

## **Environmental Sustainability Study Group Outcomes of Adelaide Workshop December 2004**

*To facilitate research and debate on environmental sustainability in rural, urban and remote regions:* this is the overarching aim of the Institute of Australian Geographers' Study Group on Environmental Sustainability (ENSU?), agreed at its workshop held at the University of Adelaide on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2004.

This report summarises the Workshop's objectives, lists the members present, outlines the discussions which focussed on four questions, and then presents the Workshop's outcomes in the form of agreed actions to be taken over the next 2-3 years. These actions are grouped under Publications, Teaching/Research, and Meetings.

The Workshop's **objectives** were to:

1. establish the aims of the Study Group;
2. discuss the means of achieving the aims;
3. consider the proposed processes, activities and outcomes of the Study Group, and
4. draw up a program of activities of the Study Group for the next several years.

**Present** were:

Jan Carey (Adelaide)  
Bev Clarke (Flinders)  
Arthur Conacher (UWA)  
Megan Farrelly (UWA)  
Brian Finlayson (Melb)  
Nick Gill (W'gong)  
Nick Harvey (Adelaide)  
Darren Holloway (UNSW)  
Alaric Maude (Flinders)  
David Pullar (UQld)  
Matthew Tonts (UWA)  
Steve Turton (JCU)

Discussion at the workshop centred around **four questions**:

5. What are the issues with which the study group should be concerned?
6. What roles do or should geographers play in environmental sustainability?
7. What are the most appropriate spatial units for researching and managing environmental problems and issues?
8. What are communities' roles in maintaining environmental sustainability?

### **1. What are the issues with which the study group should be concerned?**

Discussion took place in two groups, initially focussing on issues identified by Study Group members as canvassed by Kath Broderick and Arthur Conacher.

In addition to the overarching aim of ENSU, presented above, it was agreed that the Group should focus on identifying important themes rather than specific problems, such as weeds. The following themes were identified as those with which the Group should be concerned over the next several years:

- \$ sustainable regional development (bringing together economic, social and environmental geographers);
- \$ the crisis in water management (encompassing integrated catchment management);
- \$ interpretation and communication of environmental issues (including environmental education);
- \$ the role of communities in maintaining environmental sustainability;
- \$ ‘governance’ (the range of formal and informal policy and decision-making process and practice that inform and characterise environmental/NRM management. This includes institutional frameworks and power relations between groups and interests), and
- \$ the dynamics of landscape change and the environmental implications of global changes (including indicators, measurement, mapping, GIS).

Several other important themes may not be included in the above and were also discussed, namely:

- \$ environmental futuring and future dilemmas;
- \$ ecosystem services and biodiversity management;
- \$ resource consumption;
- \$ environmental justice;
- \$ investigations into future social and economic organisation if current activities are shown to be unsustainable: what do you do? and
- \$ population and resource pressures.

## **2. What roles do or should geographers play in environmental sustainability?**

These were considered in three connected but different areas by Alaric Maude:

1. research;
2. teaching, and
3. public policy.

On the negative side it was noted that few geographers write explicitly about sustainability, and that governments (and media) do not look to geographers when confronted with sustainability issues. There is an emphasis on NRM at the expense of other issues (such as manufacturing, the service industries and urban sustainability). The roles of personal and household consumption are neglected. Insufficient attention is given to teaching methods of environmental management other than EIA.

However, there are numerous positive answers to the question: what do geographers bring?

Geographers think holistically and can bring a broad, interrelated, systems holistic approach

to environmental sustainability. This is manifest in the study of the environment as functioning systems, involving ecosystem-based management. Geographers can think of a number of ways of managing the environment (not solely economic, or engineering, or plant-based). They also accept a variety of conceptual frameworks and theories. They study the relations between human and physical phenomena, and have an anthropocentric view of the biophysical environment: 'preservation' is not sustainability. Geographers should be good at discussing how the environment supports human life, incorporating the concept of ecosystem services. They should be able to explain how we got into difficulties, but without necessarily going to the fundamentals of explanation. Why does 'the economy' get us into strife? What needs to change? What is driving the 'sea change' (and 'tree change') phenomena? Geographers understand that environments and environmental problems are human constructs: for example, indigenous people and middle class whites have very different views of 'wilderness'. Finally, geographers understand the importance of both place and scale.

