

Keynote address: The Sustainability Assessment Agenda

Good morning! My name is Jenny Pope from Integral Sustainability and I would like to warmly welcome you to the inaugural Western Australian Sustainability Assessment Symposium.

The ultimate aim of the symposium is to contribute to progressing sustainability assessment practice in Western Australia and we have an opportunity over the next two days to collectively reflect upon our progress so far, the challenges we face as practitioners and the steps we might take to move forward.

Most importantly it is an opportunity to share experiences, to ask for and offer advice and to build connections and networks that will support us our ongoing journey to integrate sustainability principles into our decision-making processes.

Although our focus is Western Australia we are delighted to especially welcome several delegates from other parts of the Australia who have made the journey to participate in this event, and we will have an opportunity to hear something of how sustainability assessment is approached in other states and internationally during the Symposium.

There has been considerable international interest in the way we practice sustainability assessment in Western Australia, especially since the State Sustainability Strategy was released in 2003 with its specific commitments to developing and implementing sustainability assessment processes within Government.

There were many eyes upon the environmental, social and economic assessment of the Gorgon gas project back in 2002-2003, which was the first attempt in Western Australia at applying a sustainability assessment approach as part of a regulatory approvals process. The sustainability assessment of the South West Yarragadee water supply development, that closely followed, was similarly closely observed.

In fact, we are now considered by the international impact assessment community, from which much of the literature and thinking about sustainability assessment has emerged, to be something of a 'sustainability assessment hotspot', along with Canada, New Zealand and the UK.

For this reason, Western Australia is to be featured in the International Association for Impact Assessment's Study of Impact Assessment Effectiveness, and we hope that this Symposium will be an important contribution to that study.

Before going any further, I would like to thank the Symposium sponsors, the Water Corporation of Western Australia, and specifically the Sustainability Team and the Water Forever Project.

The Water Corporation has been immensely supportive of this event from its inception, as evidenced by the large number of Water Corporation faces in the crowd today as well as the financial support that has allowed a number of

members of the community and NGO representatives to participate in the Symposium.

You will see that the programme also features quite a few presentations from Water Corporation personnel and consultants who have worked with them on their sustainability journey, and I think this is a genuine reflection of the leadership that the Water Corporation has shown in implementing sustainability assessment and aligning their business practices towards sustainability.

You would have noticed the Water Forever display in the reception area – Water Forever is the Water Corporation’s strategic planning initiative for Perth’s water future over the next 10, 20 and 50 years. We’ll be hearing more about that very shortly, but don’t forget to visit the stand, pick up some information and register to be part of the Water Forever process.

You may have also noticed the Sustainable September banner when you came in and may be aware that Sustainable September is a month-long celebration of all that is being done in the name of sustainability in Western Australia.

There is a calendar of Sustainable September activities and we are delighted that this Symposium is a featured event in the calendar. Although we are heading towards the end of the month there are still a number of events to come, so do check out the calendar. One that may be of particular interest is the Sustainability Practitioners’ Association Soiree, which is very conveniently to be held tomorrow afternoon from 5pm at Little Creatures in Fremantle.

We are all invited to join other sustainability practitioners for a few drinks and a celebration of all things sustainable, and you will find a flyer with more information in your folders.

So, we are all here for the next 2 days to discuss sustainability assessment, but what exactly is sustainability assessment? It’s one of those ambiguous terms, a bit like sustainability itself, that means different things to different people and also different things in different parts of the world.

I think one of the more useful definitions of sustainability assessment comes from a South African colleague, Theo Hacking. He says simply that sustainability assessment is “a process that directs decision-making towards sustainability”.

I like this definition because it emphasises that sustainability assessment is not just about reviewing the sustainability implications of our decisions after we have made them, which of course is a good thing to do, but more importantly it goes beyond this to mean changing the way we make those decisions in the first place. For this reason, perhaps we should stop talking about ‘sustainability assessment’ and start talking about ‘sustainability planning’ or ‘sustainability decision-making’.

This slide helps to explain this point. It’s a basic 5-step model from planning theory representing how decisions guided by sustainability assessment might be made in a perfect world.

1. Identify the goal and the related question to be addressed;
2. Define the sustainability decision criteria;
3. Identify alternatives and options to meet the goal;
4. Assess the sustainability impacts of each alternative against the decision criteria;
5. Select and enhance the preferred alternative.

