

# Making Victoria a Sustainable State

## Ministerial Statement on Environmental Sustainability

Minister for the Environment John Thwaites MP  
to the Parliament of Victoria  
2005



*Our Environment, Our Future*

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# We depend on a healthy environment

This statement has one simple message to the people of Victoria: we must make sustainability a part of everything we do, if we are to maximise our future economic growth, maintain our quality of life and protect our unique Victorian environment.

Victoria is our home. It is the source of our livelihood and the future for our children. We must treat it with respect. Sustainability is the way forward.

Success will require an integrated approach that brings together our economic, social and environmental policies. Our policies must be based on the understanding that maintaining our environment and boosting economic growth have ultimately the same objective – making Victoria a better place to live and bring up a family.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in their 1987 report *Our Common Future* defined sustainable development as:

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

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 held in Rio de Janeiro further stated:

‘To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, states should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption...’

Victoria is proudly playing its part in helping the world meet this objective.

We already have in place a broad sustainability framework *Growing Victoria Together*. Today I am here to talk about one aspect of that framework – environmental sustainability.

Most Victorians understand the crucial importance of maintaining our environment. Our natural and built surrounds help make Victoria one of the most liveable and attractive places in the world. Our natural environment also provides the essentials of life such as, high quality drinking water and clean air to breathe.

Fewer Victorians, however, recognise the economic importance of a healthy environment. Without it, our industries could not thrive, human health would deteriorate, and our State’s competitiveness would decline.

The value of the planet's land and sea-based ecosystems is estimated to be worth more than \$33 trillion US. This is without considering the aesthetic, intrinsic or recreational values that the environment also represents.

Our tourism relies on healthy parks and waterways. Our agriculture relies on healthy land and rivers. Our cities rely on liveability to attract tourism, investment and migration.

These assets and this beauty must be protected. Such precious assets cannot afford to be squandered, or treated as an afterthought.

For too long – centuries in fact – we have treated the environment as an inexhaustible bounty.

We have consumed natural resources at a faster rate than they can naturally replenish.

We have considered the needs of today, but not the rights of future generations.

In Victoria, like many places around the world, we are only now feeling the consequences of many of these past mistakes.

For example:

- Since European settlement began in Victoria in the 1830s approximately 65 per cent of our native vegetation has been cleared. This has not only degraded the land through salinity but it has also had climate impacts. Land clearing in Australia contributes around 12 per cent of the nation's total greenhouse emissions.

Another example:

- 35 per cent of major rivers in Victoria are in poor or very poor condition with only 22 per cent in good or excellent condition.

The true costs of the world's dependence on fossil fuels are only now becoming clear, as our climate changes and the price of managing the impacts rises.

We have to begin to reverse the damage now.

The answer is to make the environment a consideration in everything we do.

If you ask what environmental sustainability means in practise, it is never having to say sorry to our grandchildren.

Sorry, not just for the destruction of places of wonder and beauty, but sorry also for limiting their economic opportunities, lowering their potential standard of living and reducing their quality of life.

The Victorian Government believes it's time to acknowledge that what is good for the environment is good for the economy, good for the state and good for the people of Victoria.

This statement affirms the central importance of sustainability to our State's environmental, economic and social future. The Victorian Government will build sustainability principles into everything we do as a State.

# We have made progress

We have already made significant progress towards becoming a more Sustainable State.

Victorians are now starting to use our natural resources more sustainably and we are repairing the damage we have caused to our natural assets. Organisations like Landcare, Coastcare and other environmental non-government organisations are making a tremendous difference in building sustainable communities across the State.

Businesses in all industries, from finance to manufacturing, have begun to make serious strides in reducing their environmental impact.

Local governments in Victoria are also leading the way in developing sustainable policies and delivering sustainable services.

