

State of the
Environment
Reporting Series

Discussion Paper No. 2

State of the Environment Reporting Public Consultation Paper



Report prepared by the Environmental Protection Authority for the Minister for the Environment

**Environmental Protection Authority
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Contents

- 1.0 Foreword
 - 2.0 History of State of the Environment Reporting in Western Australia
 - 3.0 Proposed Objectives for the Next Reporting Cycle
 - 4.0 Proposed Outputs for the Next Reporting Cycle
 - 5.0 Scope of Next Report
 - 6.0 Community Communication and Engagement Strategy
 - 7.0 Proposed Process for the Next Reporting Cycle
 - 8.0 State of the Environment Reporting and Natural Resource Management
 - 9.0 State of the Environment Reporting and Sustainability
 - 10.0 Preparing Submissions
-

1.0 Foreword

This consultation paper marks the beginning of the next cycle of State of the Environment reporting in Western Australia. The Environmental Protection Authority is seeking early input and comment on how the next State of the Environment Report might be undertaken.

In 2002, the Government of Western Australia asked the EPA to take responsibility for Western Australia's State of the Environment reporting program.

The EPA is an independent advisory body on the environment and environmental matters. It has an important impartial role in reviewing environmental outcomes and the performance of natural resource management.

The EPA has welcomed the responsibility of coordinating the State of the Environment reporting process and is keen to engage the Western Australian community in such an important program.

2.0 History of State of the Environment Reporting in Western Australia

State of the environment reporting is an informing system. Its key function is to communicate credible, timely and accessible information about the condition of the Western Australian environment to decision makers and the community. This will assist in improving the targeting of resources and the achievement of better environmental outcomes.

The reporting process needs to engage the community to increase general awareness about the environment so the community can assist in addressing the environmental issues facing all Western Australians. The report is designed to cover trends in the environment, so that management options and actions can be defined for the future. The reporting process is also designed to provide the community with a measure of the effectiveness of environmental actions already taken and to increase the transparency of management of the State's natural resources.

In December 1992, the state government released its first official State of the Environment Report (Government of Western Australia, 1992). The 1992 report provided an overview of the state of Western Australia's atmosphere, water resources, flora, fauna, soil, landscapes, marine and coastal areas. It also outlined the impact of human activities on the natural environment, and identified what steps were being taken to address some of those problems. This first attempt, which took nearly seven years to complete, was very government orientated and was moderately successful in producing actual environmental outcomes.

Six years later, the state government released *Environment Western Australia 1998: State of the Environment Report* (Government of Western Australia, 1998). Although the scope remained largely unchanged, the 1998 report differed significantly in many respects.

Firstly, the reporting process was developed as a joint exercise between the government and the community. The 1998 State of the Environment Report was preceded by a draft report and working papers. To increase the transparency of the process, the public was asked to comment on this draft and provide input into the final document. This was the first time in Australia that the public had been involved in a State of the Environment reporting process.

The 1998 State of the Environment Report was also followed by a response document, titled *Environmental Action: Government's Response to the State of the Environment Report* (Government of Western Australia, 1999). This reflected a commitment from the State Government to undertake a host of actions to address each of the issues identified in the 1998 State of the Environment Report.

In terms of structure, the 1998 report was very concise. It did not consider all of the environmental issues facing Western Australia. Rather, it focused on key environmental issues identified by the regional focus groups, the reference group and from public comments on the draft report.

3.0 Proposed Objectives for the Next Reporting Cycle

In November 2002, the EPA held a roundtable discussion to assist in formulating the approach it should take in conducting Western Australia's next cycle of State of the Environment Reporting.

A range of people with varying specialities and backgrounds assisted the EPA by engaging in creative debate as to what outcomes the State of the Environment Program could achieve.

It was agreed at the roundtable discussion that the next reporting cycle should address several key objectives. The EPA has proposed that these objectives should guide the next reporting cycle as terms of reference.

The themes highlighted in the roundtable discussion were:

Continuity and comparability between reporting cycles: The next reporting cycle should maintain continuity with the previous report, in terms of what is reported and the reporting framework (Condition, Pressure, Response, Implications, Effectiveness). This would allow trends in environmental conditions and management to be followed. The challenge would be to ensure that processes and parts of the report that have worked well previously are maintained and built upon. Additionally, the EPA should report on outcomes achieved through the previous reporting cycle.

Wide scope and scale: The report should build on themes addressed in the last report (see section 5.0). The report should address each of these themes from a range of perspectives — for instance, by region, issue, sector and statewide.

Predicting consequences: Where current knowledge allows, the consequences of adverse environmental trends on other parts of the environment, society and the economy should be predicted. This would include more analysis on the consequences of intervention, as well as society's capacity to adapt to changes in the environment.

Provide strategic advice: The report should be articulated in such a way that it will be a leader for change. This should embrace the notion of being strategic in outlook and forward thinking, providing recommendations for new policies and practices.

Support sustainability: The reporting process should link with sustainability developments occurring in Western Australia, specifically the State Sustainability Strategy. It should also inform approaches to sustainability (e.g., new analytical tools, case studies, etc).

