

# **2021 Youth Summit “Closing Address (includes wrap up of first 3 days) (Thursday, 22 April 2021)**

## **Introduction:**

This online Youth Summit event has focussed on the crucial importance of youth involvement and the voice of youth in helping to progress genuine sustainable development in our region and in our wider world. The youth of today are the citizens of tomorrow. They have a strong vested interest in helping to answer some of the big questions associated with the notion of human sustainable development: how can we live well in this place for the long-term future, in our local areas, in our region, in our country, and on our planet? And what is the preferred future we want to choose, to develop our ability to live in that way?

To sum up the three days of the Summit, presenter topics and audience responses are clustered here under a few themes. They all link to a core message: that there is an urgent need to move or transition rapidly away from ‘business-as-usual’ ways of doing things, toward a truly sustainable development path for our region and the world in the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **THEME 1: The ‘push’ forces which can encourage future sustainable development**

- **The push away from traditional, business as usual forms of development**

One ‘push’ toward better forms of development comes from the serious bad news about what continued, unsustainable development will mean for human and other species wellbeing and quality of life. Any sensible and prudent society would surely want to avoid these negative consequences. We need to overcome, quickly, the massive environmental and sustainability problems we have accumulated from 40 + years of a form of unsustainable development known as neoliberal economics, with its ideas of the so-called ‘wisdom of markets’ the central importance of growth, and the delusional idea that the natural world will provide a free dump for all of our waste and pollution without producing any negative consequences. Such economic ideas have dominated our ideas of progress and development over that period.

Although neoliberal economics did once provide multiple benefits and progress to a minority of the world’s communities, we are now experiencing increasingly negative impacts from this form of development. Uncontrolled climate change and growing economic and social inequality around the world are just two of the major problems which demonstrate that neoliberalism is no longer fit for purpose to guide human society into a sustainable future. At the same time, the negative impacts which a ‘growth at all costs’ form of development is producing can only get much worse without a serious and prolonged effort by all sectors of society to transition, rapidly, to sustainable forms of development. The very good news is that we know how to do this – and we will hear more about that good news a bit later.

But staying with some of the negative impacts for a while longer. These have been well understood and described for decades now by scientists and researchers around the world, and some were presented in the Youth Summit by Andy Le Brocq and Jane O’Sullivan. Some of the take home messages included:

- We must listen to and urgently act upon the warnings that science and evidence-based research is giving us about the unsustainable development path we are on. This path can only produce an increasingly unpleasant, dangerous, and ultimately lethal global environment for ever larger numbers of people and other species, in both the developing and developed world.
- Therefore, we must develop rapid control over global heating and uncontrolled climate change trends, and their serious knock-on side effects.
- We must move rapidly to halt biodiversity loss, and start repairing the damage we have inflicted on the natural systems of the planet.
- We must tackle the challenge of human population growth, which is one of the drivers of increased impacts on the natural systems of the planet which support us all.

That was the bad news, and nobody wants to hear bad news. But it was also a call to action. And acting on serious problems which can benefit society, and encouraging others to do so, can be a positive way to help deal with feelings of frustration, anxiety or helplessness which may arise when we seek to support solutions to environmental problems such as climate change.

So, on a personal level, we might feel better off, overall, if we stop not trying to think about environmental problems at all and distracting ourselves with other matters all the time. Rather, we can find ways to come together in our families, in our personal networks, or in our schools to find support over environmental concerns, and to develop ideas which can help tackle, even small ways, the seriousness and urgency of the environmental and sustainability problems we face. And it was clear from some of the student responses at the Summit that this was the approach that some schools were taking in developing environmental clubs which could help promote **sustainability education** to students.

- **The role and value of sustainability education**

So, what are the benefits of sustainability education? One purpose of such education is to provide citizens with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and the communication tools, to help them promote the value of sustainable development ideas across their communities. As already suggested, when people are actively engaged in working on solutions to problems, when they feel they have some ability to influence outcomes, and particularly when they are being supported by likeminded individuals – they tend to experience less anxiety and distress. In this area of Summit presentations, it was great to see **the Ursie’s Earthies College environment club or service group** incorporating such sustainability education and communication principles and putting them into action. This is a great model for other local schools to follow, as was the recycling work being undertaken by students at **Centenary Heights** school.

The presentation by Paul McDonald of SQ Landscapes demonstrated that sustainability education can come in many forms - but that if you want to get environmental or sustainability messages across to a particular audience - you would be well advised to first understand their viewpoint – on how the world works for them, and how they tend to behave within those personal ‘rules’. We then need to design sustainability educational messages that fit with those individual viewpoints – not the other way around. This was a valuable point about the need to tailor messages in sustainability education.

