

epa

northern territory

Background Paper

Establishing Principles of
Ecologically Sustainable Development
for the Northern Territory

August 2008



Northern Territory Government

Introduction

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is responsible for giving advice and making recommendations to the Territory, businesses and the community about ecologically sustainable development.

The *Environment Protection Authority Act* does not define ecologically sustainable development (ESD) and while there are many definitions of what it means, ESD remains a slippery concept.

We often discuss our society's future (especially our use of resources) in the language of sustainability – what does this mean in practice and how do we know if we are achieving sustainable development?

For example, the Northern Territory is blessed with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The beauty of its unique and unspoilt natural environment attracts visitors from all over the world, and it has a growing and developing economy (with much of its industry being dependent upon our natural resources). How do we encourage our thriving economy to continue for the long-term:

- make sure that all Territorians benefit from our growing economy?
- protect our environment and ensuring important ecological processes are maintained?
- ensure all future generations of Territorians have access to our resources and our beautiful environment?

This document is the EPA's first step to move the Northern Territory towards a sustainable future by developing principles that allow us to put the ideal of ecologically sustainable development into practice.

Act now to protect our future.

What's the point of this project?

The aim of this project is to define a set of overarching principles for achieving ecologically sustainable development for the Northern Territory. It has the purpose of defining ecologically sustainable development with application to the Northern Territory that acknowledges the Territory's particular socioeconomic and biophysical features. It is a step towards ensuring that the theory of ecologically sustainable development is put into practice.

The EPA decided to make this project its priority in order to minimise the ambiguity about ESD and accordingly minimise inaction within the Northern Territory in working towards achieving the goals of ESD.

The project is important because it will promote an integrated and consistent approach – everyone will work towards the same set of accepted and understood objectives.

From the EPA perspective, it will also guide future legislative/policy review and development on matters of natural resource management, environment protection and resource development.

What do we mean by Ecologically Sustainable Development?

There are many definitions of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD).

One of the first and most cited definitions of sustainability is the one created by the World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 report *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Commission), led by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. The Commission defined sustainable development as

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

Within Australia, the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* states ESD is:

using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased

development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends.

The Northern Territory's *Waste Management and Pollution Control Act* states ESD:

means development that improves the total quality of life both in the present and in the future in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends

In June 2007, the Interim EPA Board presented its report to the Northern Territory Government *Towards an Environment Protection Authority for the Northern Territory*, which contained its recommendations for establishing an EPA in the Northern Territory. This document recommended that the Northern Territory EPA have responsibility for advising Government on matters of ecologically sustainable development. While the Interim Board did not include a definition of ESD, it did state that a principle/aim or objective of the EPA was to:

Foster the principles of ecologically sustainable development, that is,

- *protection of biological diversity and maintaining the integrity of essential ecological processes and life-support systems*
- *the precautionary principle*
- *inter and intra generational equity*
- *improved valuation pricing and incentive mechanisms that reflect 'true cost economics' (such as 'polluter pays')*

What is the common understanding of Ecologically Sustainable Development?

Ecologically sustainable development is referred to in different ways. Some definitions just refer to 'sustainable development' or 'sustainability' and others refer to 'environmental sustainability'.

The Brundtland Report, which refers to 'sustainable development', acted as a catalyst for a number of international developments on environment and development issues, including, within Australia, the development of the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD). Accordingly the NSESD report is based on the concepts set out in the Brundtland Report. However, it refers to this concept as *ecologically* sustainable development.

Regardless of the label used, the intent and concept are based on the same features – a long-term integrated or holistic approach to protecting the environment; building both environmental and social as well as economic considerations into decision-making; and taking into account the rights of future generations to raw materials and vital ecosystem services.

Ecologically sustainable development does not focus solely on environmental protection. The United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers to the "interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection.

The following link provides an illustration of this concept.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Sustainable_development.svg

The following are common, understood principles behind ecologically sustainable development:

- Integration — the effective integration of environmental, social and economic considerations in decision making.
- Community involvement — recognition that sustainability cannot be achieved, nor significant progress made toward it, without the support and involvement of the whole community.
- Precautionary behaviour — where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.
- Equity within and between generations — fairness and equal access to opportunities both in our lifetimes, as well as for future generations.
- Continual improvement — the declining environmental situation means there is an imperative to take immediate action to become more sustainable and to make continual improvement.
- Ecological integrity — to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems.
- Improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms — namely, that environmental factors should be included in the valuation of assets and services.

These principles aim to prevent and reverse adverse impacts of economic and social activities on the ecosystem, while continuing to allow the sustainable, equitable development of societies.

Where to from here?

The EPA will be developing a set of overarching principles for achieving ecologically sustainable development within the Northern Territory. It is a step towards ensuring that the theory of ecologically sustainable development is understood by all Territorians and is put into practice.

Before the EPA commences this project it wants to hear from you.

- Thinking about the Northern Territory and those things about it that are important to you – what do you want the EPA to consider when developing the principles of ecologically sustainable development for the Northern Territory?
- What do you think ecologically sustainable development means?
- We often talk about the “Unique Territory Lifestyle” – what is it that makes it unique and what do we need to do to help protect it?
- How is the Northern Territory different to other parts of the country? Does this difference mean that the Northern Territory should do things differently to the rest of the country? Should the difference be reflected in the principles of ecologically sustainable development?

Submissions

The EPA wants to hear your views, concerns and ideas towards the creation of Ecologically Sustainability Principles for the Northern Territory. The intent of this Background Paper is to assist you with your response.

Written submissions can be completed online at www.epa.nt.gov.au or sent to:

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