There was Group consensus that sustainability (and regional development) could (re)-integrate the sub-tribes of geography. Specific outcomes from this discussion are presented below under Workshop Outcomes heading.

### **3. What are the most appropriate spatial units for researching and managing environmental problems and issues?**

The Group considered a presentation by Arthur Conacher and noted that an array of different spatial units is used by different organisations for different purposes.

Government agencies (Federal and/or State) use different regions for planning, economic development, agriculture, environmental protection, and a range of social purposes (health, welfare, recreational, cultural, educational). Agency structures may broadly align with these regions, with offices located in the regions. Other specific purpose regions include national parks and other reserves, State forests, Aboriginal lands, heritage areas, water and defence. Local governments, singly or grouped (as in Regional Councils), have planning, environmental protection and community service responsibilities. Communities, local governments and agencies have various loosely integrated arrangements in Land Conservation Districts, Landcare and, more recently, broader 'regions' (based on common problems of land/environmental degradation; and as a requirement for funding by NHT2), as well as in Catchment/Sub-catchment groups, 'Friends' groups and 'communities of interest'. Other spatial units include administrative areas (e.g. LGAs, APB districts), statistical areas, coastal/marine systems, eco/bioregions, regions based on land use and/or land cover, city regions (cf Dickinson's *City, Region and Regionalism* and his later *City and Region*; also the idea of cities' ecological footprints) and, finally, research regions: where are the problems?

The closely associated question of scale was also discussed, including the 'problem of fit between ecosystems and institutions' (Pritchard *et al.*, 1998). It was considered that funding to local groups is sometimes inappropriate. However, institutional management is often a 'mess'; with examples including estuaries, the riparian zones of rivers in Victoria, and CMAs in Victoria and New South Wales. The problem of integrating the activities of agencies remains despite the Federal control of funds. The Netherlands' Sustainability Councils were suggested as a possible model.

It was suggested that perhaps the role of geographers is to look at targets, with an emphasis on the science; and to interpret the data produced by agencies. Geographers could also contribute by investigating the agencies themselves, identifying blockages and examining communication within and among institutions.

No specific outcomes emerged from this discussion, although it was agreed that there is no 'one size fits all' answer to the initial question.

#### **4. What are communities' roles in maintaining environmental sustainability?**

Discussion centred on a presentation by Megan Farrelly. She outlined the various ways in which communities are involved in environmental issues, including citizen juries, and canvassed the many reasons for involvement. Is public participation a means to an end or an end in itself? Participation is widely considered to be more than mere consultation. However, the question is increasingly being raised as to whether community involvement means that volunteers are doing the agencies' jobs.

Various areas of concern with community involvement include: the inability of many to get to meetings and community apathy (hence questions concerning representativeness of community groups); the lack of feedback to community participants by meeting organisers, and the lack of feedback by community 'representatives' to the stakeholders they purportedly represent; accountability (to the wider community, to funding bodies and to the environment); the NHT2-initiated scaling up to larger regions leaving smaller-area groups leaderless and uninvolved; leadership (how to obtain good leaders); representativeness (community groups generally are not representative of the wider community); the problem of different 'drivers' (there may be no real shared understanding amongst the members of a group); and 'patch protection', including distrust of agencies and inability to see beyond the local situation. Megan suggested that areas of focus for the ENSU could be:

- § the purpose of public participation in environmental sustainability;
- § the question of representation (versus appointing people for their skills: associated with that is the problem of finding good leaders and providing feedback to the broader community);
- § accountability — for the expenditure of public funds and to the broader community and the environment, and
- § the community/institutional interface: how can differences be reconciled?