Inclusion of the wider community: The concerns of the wider community should be incorporated throughout all stages of the reporting process. The report should also build on current community actions and undertakings and aim at increasing public awareness of key environmental pressures.

State monitoring and evaluation framework: The State of the Environment reporting framework should link with monitoring and evaluation activities being undertaken by natural resource management sectors and regional groups. It should also link with industry reporting (triple bottom line). The use of indicators should be extended.

4.0 Proposed Outputs for the Next Reporting Cycle

The EPA is considering what possible outputs the next State of the Environment reporting process might deliver. These could differ significantly from previous reports.

There is currently a national trend towards releasing a summary report and supporting 'theme' reports. The advantage of this report structure is that it offers a very concise and focused synopsis of the key issues, yet detailed analysis of the results is still available in the supporting material. Theme reports may address either the state of a region or the state of a natural resource sector, such as water.

As well as the final report, a range of outputs will follow from the reporting process. The 1998 State of the Environment reporting cycle produced a range of additional outputs. These included the draft report and working papers, a government response to the State of the Environment report, brochures, compiled public comments and public seminars. It is likely that many of these types of outputs could be delivered again in the next reporting cycle.

An online information system, similar to that produced through the National Land and Water Resource Audit (NLWRA), would also be a very useful tool for State of the Environment reporting. This would consist of a website linking comprehensive databases and storing natural resource data on a range of scales — not only for reporting on the State of the Environment, but also linking to planning and natural resource management.

5.0 Scope of Next Report

The EPA recognises there is a need to provide clarity on how comprehensive the report will be and the level at which environmental issues will be addressed. To maintain continuity between reporting cycles, the EPA suggests that the next SOE Report should focus on the key themes addressed in the 1998 report. These themes are:

Fundamental pressures

There are two key fundamental pressures that drive human impacts on the environment: population and consumption.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity — the variety of genes, species and ecosystems — is essential to human well-being in many respects. It underpins the economy and maintains ecological processes that are vital to the survival and continued evolution of life on earth. Its value to society and the state's economy is immeasurable.

Atmosphere

For the purpose of the 1998 report, 'atmosphere' refers to all air above the ground, up to and including the stratosphere; it excludes air inside buildings, workplaces and homes (indoor air). The condition and movement of the atmosphere affects all life on Earth, from the local and regional to the global scale.

Land

'Land' is taken to mean the soil and subsoil resources that constitute the top of the Earth's surface. The animal and plant life that inhabits the land surface is discussed where it is important to the protection and rehabilitation of the land.

Inland waters

'Inland waters' refers to groundwater, rivers, wetlands and estuaries. The animal and plant life that inhabits inland waters is discussed where it is important to the protection of inland waters (such as fringing vegetation) or where it is directly affected by changes in the condition of inland waters.

Marine environment

In the 1998 report, 'marine environment' referred to the intertidal zone, near shore and open ocean environments but excluded estuaries. Australians are responsible for managing one of the largest exclusive economic zones, fishing zones and continental shelves in the world, and WA has a large share of this responsibility.

Progress towards sustainability

Sustainability of the key natural resource sectors in Western Australia was addressed in the 1998 State of the Environment Report, although much has happened since then.

In recent years, there has been broad development of sustainability indicators to measure the implementation of the objectives and guiding principles of sustainability. This is also a key topic of the State Sustainability Strategy.

The EPA has embarked on a program to evaluate natural resource management outcomes. This program will be integrated into State of the Environment reporting over time.

Proposed additional themes

In keeping with national developments in State of the Environment reporting, three additional themes are being proposed for the next cycle. These include:

- Land-use: this refers to the impact of various land uses on the environment and could include such activities as agriculture, mining and urban development
- Human settlements: this refers specifically to the impact of urban developments on the environment
- Cultural heritage: this section would encompass indigenous and non-indigenous cultural heritage issues and their link to the natural environment.

6.0 Community Communication and Engagement Strategy

The next State of the Environment reporting cycle aims to integrate public opinion throughout all stages of the reporting process, and to incorporate input from a wide range of community members. One way of improving public input is to develop a public consultation and community engagement strategy. This would outline the broad range of roles proposed for different individuals or members of the community within the reporting process. These roles would vary depending on skills, expertise, knowledge and interests.

Options for the EPA include:

- inviting potential community players to participate or comment on the State of the Environment Report
- making a public call for expressions of interest in potential partnerships
- appointing experts to develop a community engagement strategy.

Community groups with a potential role in the State of the Environment Report include:

- universities and other research organisations
- landowners
- industry and industry associations

- conservation groups
- state government agencies and bodies
- NRM catchment or regional groups
- households
- Commonwealth agencies
- local governments.

7.0 Proposed Process for the Next Reporting Cycle

The proposed process to develop the next State of the Environment Report is aimed at bringing together government departments, the community and industry to provide information and expertise on Western Australia's key environmental issues. The process is set to begin in early 2004 and may include:

1. Public submissions on reporting processes and approaches

Interested members of the public, government departments and other stakeholder groups would be invited to provide written submissions on the proposed State of the Environment reporting process. Submissions might address the process itself, the proposed terms of reference, desired outputs, the scope of the report or community involvement in the reporting process. These submissions would help shape the next reporting cycle.