The Bracks Government has joined the sustainability drive, leading the most comprehensive environmental reform agenda in the State's history:

We have:

- reduced logging across the state by 31 per cent to ensure a sustainable forestry industry
- led a 19 per cent reduction in water usage and invested \$100 million in improving the health of our rivers (including the Murray, Thompson, Goulburn, Yarra and the Gippsland lakes) through Our Water, Our Future
- reached a historic agreement with the Australian and NSW governments to boost the flows of the Snowy River from 1 to 21 per cent of average natural flows within 10 years, and 28 per cent in the medium term

- established 13 marine national parks and 11 marine sanctuaries covering 54,000 hectares of Victoria's marine waters
- created more national parks than any government in Victoria's history and protected an additional 540,000 hectares of forest under the National Parks Act
- introduced Melbourne 2030 – a 30 year plan to manage growth and protect Melbourne's liveability
- set a target of 'net gain' for Victoria's native vegetation, to reverse the decline
- set a target to increase our electricity consumption from renewable energy sources from 4 per cent to 10 per cent by 2010
- introduced 5 Star energy and water efficiency standards for all new homes.

The Victorian people have responded magnificently to this leadership, making their own sometimes dramatic improvements in sustainable resource use:

- Victorians now recycle more than 50 per cent of their waste and in 2004 the amount of waste going to landfill dropped
- Our farmers and agribusinesses are leading the nation in efficient water use
- In 2004 Melburnians used 19 per cent less water per household than their average for the 1990s

# Many challenges remain

Victorians should be proud of their achievements, but we must not become complacent.

Our natural environment remains one of the most highly stressed in Australia and many challenges lie ahead.

## **Our water resources remain stretched**

- Only one quarter of our rivers are healthy.
- 35 per cent of our wetlands have been totally lost.

## **Victoria's land is becoming less productive**

- 670,000 hectares of land in Victoria are currently at risk of becoming saline and this could increase to over 3 million hectares by 2050.
- It is estimated that land degradation has led to a 5 to 10 per cent reduction in land productivity. Without remedial action, it is projected that by 2050 the area of degraded land could double in Victoria.

## **Our climate is changing**

- Greenhouse gas emissions are accelerating climate change, making Victoria warmer and drier. The State's average temperature is predicted to rise by between 0.8 and 5.0 Celsius by 2070. Scientists tell us this could lead to up to 5 per cent less water in the Murray Darling system by 2023, reducing water allocations and limiting irrigated agriculture in Victoria.
- Potentially there will be a 1cm to 8cm rise in sea level per decade and along with increased storms that are also expected with climate change, a growing number of Victorians who live along the coast will be affected. Insurers are already carefully examining the impacts of climate change for their business. We will need to understand the risks and carefully plan future coastal development to avoid increasing our vulnerability to climate change along the coast.
- Energy production in Victoria is more greenhouse gas intensive than in any other State in Australia.

- Scientists, including Australia's Chief Scientist, Robin Batterham, advise that we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by around 50 per cent by 2050 to avoid dangerous climate change (that is greater than a 2.0 Celsius increase).

## **Many plants and animals are at risk of extinction**

- Victoria's ecosystems are the most highly stressed in Australia.
- 44 per cent of our native plants and 30 per cent of native animals are now extinct or threatened.

## **The impact of our towns and cities is growing**

- Urban areas are expanding rapidly. The average density of Melbourne is low by international standards, at just 14.9 people per hectare, compared to a similar city like Toronto, which has 41.5 people per hectare.

## **We are generating more waste than ever before**

- Per capita, Australia is one of the highest waste generating countries in the world and Victoria is one of the nation's largest waste generators.
- Victorians recycled more than a third of household waste in 2004. Although Victorians are recycling more waste than ever before, we are also producing more waste. Between 1992 and 2002 total waste rose by 40 per cent.

Every one of these issues not only threatens our natural environment, but our economy and community as well.

A water shortage is not only a problem for rivers. It affects our agriculture and manufacturing industries, and with them, the livelihood of all Victorians.

A warmer world due to climate change not only threatens plants and animals, but also infrastructure, business, tourism and communities.

# Building the environment into all we do

We now know that we need to do more than simply care for our environment. We must treat it as a highly valuable asset to our State and the world.