Additional issues emerged from the discussion. These included evaluating the range of methods for involving the public; the role of private enterprise versus public agencies, and the question of whether public participation actually produces better outcomes. While this last question refers back to the objectives of public participation, it was considered that a role of ENSU could be to evaluate the effectiveness of public participation, both with regard to the extent of people's involvement and the actual environmental outcomes. How could effectiveness be evaluated, and by what criteria? Is there a danger of community groups being taken over by pressure groups? What is the role of 'the community' on private as distinct from public land? What is the role of corporations, which are also 'stakeholders'?

The divergence amongst scientific, local and agency knowledge was also discussed, as was the related question of how agencies can be involved effectively in the work of community groups. Can decision theory literature help? Unlike community groups it was noted that agency personnel respond to pressures/incentives leading to promotion. A related problem is that of population transience in community groups and agencies; the problem of loss of 'corporate memory'.

With regard to research a major issue discussed was the question of ethics. In particular, the growing demands on researchers of university ethics committees is stifling research, not stimulating it. Academics should be teaching people how to conduct research ethically, not just ticking boxes. It was suggested ENSU write to the Universities.

A closely related problem involving ethics approvals concerns the publication of research outcomes. Geographers study the real world. Geographical journals are therefore reluctant to publish research papers wherein organisations, key individuals and even places cannot be identified.

### **Workshop outcomes**

Several actions were agreed to by the workshop participants. The actions are grouped under *publications, teaching/research* and *meetings*.

#### *Publications*

*A book on sustainability* will be edited by Alaric Maude and Bev Clarke. Chapters will be written by geographers, with the book aimed at policy makers and the public. It will not be a text book. Timetable: book planning and contract completed by December 2005; first draft December 2006; publication mid-2007. The book is to include a chapter on public participation.

*A text book on integrated rural area planning* has been contracted, to be written by Arthur and Jeanette Conacher and Matthew Tonts for Cambridge University Press. With luck, the first draft will be completed by December 2005.

*A technical manual* aimed at landcare, catchment and other community groups was discussed but held over at this stage. Any offers?

Theme issues for *Geographical Research* (formerly *Australian Geographical Studies*) and *Australian Geographer* were discussed. A theme issue (or part of an issue) on environmental sustainability for *Geographical Research*, arising from papers presented at the IAG conference in Adelaide in May 2004, is planned for the second issue of 2005. *GR* is booked for theme issues until 2008.

A series of papers by geographers published in the *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* would highlight the contributions geographers make in this field. Members of ENSU are to be encouraged to do this through the Group's Newsletter, by email circular and through distribution of this report. Eric Anderson, the journal's foundation editor, has

resigned but manuscripts can still be sent through him at [ehanderson@netspeed.com.au](mailto:ehanderson@netspeed.com.au). However, from March 2005 the journal will be edited by a team based at the School of Natural and Rural Systems Management, University of Queensland, with Professor Helen Ross and Dr Grant Wardell-Johnson as co-editors. Contact details will be provided in the March 2005 issue and on the EIANZ website, <http://www.eianz.org/>. The objective is to get a continuous flow of papers by geographers published in AJEM. The following possible papers were offered at the Workshop:

- § Darren Holloway (UNSW): water management
- § David Pullar (UQ): land-use impact, Victoria
- § Andrew Hall (?) Honours student with Nick Harvey: SEA and wind power

Arthur Conacher is to write a Commentary on ENSU's workshop for *Geographical Research*, for the Group's website (currently included in the IAG's website) and possibly for the *Newsletters* of the IAG and the ENSU.

### *Teaching/research*

*What is being done in our teaching programs in relation to sustainability?* Nick Gill will commence identification of geographers teaching sustainability-related courses or programs, with a view to holding a Workshop on this important question. Discussion would include sharing ideas and resources, comparing case studies and reviewing approaches. However, due to Nick's other commitments the Workshop will not be held until the IAG conference in July 2007 (in either Hobart or Melbourne). Identification of relevant geographers commenced at the Workshop.

Abstracts of relevant theses are to be supplied by Workshop participants (and other members of ENSU) to Alaric Maude. The point is that much student research relevant to environmental sustainability is not seeing the light of day. Alaric will develop a database of relevant research.

