report by the Total Environment Centre describes longwall mining as having the following impacts: *"Widespread cracking and draining of river and creek beds and underground aquifers, cliff falls, the draining of rare swamps, fish kills, methane gas bubbling to the surface, iron oxide pollution and the release of wastewater into river systems."*

A very significant number of operations take place in the Southern Coalfields in Sydney's water supply catchment. BHP Billiton's Carooona project in the Gunnedah Basin, threatens multiple levels of aquifers under some of Australia's richest agricultural land.

The NSW Minister for Mineral Resources, Ian MacDonald (who's also the Minister for Primary Industries – a conflict of interest in many cases), strongly supports the Carooona longwall mining project however, telling parliament it is "an exciting prospect." Tensions between departments and ministers is made clear by a leaked report from the NSW Dept of Environment & Climate Change which stated that under the current approval regime for mines "... the real economic costs of mining impacts, particularly environmental impacts, are not adequately considered."

Surely if there is ever a time to draw a line in the sand when it comes to the environmental devastation wreaked by mining it is when it causes water courses or aquifers to drain away.

Another area of failure is the continued logging of NSW's native forests for low-value products such as woodchips and firewood. A recent report by the NSW Auditor General, has found that logging practices in northern NSW native forests are unsustainable and unprofitable. "The native forests managed by Forests NSW on the North Coast are being cut faster than they are growing back" the report says. The report also revealed that native forest operations in NSW ran at a loss of more than \$14 million in the 2007-08 financial year.

In the South East of the State, NSW's native natural forests, as opposed to native plantation forest, are still being logged and woodchipped and exported to Japan to be processed into paper. Again this operation is unsustainable and unprofitable, propped up by subsidies and a lot of pressure from industry.

When will our priorities shift? What will it take? Will it get to the point where it is too late to bother? Some commentators are beginning to say that about stabilising the climate – that's it's almost becoming too late – such a shame really because governments and big industry have known about climate change for a few decades now. As they have about threatened species decline, fish stock depletion and unsustainable water use.

When launching the 2003 State of the Environment Report, the then NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus said, "Continuing the current path of resource use will have serious environmental and economic consequences for NSW. There is unsustainable use of ground and surface water, energy, soils, native vegetation and fish... As a society, we need to face up to the reality that our environment and its resources are finite".

So, here we are six years and a few environment ministers later - has the call been heeded? Are we facing up to the fact that our resources are finite?

I don't think so.

The NSW Government is digging up resources like there's no tomorrow – well maybe there's something in that at the rate they're digging up coal. In the past decade, NSW coal exports have increased by 38%. A third coal export terminal on Kooragang Island that will load and additional 66 million tonnes of coal per year for export expansion of the existing Kooragang coal terminal to increase its capacity by 43 million tonnes.

You'll note I haven't talked about climate change at all. I didn't think I needed to now everything will be taken care of by the federal government's carbon pollution reduction scheme. You see, under the CPRS, NSW won't have to worry about its emissions at all because every single tonne of greenhouse gases we all need to "reduce" can be offset by purchasing permits to pollute internationally. As the system currently stands, we won't have to reduce our emissions domestically at all if it all becomes too hard. What an amazing piece of policy work that is.

Fortunately, there is evidence that some bodies working on climate change and sustainability are grasping the nettle a little more tightly at the international level.

A recent report by the Sustainable Development Commission titled 'Redefining Prosperity' goes to the heart of the problem:

*"Today we find ourselves faced with the imminent end of the era of cheap oil, the prospect (beyond the recent bubble) of steadily rising commodity prices, the degradation of forests, lakes and soils, conflicts over land use, water quality, fishing rights and the momentous challenge of stabilising concentrations of carbon in the global atmosphere... In these circumstances, a return to business as usual is no longer an option."*

The report ponders a world where nine billion people – the predicted population by 2050, we're currently at 6.6 billion – all aspire to the level of affluence we currently enjoy in the OECD nations. The world economy will need to be 15 times the size it is now by 2050. The report asks – what does such an economy look like? What does it run on?

Essentially the report questions whether ever-rising incomes for the already-rich are appropriate goals for policy in a world that will be increasingly constrained by an ecological crisis already upon us. It's challenging stuff.

At this point it might be worth recalling the definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland Report Our Common Future in 1987:

*'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'*

On the Federal Department of Environment's website it states: "All our activities contribute in some way to sustainable development". Really? That's a huge call.

The three principles necessary to understanding sustainable development are intergenerational equity, the precautionary approach and biodiversity conservation. A sustainable development approach to water supply for the Hunter for example would introduce a suite of demand management measures, treating water as the scarce resource it is and conserving a healthy river for local communities, fauna and future generations to enjoy. A dam would not be on the table.

I seem to sign off every week on countless submissions to development applications, major project proposals, government policy reviews (whether it be the Federal Government's carbon

pollution reduction scheme, the NSW government's policy on wetlands, or its Biodiversity Strategy) or Parliamentary Inquiries, each time urging decision makers to take ESD principles into consideration. And it seems like each week we hear about decisions that are made which clear native vegetation and wetlands for housing and justify another offset as threatened species habitat. There are some rejections for some of the more outlandish proposals, but more often than not developers are getting their way in NSW. We, and our coastline, are open for business.

How many State of the Environment Reports will it take before we start acting to ensure healthy ecosystems, fresh water, clean air and a safe climate are guaranteed for future generations? Why are we commissioning State of the Environment Reports if this isn't what we want to do? From where I sit it appears that governments have an unhealthy obsession with monitoring environmental decline.

For two days you'll be hearing about sustainable development – about intergenerational equity, the precautionary approach and biodiversity conservation. I'll make the bold assumption that you won't be despite the title of the conference. You'll be hearing about approaches that are slight improvements on business as usual. However given the looming ecological crises that are upon us I would urge we go much further than this.

It's time for all levels of government and responsible business leaders to tackle the growth and consumption issue head on. Getting sustainable development truly sustainable is the challenge of our lifetimes.

Let's return to that statement in the 2006 NSW State of the Environment Report: "continued growth is not sustainable over an extended period." When does the stop or slow button get pushed? Because there's no doubt that one day it will have to and the sooner it does, the less severely it will need to be pushed.

I wonder what the 2009 NSW State of the Environment Report foreword will say. You can only hope it reads something like: "We've had countless sleepless nights and lost most of our friends from the big end of town as a result of a decision to go where no government has gone before - to prioritise outcomes in 2050 over those in 2011. The NSW Government believes we all have a moral obligation to future generations to take stock of what we have and preserve and cherish what's left. We have decided we will risk just a little today to give our children a future."

Political suicide? Perhaps. Sustainable development? Finally.