And for an older age group of citizens active in their community, sustainability education messaging might help them cut through complacency amongst our political leaders, and those others who hold the power to make the required sustainable development changes – but who currently resist doing so.

## **THEME 2: The ‘pull’ forces which can encourage future sustainable development**

Which brings us to the good news and ideas which can help pull us toward a genuinely sustainable form of future human development, one in which the needs of People, Planet and Prosperity are consistently considered and balanced before development can proceed. Such a process of genuine, sustainable development has never been fully achieved over the last 30 + years of the existence of the idea. But we now have no choice but to make it a reality in the next few decades ahead if we wish to avoid the serious impacts already described.

- **How to make social systems more supportive of sustainable development**

Dr Michelle Maloney from the Australian Earth Laws Alliance outlined two paths to achieving sustainable development. The first was through changing the way our systems of education, law and government influence and run our society. To take just one example: in Australia there is a need to change the way that our governments adopt sustainable development strategies. In many cases there is considerable room for improvement.

- **How can governments become more supportive of sustainable development?**

Firstly, we as citizens can use our sustainability education knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to speak to those in power with increasingly unified and informed voices. We need to insist that our

political leaders and powerbrokers lead on sustainability development adoption. In the present, unsustainable world, governments need to be more honest in communicating the growing environmental challenges we face, and the solutions which do exist, and which need to be adopted, urgently, to tackle them. Whilst ensuring the safety, security and wellbeing of the citizens who elected them, governments need to be actively guiding us out of the unsustainable mess we are in – and toward a brighter, genuinely sustainable future. To do that, they need a plan to start with, such as a sustainable development road map, which they should develop in close consultation with their citizens.

Governments should be acting on the science and evidence-based requirements to ensure greatly reduced greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from their operations and from their communities. They should be setting ambitious renewable energy and net zero GHG emissions targets; and they should be giving far greater, real protection to the natural places and species they have responsibility for, whilst supporting the restoration of damaged environments. Finally, governments should be actively involving their citizens in government decision making processes on all sustainability problems. They should be using authentic deliberative and participatory democracy processes to do this – creating citizen juries and citizen assemblies to help advise government decision making on climate change, biodiversity loss and improving social justice outcomes.

In another presentation, Cr Megan O’Hara-Sullivan from Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) talked about the benefit of young people and students seeking out and talking with councillors about their environmental and sustainability concerns. It would be interesting to see how TRC representatives might respond to some of the sustainability issues covered here.

- **Changing mindsets or worldviews from human to earth centred**

Dr Maloney also talked about how the beliefs and attitudes we hold about the way the world works – known as our mindset or worldview, has a major influence on how we relate to the natural world and our environment. For sustainable development to really take off in the years ahead, we must develop a new story in our heads, a new worldview about what represents human progress, achievement, and success. Dr Maloney made a contrast between a traditional Western, Anglo-Australian worldview and those held by First Nations – and how the contrast might influence the way we think about caring for the environment and natural systems. This was a point also touched upon by Paul McDonald when he talked about the value of bringing Indigenous knowledge into mainstream Australian land management.

And as Clem Campbell explained, if we believe that ‘having more’ is our ultimate measure of success, we may tend to live a life much higher in consumption, and therefore waste, than if we follow the principle of ‘being more’ of taking pleasure and satisfaction in developing our skills and talents as a citizen. As Liz Bowen suggested, we might also see that achieving inner, spiritual change is sometimes as important as seeking external social and political change. But these two things may be closely connected through the values we hold. As Dr Maloney pointed out, if those values are individual and human-centred, we may feel less compassion for our fellow humans and other species, and therefore less inclined to help them – as compared to the situation of seeing ourselves as just one small part of the interconnected web of life – with all parts deserving respect and fair treatment.

### **THEME 3: Building on existing strategies and technologies to speed up sustainable development adoption**

- **The Circular Economy Concept**

From linear or make/waste/ dump mindsets which are characteristic of a traditional, unsustainable economy - to the idea of a circular economy. Dr Polly Burey, from USQ, took us through some of the basics of so-called circular economy thinking. This is a promising economic model for the future, one which can power sustainable development whilst greatly eliminating waste and pollution and reducing the need for raw materials to a minimum. Based originally on the observance of flows of energy and materials in nature, the circular economy has been in operation in some form in many parts of the world for many decades.

In our own local area, Michael Hockey from TRC, described the impressive rates of diversion of waste from landfill provided by a new generation of waste management facilities, and Cr. Megan O'Hara-Sullivan talked about how landfill waste gases were being used to power water pumping facilities, and how pyrolysis, or waste to energy technologies, were being researched and refined in the local council area.