### *Meetings*

#### IAG Conference Armidale 19-22 July 2005

For several good reasons IAG Study Groups are obliged to be involved in IAG conferences. Given the shortness of time, for the forthcoming IAG conference in Armidale (July 2005) it was agreed to ask the organisers to list a session on Sustainable Regional Development. Members of the Study Group are encouraged to submit papers and it will be interesting to see whether submissions come from people who are not currently members of the Group. Arthur has asked Jim Walmsley to include the session in the program and has also offered to be identified as convener if required. Unfortunately the timing of the conference coincides with the first week of UWA's S2, which means that Matthew Tonts is unable to go to Armidale. (Disturbingly, other than Alaric Maude, no one at the Workshop was intending/able to go to Armidale.)

Alaric Maude offered to organise a workshop on the ethics question, with the outcomes to be submitted to the ethics inquiry. However, the deadline for that inquiry precedes the Armidale

conference. Is the idea of the research ethics Workshop still worth pursuing?

IGU Regional Conference and joint meeting of the IAG and NZ Geog Soc Brisbane 3-7 July 2006: Theme: Regional Responses to Global Changes

It was agreed that the Study Group propose three sessions. Each is considered to be of broader interest than just to the members of the Group. Arthur was to contact John Holmes, which he has done. John has expressed strong support, though I suspect he has mis-read our proposal as involving only one session. But he writes that we should go ahead with our plans. The proposed sessions are:

1. The effectiveness of public participation in environmental sustainability. Workshop. Convener: Bev Clarke. How successful is public participation, and based on what criteria? The workshop should include participants from other disciplines as well as geographers.
2. The dynamics of landscape change in relation to environmental sustainability. Symposium and possible panel discussion. Convener: Deirdre Dragovich (who was not at the Adelaide workshop but has subsequently agreed to take this on). The emphasis will be on physical processes.
3. Regional governance. Convener: Alaric Maude to invite Marcus Lane.

IAG Conference Melbourne/Hobart July 2007

Workshop reviewing environmental sustainability teaching, followed by a paper for AJEM. Convener: Nick Gill.

**Conclusion**

The Workshop set out to: establish the aims of the Study Group; discuss the means of achieving the aims; consider the proposed processes, activities and outcomes of the Study Group, and draw up a program of activities of the Study Group for the next several years. These aims were largely achieved, with the overall aim of ENSU agreed as being *to facilitate research and debate on environmental sustainability in rural, urban and remote regions*. A range of themes was also identified and agreed upon.

The second objective of the Workshop, to consider means of achieving the aims and the proposed processes, activities and outcomes of the Study Group, was only partly fulfilled. Processes and activities were identified although perhaps more by default than explicitly; but the possible outcomes of the Group's activities were not discussed. How will we know when the Group has achieved its objectives? Finally, a program of activities for the next several years was drawn up.

Unfortunately there was no discussion on when the Group should next meet. I had assumed this would take place at the Armidale IAG conference, and it was only at the end of the second day when I realised that of those present, only Alaric Maude was definitely planning

to be there. We should have arranged an alternative meeting, to review progress in implementing the Group's agreed aims. I will work on it ... .

### **Postscript**

A term that notably was not discussed at the Workshop was 'environmental sustainability' itself. Prior to the Workshop the 1999 Federal *EPBC Act*'s definition of 'environment' had been circulated as the working definition for ENSU. But 'sustainability' was not canvassed. The probable reasons (since it was not discussed ... !) include a feeling that we would go round in circles, and related to that, a desire to get on with it and achieve something.

Arthur Conacher  
Study Group Convener  
24 January, 2005

### *References*

- Dickinson, R.E. (1947), *City, region and regionalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (in the US version published by OUP, New York, intriguingly the sub-title is: *a geographical contribution to human ecology*).
- Dickinson, R.E. (1964), *City and region: a geographical interpretation*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Pritchard, L. Jr., Colding, J., Berkes, F., Svedin, U. and Folke, C. 1998: *The problem of fit between ecosystems and institutions: a report for the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change*, IHDP Working Paper No. 2, Bonn.