Some forms of sustainability assessment focus mainly on Step 4: assessing the sustainability impacts of a proposal – how much vegetation will need to be cleared? What will the greenhouse gas emissions be? How many residents might be affected by the visual impact of the project?

Perhaps there might be opportunities to mitigate or offset these impacts in some way and this touches on Step 5. But you can see that this a reactive approach to sustainability assessment, undertaken when most of the important decisions have already been made and all that is left is some tweaking around the edges.

This reactive form of sustainability assessment does have its place. It is this type of assessment that might be conducted by a regulatory agency for the purpose of assessing whether or not a proposal should be approved from a sustainability perspective.

In fact this was exactly the approach that was adopted by the Western Australian government in its strategic assessment of the Gorgon gas development on Barrow Island back in 2003. It's better than nothing, but we can go much further.

Many organisations, including many represented in this room, have long realised that a more proactive approach to sustainability assessment which incorporates sustainability considerations into the process of developing a proposal is much more likely to deliver sustainable outcomes that are better from the perspectives of the proponent, the regulators and the community.

Since government interest and leadership in sustainability assessment has waned somewhat, I believe the strength of sustainability assessment practice in Western Australia now lies within these organisations.

One of the most common applications of sustainability assessment being practiced in Western Australia at the moment relates to locating infrastructure, and this process essentially follows the five steps I've outlined.

In Step 1, the framing question in such cases is "where is the most sustainable location for this infrastructure?"

Step 2 involves defining the sustainability issues that might be important in making the decision, setting sustainability objectives for these criteria and identifying any fatal flaws, or acceptability thresholds that should not be crossed.

In Step 3 possible alternative sites are identified and in Step 4 the sustainability impacts of each alternative site are assessed against the criteria, objectives and acceptability thresholds from Step 2.

Step 5 involves making a decision based on the analysis of Step 4 as to which is the best option overall from a sustainability perspective.

This is often a difficult thing to do, as by its nature sustainability is a complex concept involving many different competing objectives over a range of time and space scales. How do you balance such diverse issues as biodiversity, jobs, visual impact, economic benefits and all the rest?

Fortunately there are a number of tools available that can help to work through these issues and we will be discussing several of these in the Symposium, including multi-criteria decision analysis, approaches based on cost benefit analysis, as well as other more qualitative approaches.

But let's have a closer look at the first step, which is about framing the issue at hand. This is crucially important because it determines how much room the decision-maker has to move in coming up with creative solutions to a problem, and in turn this usually determines how sustainable this solution is.

I'll give you a very simple illustrative example. Congestion has become a problem on a certain stretch of road and the goal of widening the road has been set. If we take a sustainability approach, the framing question in Step 1 might be: "what is the most sustainable way to widen the road?"

The sustainability decision criteria we identify in Step 2 might then reflect clearing of vegetation, proximity to houses, costs, noise, dust etc.

In Step 3 we might find that the road could be widened in different ways – different sections could be widened, or the widening project could be undertaken in stages over time.

With our sustainability assessment approach we can choose in Step 4 the road-widening strategy that minimises clearing, generates minimum disruption to local residents and is the most cost effective, and then further enhance the preferred option in Step 5.

But the bottom line is that we are still widening the road and therefore have taken a pretty narrow view of the issue at hand.

So what happens if we spend some time thinking about the problem before we jump to a solution that might initially seem obvious?

Perhaps, instead of defining the desired outcome as a wider road we might open it up a little and define it as a less congested road, and the sustainability assessment framing question then becomes 'what is the most sustainable way to reduce congestion?'

It seems very similar, but actually it is far more strategic, and as a result a whole range of new options is suddenly available, of which widening the road might be only one.

For example, we could enhance public transport, designate a carpooling lane for vehicles carrying 3 or more passengers, or we could introduce a congestion charge as they have in London.

This more strategic question invites consideration of some bigger picture sustainability issues when we identify our sustainability decision criteria. Cost might still be a factor, but we also might consider net greenhouse gas emissions, convenience and travel time and other issues.

What does this mean for sustainability and our goal of delivering more sustainable outcomes through decision-making? I would argue that a more open, more strategic question that moves outside the realm of same old, same old responses, invites creativity and innovation in coming up with new ways of solving problems that more often than not ultimately lead to more sustainable outcomes. This is the sentiment expressed in this diagram.

This slide shows some typical sustainability assessment framing questions, with the narrower, more project-focussed questions at the bottom moving through to the higher level, more strategic questions at the top.