It is time to consider what environmental bequest we plan to pass on to our children. Victoria today stands at an important juncture. We have to decide now whether we want to pass on a healthy environment to future generations.

The government is calling on all Victorians to take the next step towards environmental sustainability, by considering the environment in every decision we make.

We can no longer treat our environment as an afterthought. It must stand side by side with our economic and social decision-making.

Whether it be in the office, at the factory, on the farm or at home, we need to integrate environmental considerations into everything we do.

Each of us influences the condition of our environment, through the products we buy, the type of transport we choose, or the investments we make.

Added together, these millions of individual decisions will help drive new markets, open up opportunities for sustainable industries and improve our environment.

There is no silver bullet, no single intervention or discovery that will save us as citizens or businesses from our responsibility to do more with less.

Government's role is to provide the beacon for sustainability and lead by example. All the States and Territories are working together to develop a national emissions trading scheme to help fight climate change.

The State Government is also helping to drive change by establishing environmentally friendly procurement policies for its departments and agencies. The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability is currently drawing up advice on how those policies can be improved and implemented, and I look forward to receiving his recommendations.

Victorians too can influence broader change.

- If every household bought a portion of its electricity from a renewable source, like solar or wind, we would cut greenhouse gas emissions and help create new sustainable energy industries.
- If each household saved just 10 litres of water a day – one bucketful – it would reduce its water bills, cut demand by over 4.6 billion litres of water and significantly reduce the stress on Victoria's waterways.
- If every household composted their organic waste, we would reduce landfill by 900,000 tonnes a year – almost 25 per cent. This would slow our consumption of land and cut waste management costs.

We each have the power to bring about significant change. The challenge is to modify behaviour that damages the environment.

It can be done – as Victorians have demonstrated by using less water. We now need similar victories in other areas.

# Directions for environmental sustainability

Three directions hold the key to improving Victoria's environmental sustainability.

## **1. Maintaining and restoring our natural assets**

We must manage our natural assets more sustainably if we are to utilise their full economic and social value.

Our bushland, forests and waterways deliver valuable resources and services for Victorians.

For example, Melbourne enjoys some of the highest quality drinking water in the world today, because past policy makers protected large areas of bushland from inappropriate development. Without these 'closed catchments' we would be forced to treat our water through costly purification processes.

Maintaining our natural assets is crucial for a vibrant state economy.

The Victorian Government has set ambitious targets for economic development, including boosting its agricultural exports to \$12 billion. We simply won't be able to meet these targets if we slowly degrade our arable land, deplete our forests and diminish our rivers.

This doesn't mean locking our assets away forever. Like a smart investor, we can live off nature's dividends without eroding its value as a long-term asset.

This of course requires us to make investments as well. That is why the State Government has spent over \$1 billion on new environmental initiatives since 1999.

As part of our new approach, the Victorian Government will monitor the State's progress in restoring our natural assets.

For the first time, the Victorian Government has developed a comprehensive set of thirteen environmental quality objectives and interim targets to measure our progress in achieving environmental sustainability. This is part of a Framework I am also releasing today.

As we move forward, information improves and priorities change, further interim targets may be set.

Examples of our environmental objectives are clean air, efficient transport systems and reduced climate impact. One of the ways we will measure our reduced climate impact objective will be through the interim target of increasing the share of Victoria's electricity consumption from renewable energy sources from 4 per cent to 10 per cent by 2010.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment will provide biennial assessments of our progress on achieving these objectives, commencing 2007.



## 2. Using our resources more efficiently

Australia's abundant natural resources make us the envy of other countries.

However, we sometimes use these resources wastefully – harming our environment, the liveability of our communities and our economic competitiveness.

The World Wildlife Fund's 2004 *Living Planet Report* lists Australia as the fourth most resource hungry country in the world.

We can reduce consumption of natural resources while increasing our income and standard of living.

The keys are minimising waste and increasing efficiency.

This year, we will challenge Victorians to do with energy what they have already done with water – conserve it.

