

AESP

Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Inc.

submission dated

2 April 1999

to the

Productivity Commission

in connection with the Productivity Commission's inquiry into

*Implementation of
Ecologically Sustainable Development
by
Commonwealth Departments and Agencies*

Further information

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Glossary and Abbreviations

AESP	Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Inc.
biodiversity and such	biological diversity. The diversity of life forms, including of species, of ecosystems, and of the genes within species and within ecosystems. Life forms include all living things - not just plants and animals visible to the naked eye, but microscopic organisms as algae, fungi, protozoa, bacteria and viruses.
Commission	Productivity Commission
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
ESD	Ecologically Sustainable Development
total population	the total number of all persons in Australian territory at any given moment, regardless of their length of stay. Comprises permanent resident population, long-term resident population, and short-stay visitor population, but excludes Australians who are out of the country at that moment ('long-term' means for 12 months or more but not permanently; 'short-term' means for less than 12 months).

Introduction

This second submission is made in response to the **Draft Report** dated February 1999 produced by the Productivity Commission ('the Commission') in relation to its inquiry into Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development ('ESD') by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies.

This submission by Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Inc. ('AESP') is made by AESP's National Office.

AESP's first submission was lodged on 13 November 1998, but was not received by the Commission and was therefore re-lodged on 19 March 1999.

This second submission comments on the following aspects of the Draft Report –

- its Findings
 - its Draft Recommendations
 - matters on which the Commission specifically seeks participants' views
- and it also highlights other issues raised – or not raised – by the Draft Report.

Findings

AESP notes and in general endorses the following Findings, which are set out in the Draft Report at the following page numbers. (Findings upon which AESP does not wish to comment are not listed.)

<i>Finding Number</i>	<i>Draft Report page number</i>
6.1	xxvi
6.2	xxvii
7.1	xxvii, 106

Draft Recommendations

AESP makes the following comments on selected Draft Recommendations, which are set out in the Draft Report at the following page numbers. (Draft Recommendations upon which AESP does not wish to comment are not listed.)

<i>Draft</i>	<i>Draft Report</i>	<i>AESP comment</i>
Recomm'n page number		

6.1	xxvi	Endorse
7.1	xxviii, 108	Endorse
7.2	xxviii, 108	Endorse
7.3	xxix, 119	Endorse. Strongly endorse re performance indicators.
7.4	xxix, 120	Endorse
7.5	xxxi, 125	Endorse concept, but strongly oppose limiting to environment and natural resource policies, since that would ignore important underlying causes such as population growth driven by programs of DIMA and others. For same reason, strongly oppose giving initial priority to National Heritage Trust expenditure.

Matters on which participants' views sought

AESP offers the following views on selected matters on which the Draft Report seeks participants' views. (Matters on which AESP does not wish to comment are not listed.)

Performance measurement (Draft Report page xxxi, 126)

AESP strongly supports the need for performance measurement, and believes that it should be ongoing rather than one off.

On the question of priority areas for review, AESP strongly recommends that –

- an independent body of experts – such as the State of the Environment Advisory Council, chaired by Professor Ian Lowe, which oversaw the preparation of *Australia: State of the Environment 1996*, or the National Biodiversity Council, currently chaired by Professor Harry Recher – be commissioned to assign priority areas. Indeed, AESP suggests that the Commission seek the views of both Professor Lowe and Professor Recher on how that independent body of experts should be selected, and whether the two bodies just mentioned might – together – form a team to take on that task.
- the criterion upon which priority areas for review are selected must be the extent to which those areas have the capacity to enhance or impede achievement of ESD for Australia. That selection must not be made on the basis of government expenditure, since doing so would mask and skew the real underlying causes. For example, as AESP's first submission pointed out, all other factors being equal, DIMA's policies and programs have the power to influence the total environmental impact of Australia's population on Australian ecosystems over the next 50 years by **25 per cent either way** – a massive underlying cause factor, yet one that would be masked if expenditure were the prioritisation tool.

Voluntary code of conduct, independent Commission, and duty of care (Draft Report page xxxii, 130-137)

AESP opposes a voluntary code of conduct – ESD is too important to leave to voluntary compliance. Likewise the ‘duty of care’ concept seems too vague to give any guarantee of compliance, unless an independent Commission were to enforce it.

The idea of an independent Commission for ESD has merit, because it would take ESD compliance enforcement out of the hands of the Government. However such a Commission would need to be made up of truly independent experts in ESD – see, for instance AESP’s suggestion above (at page 2 of this submission) for the composition of such an expert body.

One of AESP’s strongest concerns is that DIMA has become an advocate of continued high immigration for reasons partly to do with successive Governments’ political agendas and partly to do with DIMA’s tendency to become a captive of the groups which support high immigration, which it to some extent sees as its ‘clients’.

This has, in AESP’s view, made DIMA incapable of objectively assessing its role against ESD outcomes, and has led to DIMA being a defender of its present programs at all costs.

Furthermore, the relative bargaining power - in Cabinet and elsewhere - of the DIMA portfolio versus the Environment and Heritage portfolio will always mean that the ability of the latter to discipline or influence the former will be extremely limited.

In other words, DIMA is largely immune to ESD critique within Government. It is therefore essential that an independent body outside Government have a role in keeping DIMA – and other departments and agencies prone to ‘capture’ by their ‘client industries’ – honest.

Future directions for ESD (Draft Report page xxxiii, 138 - 146)

AESP strongly recommends that the whole question of Australia’s population size – meaning the size of not only our permanent resident population, but also our long-term resident and short-term visitor population – become a new strategic direction for ESD canvass.

A second new strategic direction should be the size of the per capita ecological impact of Australia’s population.

Taken together, those two factors – population size, and per capita ecological impact – are the key determinants of ESD outcomes. Both must be examined, and both must be minimised, in order to maximise the chance of Australia achieving ESD.

All departments and agencies whose actions have a significant effect on the size of either should be examined, and a program drawn up to identify what changes to what policies and programs in which departments and agencies would deliver the largest and fastest dividends for ESD attainment.

DIMA’s role in influencing the size of Australia’s population will be a key factor here, but so will the role of the Department of Health on the cost and availability of contraceptives to minimise unintended pregnancies, and thus natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) in Australia.

That examination task must involve an independent expert advisory group, to avoid the 'capture' problem mentioned earlier.

Other comments

The Draft Report, while highly commendable in many respects, does not, in AESP's view, tease out fully many of the crucial underlying factors which act as substantial obstacles to Australia's achievement of ESD.

Such factors include –

- population growth
- growth in per capita economic activity and per capita resource consumption
- the choices Australia faces about the source of its economic activity. Specifically, how Australia can deliberately steer future economic activity away from types which drive biodiversity loss - such as those which involve clearance of remnant native vegetation, or extraction or diversion of water from riverine ecosystems – and towards those whose effect is more benign.

Many departments and agencies' policies and programs impact dramatically on such factors, in ways which they presently do not recognise and they therefore do not see as ESD issues.

Progress towards ESD depends on these underlying causal nexes being teased out and spotlighted. Only an independent expert commission of Australia's top ESD professionals is capable of that task, because it will involve shaking down long-held beliefs in Australia about what constitutes 'progress'.

We urge the Productivity Commission not to underestimate the resistance to such notions that will be encountered within Government, and to therefore make recommendations that will succeed despite that resistance.