



CLIMATE^{AND}
HEALTH
ALLIANCE

Submission to Australian Government
Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities in
response to:
***A sustainable population strategy for
Australia: Issues Paper***

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Introduction

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) is a national alliance of organisations and people in the health sector who wish to see the threat to human health from climate change and ecological degradation addressed through prompt and effective policy action.

The establishment of CAHA in August 2010 was prompted by rising concern in the health sector of the implications of unmitigated climate change and environmental pressures on human health.

The membership of the Climate and Health Alliance covers a broad cross section of the health sector including over 20 organisations representing health care professionals from a range of disciplines, health care service providers, institutions, academics, researchers, and consumers.

For more information about the membership and governance of the Climate and Health Alliance, please see Appendix A.

Climate and Health Alliance position on sustainable population

Achieving a sustainable population is an important issue for the Climate and Health Alliance, and has been identified as one of its priorities in its work to contribute to the development of effective political, sectoral and community responses to climate change.

The Climate and Health Alliance specifically seeks to:

Encourage the development of a sustainable population policy for Australia that recognises our fragile ecology while respecting and protecting the rights of refugees.

A sustainable population strategy for Australia

In responding to *A sustainable population strategy for Australia: Issues Paper*, the Climate and Health Alliance will provide a brief overview of the evidence of the implications for human health of an unsustainable population and outline its recommendations for policy.

1. Population impacts on the climate

A rapid rise in the world's population has contributed significantly to the hazardous increase in greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change.¹

In its 2009 *State of the World Population* report, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) said:

“Greenhouse gases would not be accumulating so hazardously had the number of earth’s inhabitants not increased so rapidly, but remained at 300 million people, the world population of 1,000 years ago, compared with 6.8 billion today.”²

While population is far from the only contributor to rising greenhouse gas emissions, slowing global population growth is a vital part of reducing the dangerous level of current emissions and restoring a stable climate to protect human health and wellbeing.

As the UNFPA report states:

“Slower population growth in both developed and developing countries may help ease the task of bringing global emissions into balance with the atmosphere in the long run and enabling more immediate adaptation to change already under way.”³

The Centre for Population Health at Monash University has evaluated the contribution of population growth in Australia to greenhouse gas emissions growth and concluded that 83% of the growth forecast in emissions by the Australian Government Treasury will be attributable to population growth.⁴ Researchers Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy conclude that:

“...it is very unlikely that Australia will achieve the five percent reduction target by 2020 in the absence of attention to the population growth factor”.

Population increases in Australia will exacerbate the existing challenges associated with climate change such as: coastal flooding from sea level rise; increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events (leading to inland floods, bushfires and heatwaves); and changes in rainfall leading to loss of productive agricultural lands as well as insufficient water to meet environmental and human needs. All pose serious risks for the Australian population, and particularly for densely populated areas.⁵

In order to bring down Australian and global greenhouse gas emission levels to reduce the risk of further dangerous climate change, Australia must consider strategies to slow population growth both domestically and in the region.

2. Unsustainable population increases will lead to resource depletion

The current level of global human population has already exceeded its sustainable limit on a finite planet.⁶ Our impact is causing massive degradation of natural ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, putting human health and global security at risk.^{7,8,9}

Resource depletion from ecosystem degradation and unsustainable harvesting of natural resources (of which “peak oil” is among the best known examples) are already posing significant global challenges for food, energy and water security, all of which are exacerbated by a growing population.

According to the paper published in the journal *Nature* in 2010 by a group of over 30 leading international scientists, including Australian National University’s Professor Will Steffen, humans are responsible for creating a new era in Earth’s history, the Anthropocene, in which human actions become the main driver of global environmental change.¹⁰

Human actions are considered responsible for our crossing of vital thresholds, or ‘planetary boundaries’ - identified by Earth system scientists as quantified boundaries within which humanity can safely exist. Three of these nine identified planetary boundaries have already been transgressed: biodiversity, climate change, and nitrogen.¹¹

The activities and rise of the human population is responsible for a concurrent decline in other species, with the rate of species extinction now 1,000 times higher than the historical background rate, with predictions this may reach 10,000 times higher in the next two decades.¹²

According to an Australian Government report on Australia's biodiversity and climate change in 2009:

"Australia's biodiversity has experienced massive declines over the past century."¹³

