Focus

THOUGHTS ON A BROADER NATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA

With the dust settled on the national election, and more recently the 2020 summit, *Ecos* asked five commentators for their top priorities in terms of a national sustainability agenda.

Melbourne. Energy, transport, water and linked climate change issues need to be treated in an integrated way, rather than as separate problems. Matej Pribelsky, iStockphoto

Energy, transport in cities, water and addressing climate change were some of the priorities that emerged and, repeatedly, the need to treat these issues in an integrated way rather than as separate problems.

Environmental consultant, Andrew Campbell, believes Australia must have an overarching strategy to address food, water and energy security during the next 50 years.

'On the one hand biofuels (which use lots of water) are being investigated as an alternative source of energy, while on the other, energy-hungry desalination plants are being constructed to supply water.

'The rapid convergence of food, energy and water security issues against the backdrop of climate change means that joined-up-government has to become much more than just a slogan,' he says.

Alan Pears, Adjunct Professor at RMIT University and environmental consultant, believes a restructure of how we do R&D in energy, towards a more integrated service-based model, is required.

'We need to develop policy that solves multiple problems rather than having one policy to deal with climate change, such as emissions trading, then another policy to deal with peak electricity supply by putting in smart meters and power stations, and yet another to address equity.'

'If we get the buildings, appliances, cars and equipment right, the amounts of energy we will need, whatever the source, will be much smaller.'

Pears also calls for a stronger approach to energy efficiency where energy standards and labelling would become mandatory in the same way that safety standards are. These would be complemented by incentives to drive innovation and assistance for disadvantaged groups.

However, Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) Senior Policy Officer, Tony Westmore, says if mandatory energy performance standards are introduced and appliances that don't meet them are precluded from sale, support needs to be given to low income households to be able to afford appliances, such as energy efficient heaters, which often come at a much higher cost.

'Rather than setting aside $300 million for households with incomes up to $250 000 to take loans to install solar panels [in the recent Budget], the government should make money available to low income households in the form of low interest or no interest loans to enable them to buy energy efficient appliances,' says Westmore.

ACOSS is working with the Australian Conservation Foundation and Choice on strategies to prepare households for dealing with impacts of climate change and reducing energy and water consumption.

Westmore says Australia has at most two years to begin climate proofing to offset the potentially devastating effects on low income households of climate change and our responses to it.

'Anything we can do between now and the introduction of an emissions trading scheme to reduce consumption is going to be good for low income households and the environment,' he says.

This could include significant funds for insulation in public housing, replacing hot water systems and installing solar panels where appropriate.

'A carbon price is going to affect a range of goods and services and there needs to be a safety net in place once an emissions trading scheme kicks off so that low income households are not disadvantaged,' Westmore says.

Alan Pears points out that 'Investment in aggressive energy efficiency measures can also reduce our dependence on energy.'

'Rather than always trying to increase the supply of energy, we need to redesign systems to make them more resilient,' he argues.

'If we get the buildings, appliances, cars and equipment right, the amounts of energy we will need, whatever the source, will be much smaller.'

'I'm quite concerned if people keep focusing on just investing in supply solutions. The biggest mistake we are making is focusing on trying to find more oil. The best way to reduce our deficit and achieve the other objectives is to create a situation where Australians can live better lives while needing to use cars less,' says Pears.

He believes the government should be promoting a different model of transport and planning which includes much more fuel efficient cars, low speed electric vehicles and more rational delivery of services.

Research Director for CSIRO Social and Economic Integration, Dr Steve Hatfield-Dodds, agrees that addressing the transport issue in cities is a high priority which requires moving away from our dependence on private cars.

'We are going to need more public transport and something like road user charges or congestion fees,' he argues. 'Private vehicles are an essential part of the overall transport system, but we can reduce travel times to and from work by reducing car use and congestion in peak periods.

'We need to think carefully about vehicle standards and positive incentives that encourage people to go for fuel efficient cars rather than just leaving it to expectations about petrol prices to drive the whole thing. We can have smarter policy packages than that.'

Andrew Campbell believes an important priority and one that can be achieved relatively easily is to improve, what he terms, the 'environmental literacy' of the whole population – helping people to read, understand and act on changes and trends in the world around them.

He points to successful community-based monitoring programs such as Waterwatch and Frogwatch but says only a very small proportion of people are involved in such programs.

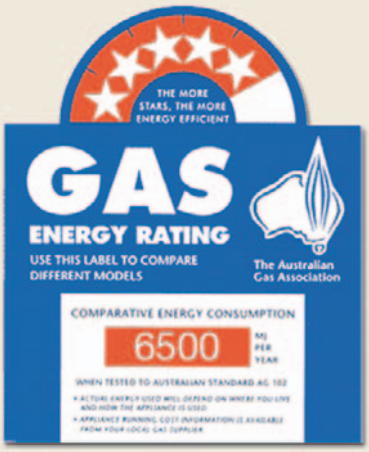
'We need to make more visible what is currently invisible to most people and we need to make it measurable and transparent. We can easily do it simply by smarter use of resources already allocated and a change in the way we fund science and education.'

