



NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION OF THE ACT INC.

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**Subject: Refinement of the expanded role of the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment – comments by National parks Association of the ACT**

The role of the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment is, according to the OCSE website to: advocate, assess progress towards and report on sustainability and environmental issues in the ACT. OCSE it is claimed is an independent body yet it conducts investigations as directed by the Minister or initiated by the Commissioner and also investigates *complaints* regarding the management of the environment by the Territory.

For a start the terms of reference should be widened, the list of key stakeholders should include community organisations with a focus on the ACT environment such as the NPA ACT and Conservation Council of the ACT, to name but two. They should have a direct input into the scope of investigations undertaken by OCSE. Investigating *complaints* is a very negative attitude, far better to investigate better ways of improving ecologically sustainable outcomes. These organisations will help with this change of attitude.

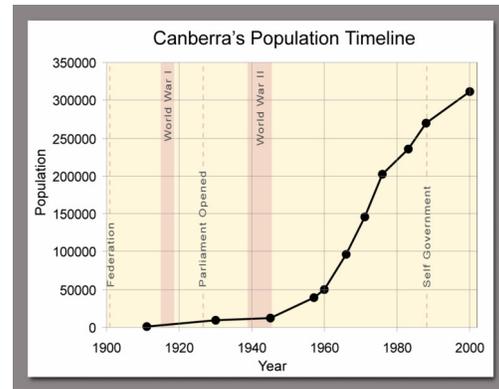
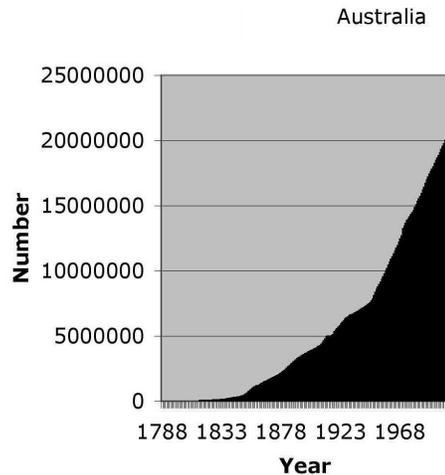
Secondly, independence should mean what it says, this would be better achieved by OCSE reporting to the ACT parliament rather than a government minister, especially under a minority government.

Thirdly it would be well to expand your limited 21 year old definition of what sustainability means, the world has moved on. The consultation paper defines it as:

*Sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

This is extremely human-centric. A recent Australian publication edited by Yencken and Wilkinson, 2001 has a much better, more universal definition of sustainability incorporating ecological, social, economic and cultural sustainability. We urge you to change to this wider outlook from which will flow a number of very different actions.

For a start, there is the thorny issue of human population growth, or rather, a population ceiling. We need to stem the accelerating rate of environmental degradation the main driver for which is population growth. In just 200 years, 20 mammals, 20 bird species and innumerable invertebrates have been driven to extinction in Australia, the rate far exceeding the natural extinction events that saw off the dinosaurs for example. Two ecological communities and 15 species are endangered in the ACT alone, principally due to habitat loss for urban expansion. The Commission should as a matter of utmost urgency promote a meaningful discourse in the ACT and ACT government of a desirable upper bound to our ultimate population and urban growth. Perhaps OCSE could run a series of public conventions. That there should be an upper bound seems beyond question (see figures below of Australia's and Canberra's population plotted against time, data from ABS). Could we really accommodate ten million people, or even one million people sustainably in the ACT? We think the figure is bound to be well below that number and the 500 000 currently bandied around.



So what does a sustainable population mean for the ACT? Should the ACT really be able to provide all of its food, water and energy needs from within the ACT? We certainly don't now! But isn't that a desirable goal and the goal envisioned by even the current OCSE definition?

Of the rivers flowing through or within the ACT, only the Naas and Gudgenby River systems are not currently dammed to provide water for human consumption or for visual stimulation (the Molonglo River). None of the existing dams has provision for aquatic fauna to bypass the barrier, no thought of ecological sustainability has gone into their design and construction, just human need and dare we say greed. But even if all the available water, allowing environmental flows, were to be bypassed to our homes and gardens we would have to dramatically alter our current lifestyles to sustain a larger population than we have at present given the experience of recent drought-prone summers. Water restrictions will of necessity become the norm, not just in times of drought let alone factoring in a drier future as a result of global warming.

Obviously OCSE should be leading the future energy directions discussion in the ACT, compulsory solar water heaters in all existing and future ACT homes and offices, hundred-megawatt-scale solar electricity generation in addition to photovoltaic systems for each and every home and office. These steps are just the beginning over and above the basics such as mandating for roof and floor insulation, double glazing or shutters, etc.

These are just some of the obvious ways OCSE should be influencing government and public thinking which it isn't yet. Public conventions to educate and excite the public about each individual's contribution to a future sustainable ACT tapping the expertise of the best educated population in Australia is surely the way forward. Surely the way forward for OCSE.

We will be happy to join your reference group with ideas and expertise and a vision for a truly sustainable future ACT.

Yours sincerely

Kevin McCue

For Christine Goonrey  
President NPA ACT

#### Reference

Yencken, D., and Wilkinson, D., 2001. *Resetting the Compass, Australia's Journey Towards Sustainability*. CSIRO Publishing.