If we look at the hierarchy of questions, the influence and jurisdiction of many organisations, particularly those developing infrastructure of various forms, often cover the lower tiers of the spectrum and as I've indicated there are many good examples of sustainability assessments that address these types of questions.

However, many of the higher level, strategic questions, such as “What is the most sustainable way to manage a particular resource?” (for example water or mineral resources) or “What is the vision for a sustainable future for a particular area” are policy issues and therefore firmly in the realm of government at all levels.

These are vitally important, because matters of policy not only influence and shape the project level decisions we make but arguably it is in the policy and strategic planning arenas that the greatest gains towards sustainability are to be made.

One example of Government leadership in these more strategic forms of sustainability assessment is the Northern Development Taskforce established to identify a potential site for an LNG processing hub in the Kimberley region.

Although not officially designated as such, the process being followed by the NDT can be considered as a strategic sustainability planning process addressing the question “What is the most sustainable location for an LNG processing hub in the Kimberley?” with consideration of a broad range of social, environmental and economic criteria.

This strategic approach to identifying a suitable location for an industrial hub will guide future LNG projects in the region and ensure that the cumulative impacts potentially associated with ad hoc development can be managed, and economic synergies delivered.

In summary then, I believe that our major and ongoing task as sustainability assessment practitioners is to always challenge the question, to open it up, to be more strategic in the way we think about the issues before us and ask what it is that we are really trying to achieve.

This brings us to the Symposium, the overarching goal of which is to progress sustainability assessment practice in Western Australia and beyond.

The programme has been structured to support this goal in three main ways, providing an opportunity to:

- Hear from leading practitioners about how sustainability assessment is being applied within different decision-making contexts;
- Learn about tools and techniques that can support sustainability assessment;
- Learn from each other through interactive sessions.

In the second part of this first session we will explore some applications of sustainability assessment to strategic level decision-making, before moving onto discuss project-level sustainability assessment of various forms in Session 2.

Session 3 is devoted to examining the use of multi-criteria decision analysis as a tool for sustainability assessment, and we will be hearing from practitioners experienced in applying MCDA within a sustainability assessment context, as well as a leading international expert on the use of these techniques.

Session 4 reminds us of the importance of people in sustainability assessment. We will firstly explore the concept of social sustainability and then move into a discussion about the engagement of the community in sustainability assessment processes.

I think it is fair to say that these are areas of constant challenge to sustainability assessment practitioners, particularly as the broader community (of which we are all of course part in relation to some decisions!) demands better, more transparent decision-making, greater involvement in the decision-making process and better social outcomes.

At 5 o'clock we will draw the formal part of Day 1 to a close and open the bar for our Symposium Sundowner!

This is a very important part of the programme not only because it gives us all a chance to wind down after what promises to be quite an intense day and enjoy the view from the balcony over South Terrace, but because it is a chance to meet some new people and follow up with the presenters and other delegates on ideas and issues raised during the day. We hope you will all stay for a drink or two, especially as beer, wine and soft drinks are all included in your registration!

Tomorrow we will commence in Session 5 by following on from the MCDA discussion to explore some more tools for bringing together the many and varied considerations within a sustainability assessment, including a technique based upon cost benefit analysis contrasted with a more qualitative approach.

Session 6 will be of particular interest to those of you working in land planning and development, and will examine the challenges of integrating sustainability into these processes from a range of perspectives.

Sessions 7 and 8 are designed to bring it all together. We will move right away from formal presentations and invite everyone to contribute their views and experiences.

In Session 7 we will use the Open Space approach to organise ourselves into groups to discuss sustainability assessment topics of particular interest to you. This will be potentially the most rewarding session in the entire programme so we don't want to see anyone doing a runner at lunchtime tomorrow!

If you have a burning issue that you want to discuss with others who share your interest then this is your chance to make the best use of all the experience and wisdom we have here in the room. If you prefer to just listen and absorb then that's fine too.

In Session 8 we'll come together again and hear from each of the Open Space groups before collectively painting a picture of the state of sustainability assessment practice in Western Australia at the present, and more importantly what steps we can take collectively and individually back in our work places to progress SA practice.

Once again, we welcome you all. We're delighted at the response to this inaugural event and we hope you will enjoy it, participate enthusiastically, make new friends and networks and leave tomorrow with fresh ideas and revitalised enthusiasm for working together towards a more sustainable Western Australia.