2. Establish the reporting programme and secure resourcing

A reporting programme would be developed, directed by the terms of reference. This would identify the process, outcomes, outputs and community consultation process. The EPA would also form partnerships with key government departments, industry and community groups to improve access to data, expertise and policy development.

3. Establish EPA steering group to oversee process

This group would steer the State of the Environment reporting process and act as an advisory council to all other working groups and the EPA. It is expected that this group would be convened by the EPA Services Unit and be chaired by either the chairman or one of the members of the EPA.

4. Establish input processes and communication strategy

Experts could draft papers on the key issues. These papers would be reviewed by the steering group and then circulated for comment by regional groups. Likewise, sector focus groups would be formed to review papers and comment on environmental performance for each of the natural resource management (NRM) sectors.

A strategy to incorporate the concerns of the wider community throughout all stages of the reporting process would also be established. This should aim to build on current community actions and undertakings.

5. *Develop information system and collate inputs for development of drafts*

Build a comprehensive information system and database to facilitate access to natural resource data for reporting on State of the Environment indicators. Data would be collated and processed in the course of developing the information system. This information system would then be made available to the public.

6. *Validate inputs and conclusions*

Peer reviewers, who are respected by the environmental and scientific communities, would be required to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the data and information in the draft report are scientifically valid and understandable to the wider community.

7. *Develop draft report and have it refereed*

A draft report, possibly with supporting working documents, would be developed as the basis of the next report. This should be formally refereed by a number of select people. Following this review, trends and patterns could be reported to the community via academic papers, conferences, short reports and the internet.

8. *Release draft report for comment*

The draft report would be given a public comment period, during which the community could provide input into the report's findings. This is also likely to involve numerous public presentations or seminars across the state.

9. *Review public comment and prepare final report*

Public comment would be analysed by the reference group and used to produce the final report.

10. *Release final State of the Environment Report*

The EPA is keen to ensure that the critical messages in the final report 'hit home' with all Western Australians. Creative ways of distributing the report and the key report findings would be used, including issuing statements through the media.

8.0 State of the Environment Reporting and Natural Resource Management

Natural resource management (NRM) should be a continuous and cyclical process. It requires integration across time, space and different institutions. At the state level, the State of the Environment reporting process can help bring this together. One of the major achievements of Western Australia's last State of the Environment reporting cycle was that the framework allowed environmental issues of state-wide importance to be identified and prioritised, so that suggested management actions

could be proposed for each issue to stimulate the policy planning process within the NRM sector. This led to the development of Western Australia's first environmental action plan, *Environmental Action: Government's Response to the State of the Environment Report*. This transition needs to continue, through stronger links with NRM, if there is to be any discernable impact on policy and decision making.

Integrating State of the Environment reporting with NRM monitoring and evaluation activities, to develop a state monitoring and evaluation framework, offers a great opportunity to move forward. Further exploration will identify how to link these two processes effectively. Coordinated data management and data sharing, consistent indicators across the state, plugging data gaps, partnerships, policy development and performance evaluation are just some of the benefits that may be gained. As such, it is important that the opportunity be grasped to formally address these issues, as the next State of the Environment reporting process develops.

9.0 State of the Environment Reporting and Sustainability

Emerging patterns suggest that many of the problems Western Australia faces are a consequence of either ignorance or of applying what was regarded as 'expertise' at an earlier time. The move towards sustainability will require improved understanding of the interactions between natural and social systems.

The 1998 State of the Environment Report included a section on the status and development of sustainability within Western Australia's key natural resource sectors. However, the capacity to report on progress towards sustainability for each of the NRM sectors at the time was limited. This was due to a lack of data, as well as poor analytical techniques to measure sustainability.

In recent years new analytical tools such as the 'ecological footprint model' and input-output tables, have become available. The next cycle of State of the Environment Reporting will further improve our understanding of sustainability in Western Australia. This presents an opportunity to link State of the Environment reporting with other sustainability initiatives in Western Australia, such as the State Sustainability Strategy.

10.0 Preparing Submissions

The EPA is keen to develop the process for the next cycle of State of the Environment reporting in an open and transparent manner. This involves seeking the views of the Western Australian community, government and non-government organisations, as well as special interest groups.

Members of the public are encouraged to prepare written submissions outlining their thoughts on the proposed outcomes, processes and outputs or any other issue raised in this public consultation document.

In addition, the EPA welcomes feedback on the public consultation process and how the broad community could become more involved, or gain more benefit from the

reporting process. Some questions that members of the public might consider in their submissions include:

- Have all of the key steps been addressed in the proposed process for developing the report?
- Are there any other objectives that could be aimed for, other than those already proposed?
- Are the proposed objectives too ambitious?
- Are there any other outputs that could be developed, other than those already proposed?
- What aspects of the previous reporting cycle do you consider flawed, and how could they be improved?
- How can this reporting process adequately incorporate the views of the broader community?
- How can we develop an agenda for change?

How to comment on this document

This document is released for public comment for a period of eight weeks. Your comments are welcome.

Please send submissions by 14 November 2003 to:

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