A United Nations report on Global Biodiversity Outlook in 2006 was unequivocal about humans' negative impact on biodiversity, saying:

"We are currently responsible for the sixth major extinction event in the history of earth, and the greatest since the dinosaurs disappeared, 65 million years ago."¹⁴

In early March 2011, scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, published a paper in the journal *Nature* suggesting three quarters of all known species could disappear within the next three centuries.¹⁵

We are already witnessing the risks associated with the loss of some key species such as bees in the US, where 'colony collapse disorder' has caused the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of bee colonies, raising grave fears for agricultural yields since bees are heavily relied on for plant pollination.¹⁶

Biodiversity is not something we can choose to do without – it is vital for the functioning of the ecosystems on which we depend for food and fresh water, pollinating our crops, fertilising and restoring our soils, as well the compounds from which we derive medicines.¹⁷

Thus we are utterly dependent on it for survival.

As a species however, we are showing a callous and reckless disregard for this fundamental truth.

As doctors John Guillebaud and Pip Hayes wrote in an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* in 2008:

"The world's population now exceeds 6700 million, and humankind's consumption of fossil fuels, fresh water, crops, fish, and forests exceeds supply. These facts are connected. The annual increase in population of about 79 million means that every week an extra 1.5 million people need food and somewhere to live. This amounts to a huge new city each week, somewhere, which destroys wildlife habitats and augments world fossil fuel consumption."¹⁸

3. An unsustainable population impacts on human health

Slowing population growth has the potential to positively impact human health, according to epidemiologists and population health experts Professors Tony McMichael and Colin Butler.

Writing in Health Promotion International in 2007, McMichael and Butler assert that:

"...global and regional inequality, narrow and outdated economic theories and an ever-nearing set of global environmental limits endanger population health."¹⁹

Population growth is considered to be a significant factor limiting the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.²⁰ In two reports from 2007 and 2009, an All

Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health in the UK has concluded, that the Millennium Development Goals will be “difficult or impossible to achieve with current levels of population growth”.²¹

According to the 2009 report, the impacts of population growth will hinder the eradication of poverty, risk the maintenance of existing standards of education, negatively impact steps towards gender equality, slow reductions in infant mortality, increase maternal mortality, slow the eradication of HIV/AIDS, and exacerbate environmental degradation.²²

The health care system in Australia is already under considerable pressure, and like many others around the world will struggle to meet demand by 2020.²³ Even if population projections are taken into account, additional strains on health care from a range of other factors including increasing energy costs and the health effects of climate change (e.g. morbidity and trauma associated with extreme weather events), will place health care systems at a much higher risk of unsustainability by the end of the next decade.

One of the most significant influences on population growth is level of education, particularly of women and girls, with higher levels of education associated with lower fertility rates.²⁴ Education influences women’s and girls’ knowledge of reproductive health, enables them to make informed fertility choices, increases contraceptive use, and can facilitate greater gender equality through more balanced power relationships within families.²⁵

In planning for a sustainable national population, the Australia Government must also consider the contribution it can make to a sustainable global population by developing and funding programs that provide access to family planning and support gender equality and education.

4. Continuous growth is unsustainable

The Climate and Health Alliance asserts that a sustainable population cannot be achieved, as the Strategy Issues Paper suggests, by “balancing competing interests”, if those interests include the pursuit of continuous and unsustainable economic growth.

This must also be considered in relation to approaches to lifestyle and consumption - as population expert Bob Birrell points out (in his policy advice published by the Australian Government Parliamentary Library in December 2010), that the current Australian ‘way of life’, “if defined to include dispersed, car-based suburbia, is not compatible with respect for the environment”.²⁶

According to Tim Jackson, in a report produced as UK Sustainable Development Commissioner, the emphasis of modern societies on continuous economic growth as a measure of economic security and success is folly. Jackson argues growth that is founded on ecological destruction and persistent social injustice is not only uncivilised, it is unsustainable, and is putting human wellbeing, even human survival, at risk.²⁷

Jackson writes:

“For the last five decades the pursuit of growth has been the single most important policy goal across the world.”

“It’s totally at odds with our scientific knowledge of the finite resource base and the fragile ecology on which we depend for survival. And it has already been accompanied by the degradation of an estimated 60% of the world’s ecosystems.”