Campbell's proposal would involve a schools-based environmental education initiative linked to a national land literacy initiative which draws together and supports all the community-based voluntary 'watch' programs (Waterwatch, Frogwatch, Saltwatch etc.). Another element would be analytical tools, such as carbon footprinting, lifecycle analyses and energy efficiency measures that would help schools and groups develop their own 'sustainability dashboards'.

'We need to find ways of helping people come to grips with the changes happening around them in their immediate environment. We need to get people directly involved and a good place to start is schools. A lot of sustainability resource material already exists but without changes to core curricula there is little incentive for schools to use it.'

Campbell believes that large numbers of the population could be involved in measuring conditions and trends in their local environment. Within an appropriate

Alan Pears says mandatory energy efficiency standards and labelling on all electrical appliances would immediately reduce emissions. Kostiantyn Postumitenko, iStockphoto



Customers respond well to efficiency labelling schemes.

Focus

Bushwalkers scaling Mt Maroon in Queensland. Andrew Campbell believes in 'citizen science' involvement and more practical environmental education. iStockphoto

framework, this 'citizen science' would complement formal monitoring programs in a single national system to track the condition of natural resources such as biodiversity, soil and water during a period of rapid environmental change.

After monitoring comes protecting the land, and Hatfield-Dodds believes an ambitious land stewardship program could have an enormous impact.

'For spending in the order of $1 billion per year we could triple the land under active protection – through stewardship payments to farmers and indigenous landholders,' he says.

'With a combination of well-targeted government funding and sensible programs that harness carbon sinks, we could do enormous amounts to enhance our ecosystems and protect our natural resource base.'

Over the last decade the states and Commonwealth have made gradual progress on the notions of integrated landscape and natural resource management, but issues of soil, salinity, water quality and biodiversity are still not properly managed as components of an interconnected system.

Hatfield-Dodds believes a key issue to be addressed is the role of NRM regional bodies.

'One function they could have is to bring together the information required for planning, priority setting and landscape use. In my view that is the most important contribution they can make – integrating the knowledge base at a regional scale so you can identify compatible use and set conservation priorities.

'It is not widely recognised that in large areas of Australia we have not identified land use options that are commercially viable and environmentally sustainable. We still have agricultural practices that are mining the soil but we don't have the information base to be able to say what use is appropriate for a specific area. This assessment needs to be tailored to local conditions and ecosystems.'

Hatfield-Dodds believes that for the first time in Australia's history we do have the capacity to identify sustainable land use and implement it on the ground over a fairly short timeframe.

'We can quite quickly get to the point where we are not making any of the problems worse – except climate change,' he says.

However, he warns that in the area of water reform, the timeframe needs to be advanced.

'If we stick with a water reform agenda that is only fully implemented in 2019 we risk enormous damage occurring before then. My personal view is that we should be more ambitious and that the money already on the table could achieve this without imposing long-term hardship on current water users. Indeed, implementing inadequate reform and then having to start over is unlikely to be in the long-term interest of water users.'

Awarded rural writer for *The Australian*, Asa Wahlquist, is also particularly concerned about the issue of water, both urban and environmental.

To tackle the water supply problem facing Australian cities, she firmly believes in smaller distributed approaches, such as rainwater tanks, rather than the big business, or what she terms 'big water', options.

'We need to look at local solutions in terms of capturing storm water and also for using wastewater. There's an abundance of rain falling on most of our cities. Equally in most cities there is a lot of wastewater that in the past has just been regarded as something to be pumped out.'

In rural Australia, she says it is important that the government is reviewing its drought policy, because drought planning, to a large extent, is based on past patterns of relatively abundant rainfall.

'If we are looking at a [permanently] changed pattern of rainfall rather than a drought, we need to deal with it differently.'

Wahlquist also sees the need to support a rebalancing of the importance of rural Australia as a supplier of food to the rest of the world.

'Australian farmers have been increasing their productivity at a rate generally above the rest of the community and that has enabled them to get yields in the dry years that their fathers and grandfathers never got. And that's because of things such as minimum till, better understanding of the weather and improved plant breeding.

'Supply of food has an importance it didn't have several years ago. Australian farmers have always produced an oversupply and food has traditionally been incredibly cheap – too cheap.

'One of the good things is at least the price of food is rising which is enormously important to farmers if they are going to farm sustainably. You do need to earn good money if you are going to invest in the latest technology and be engaged in all the land care things that good farmers need to be engaged in.'

● **Robin Taylor**

More information:
Sustainable Population Australia, www.population.org.au

National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, http://nceph.anu.edu.au

National Centre for Social Applications of Geographic Information Systems, www.gisca.adelaide.edu.au