If every Victorian household instituted a few simple energy efficiency measures – such as installing energy saving light globes or low-flow shower heads to reduce hot water wastage – we could cut the State's greenhouse pollution by millions of tonnes.

To accelerate this shift, the State Government will be launching a campaign in 2005 to show Victorians how they can be more energy efficient at home.

Through resource efficiency we can generate massive cost savings and increase our ability to compete globally. The Victorian Government wants to significantly increase efficiency within businesses and industry.

Over the next three years, EPA Victoria will commit \$2.2 million to work with the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI) and its member organisations, to drive increased resource efficiency and waste reduction throughout the lifecycle of goods and services.

## 3. Reducing our everyday environmental impacts

Our 'ecological footprint' is huge. If everyone in the world lived like Victorians, we would require four planets to provide for us.

Sprawling towns and cities have a direct impact on our environment. They consume valuable land and have indirect costs, like increased traffic and congestion – which, if current trends continue, the Department of Infrastructure estimates will cost the state \$8 billion by 2015.

By encouraging more compact towns and cities, through plans like Melbourne 2030, we can reduce congestion and pollution, make our urban environments more liveable and safeguard valuable land for agriculture, tourism and the environment.

But reducing the environmental impact of our towns and cities requires more than planning strategies alone. Every individual household and business can contribute by reducing the waste they produce, the water and energy they consume, building more sustainable homes and making informed transport decisions.

To help achieve this, the Victorian Government will release a draft behaviour change strategy for comment, called *Learning to Live Sustainably: Victoria's education, behaviour change strategy* later this year. The strategy will set out a ten-year program that coincides with the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and aims to achieve long-term change for the improvement of our environment.

Earlier this year, I was also pleased to launch a \$1.1 million Green Power campaign to encourage people to switch to renewable energy and support this growing industry.

# Towards the sustainable state

These three directions – maintaining and restoring our natural assets, using our resources more efficiently, and reducing our everyday impacts – form the core of *Victoria's Environmental Sustainability Framework* that the State Government is releasing today.

Many Victorians want to do more for the environment, but are uncertain about how they can make a difference. The Framework is a crucial step in setting the direction that Victoria must take to become a Sustainable State with a growing economy.

Over the next three months we will be encouraging comment from all Victorians on how the Framework should be implemented.

The Framework aims to make environmental sustainability a consideration in everything we do by:

- clearly articulating the government's vision for an environmentally sustainable Victoria
- providing clear guidance for decision-makers in government, industries and communities about how to achieve environmental sustainability
- outlining the environmental challenges we face and the strategic directions we need to take to restore our environmental assets and systems to health, and sustain a growing economy and prosperous communities
- setting out the environmental objectives we want to achieve, and the interim targets to measure our progress.

Environmental sustainability is about taking a long-term perspective and a holistic approach to improving the environment.

To begin the immediate implementation of the Framework I am pleased to announce today we are taking steps to form a new statutory authority – Sustainability Victoria – which will bring together the knowledge and expertise that exists across government on environmental sustainability.

Uniting the expertise of the Sustainable Energy Authority and EcoRecycle Victoria and adding a water dimension – it will better serve Victorian communities and business in integrating environmental sustainability into our everyday lives.

It will work with businesses and communities to put in place the programs needed to take a quantum leap forward in the sustainable management of our natural and built environments.

Earlier this month, I was pleased to announce that the Government will conduct an energy efficiency campaign later this year to encourage Victorians to use energy wisely at home. The campaign will be jointly developed and led by the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Energy Industries and Resources.

Today I am also announcing a new initiative called The Sustainables Household Challenge, to encourage Victorians to be more sustainable at home by adopting 10 simple actions, like avoiding plastic bags, choosing water efficient appliances and composting organic waste.

Environmental sustainability is about investing in the future of our state. It is a crucial part of the Bracks Government's vision for improving the quality of life of all Victorians.

I urge Victorians to embrace this new chapter in Victoria's growth, by acting together for the environment to strengthen the foundations of our economy and society.

Our actions today will pave the way for future prosperity, and deliver a lasting legacy for our children and theirs.