As indicated above, sustainability in any sense cannot be achieved without taking into account the impact of humans on the environment. The environment therefore is not a “competing interest”, but an intrinsic and fundamental element of human health and survival.

5. Conclusion

The Climate and Health Alliance believes establishing the scientific evidence of what constitutes a sustainable population for Australia in terms of its ecological carrying capacity is a vital contribution to public policy decision-making in Australia.

Fundamentally however this is only one element of acknowledging the evidence that humans are driving profound and fundamental changes to Earth systems, and as a species have already exceeded fundamental limits in terms of the carrying capacity of the planet.

A population can only be sustainable when it is less than the carrying capacity of the environment.

As Tim Jackson suggests, we need to respond to the evidence that the prevailing economic paradigm fails to value the ecosystem and this threatens our survival. Another important contribution will be to develop a new way of valuing progress that does not prioritise economic growth that is reliant on overconsumption. The development of a broader set of indicators to measure the elements of society that will actually contribute to the long term sustainability, health and wellbeing of the population is fundamental to this.

6. Recommended policy directions

The Climate and Health Alliance supports the following policy directions:

- The determination of an optimum number for a sustainable population for Australia should be informed by and based on scientific evidence;
- This sustainable population number should take into account the need to urgently reduce greenhouse gas emissions as part of the global commitment to restore a safe climate;
- The development of a national sustainability plan for Australia that outlines the steps needed in every sector to address the challenges outlined here for current and future populations, and takes into account the risks posed to human health from climate change and unsustainable resource use;
- Achieving a sustainable population will require a transformation of the way we measure societal success from pure economic indicators to ones that demonstrate progress across a broader set of societal goals, including the wellbeing of the community and individuals and a healthy and sustainable ecosystem;²⁸
- Australia, as a wealthy developed country, should play an increasing role in preventing unsustainable population growth, both nationally and within our region, through support for sexual and reproductive health services, family planning services, and support for gender equality.

APPENDIX A

About the Climate and Health Alliance

The Climate and Health Alliance is a growing coalition of health care stakeholders and represents a broad cross section of the sector, including health care professionals from several disciplines, health care service providers, institutions, academics, researchers, and health care consumers. It has an executive committee to guide its work, and an expert advisory committee with senior health and climate researchers to ensure the positions of the Alliance reflect an evidence-based approach.

Executive Committee

Erica Bell is a deputy director of the Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania and represents the Australian Rural Health Education Network.

Susie Burke is a senior psychologist in the Public Interest, Environment and Disaster Response team of the Australian Psychological Society.

Sally Fawkes is a senior research fellow in the School of Public Health at La Trobe University and represents Health Promoting Hospitals.

Bret Hart is a public health physician and founder of the Alliance for Future Health.

Michael Moore is the chief executive officer of the Public Health Association of Australia.

Elizabeth Reale is the federal professional research officer and librarian at the Australian Nursing Federation.

Jenny Longland is the operations manager of CRANA*plus*, a professional association for rural and remote health professionals.

Patrick Tobin is director of policy at Catholic Health Australia.

Expert Advisory Committee

The following people provide advice about climate change and health research to assist CAHA take a robust evidence-based approach in its public statements and activities:

Professor Tony Capon, A/Professor Grant Blashki, Dr Erica Bell, A/Professor Jane Carthey, Dr Peter Tait, Professor David Karoly and Professor Stephan Lewandowsky.

Members

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM)

Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)

Australian Hospitals and Healthcare Association (AHHA)

Australian Health Promotion Association (AHPA)

Australian Institute of Health Innovation (AIHI)

Australian Psychological Society (APS)

Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN)

Australian Nursing Federation (ANF)

Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN)

CRANA*plus*

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA)

Doctors Reform Society (DRS)

Food Alliance (within Food Policy Unit of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention at Deakin University)

Health Consumers' Network (Qld)

Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA)

Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

North Yarra Community Health (NYCH)

Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH)

Women's Health in the North

World Vision

Convenor

Fiona Armstrong is the founder and convenor of the Climate and Health Alliance. Fiona's professional skills and experience are in public policy, advocacy and communications. She has a background in health and postgraduate qualifications in politics, public policy and journalism. She is a former Chair of the national advocacy group, the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance, and a Fellow of the progressive public policy think tank, the Centre for Policy Development.

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²² *ibid*

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