Despite these shining examples of the circular economy concept in operation, until recently, it has been overshadowed by the linear, growth-at-all-costs economic model already described. So clearly, we need to greatly ramp up circular economy applications in everything we do. This is another example of where the need to change mindsets is vitally important, as is the role of government in giving strong leadership and plenty of resources to boost existing, proven initiatives, and for the research and development, and case study testing of new ones.

- **Solar electricity and a future renewable energy economy**

Peter Sutrin, from Proven Energy pointed to the already great Greenhouse Gas/carbon reduction outcomes achieved by the massive increase in interest in renewable energy generation in Australia over the last 20 years or so – particularly in the domestic roof top solar sector. Many progressive economists, such as Ross Garnaut in Australia, have pointed to the amazing renewable energy and manufacturing opportunities we have in this country. By combining circular economy thinking and strategies, with renewable energy generation capacity based on our fantastic solar and wind resources, many experts believe that we could become a renewable energy superpower for the Asia Pacific region. We could export so-called green hydrogen for energy overseas, and produce green hydrogen, low or zero carbon manufactured steel for international markets. Some of these projects are getting off the ground in Australia - but largely through private funding interest at present. This exciting technology side of sustainable development promotion could be boosted dramatically if the Federal government got serious in transitioning this country to a genuinely sustainable development future.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

The push for sustainable development in 2021 is about taking every opportunity to use our knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to do what we can to live sustainably in our own lives, in our families, in our communities and in this country. But is also about holding our political leaders, and all those in power, to the same standard; so that they do their utmost, at their level, to speed the urgently needed transition to a climate safe, more prosperous, fairer, more equal, and ecologically healthier future world. This would be a world in which the needs of people, planet and prosperity are consistently and rationally balanced to aid sustainable development decision making, using good quality sources of information taken from science and evidence-based research.

The horrendous alternative, of allowing continued business as usual economics and unsustainable development to proceed, and the ongoing catastrophes that will produce, need to be properly understood and acknowledged. But that understanding does not have to paralyse us from acting strongly and decisively to call for a future sustainable development path from all sectors of society. Indeed, it is better for our peace of mind that we do act now, in whatever way we can.

## **A sustainable development vision and call to action**

To return to an idea in the introduction of this program – although it may have been a lot of fun for a privileged few, in terms of long-term sustainability of human society, surely it cannot be argued that we have lived well in this place over the last 40+ years: whether in our local areas, in our region, country and on our planet. If we had lived well in sustainability terms, if we had been responsible stewards of these places, if we had not been so deluded by the seductive message of economic growth and consumption 'of having more' and not 'being more' we would not be facing the incredible challenges and threats we are now.

Sustainable Development at the most general level, is about pushing for a rational, preferred, future that fits human ideas about progress and prosperity within what the planet can support – and not the other way around. Our current best science and evidence-based knowledge support the belief that we do have the capacity to live well on this planet in a future which provides 'enough for everyone,

forever.’ But that opportunity cannot be achieved using the standard neoliberal economic development models employed over the last 40+ years.

The exciting and energising story about sustainable development is that we already have all that we need to achieve it now. We now better understand the natural planetary boundaries we must respect and not exceed in this new human or Anthropocene era. We have existing technologies to greatly speed our journey towards a low carbon future; and new technology innovations, which can speed our achievement of that goal, are appearing all the time. We also have a strong public call from many places around the world for a sustainable development. All we really lack now is the political will from our leaders to get on with the job - and the push back from vested interests who for whatever reason (usually to do with money) are resistant to speeding the course to an urgently needed, sustainable development future.

But even given such short-sighted resistance - we must not be distracted from the key objective of supporting and promoting sustainable development at every opportunity. Especially for our young people - the future depends on it.

### **Self-help for sustainable development educators and activists**

[Research has shown](#) that for some young people, thinking about the sort of environmental problems discussed during the youth summit, such as climate change and environmental damage, can cause anxiety and distress. Fortunately, such reactions may be reduced if young people develop appropriate coping strategies to help them deal with such concerns.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has produced several publications which offer ideas to help counteract the possibility of feeling stressed, anxious, helpless, or isolated when thinking about or helping work toward solving environmental problems.

Such ideas include talking with trusted others to acknowledge your feelings about climate change or other environmental problems. Working to develop and communicate a personal vision for a sustainable, zero carbon world. Working with likeminded others to promote sustainable development in groups. And spending time in nature, enjoying and valuing what remains.

In the downloadable [Climate Change Empowerment Handbook](#) from the APS (2017) these ideas, and others offered to reduce negative responses, are listed under the acrostic [A.C.T.I.V.A.T.E.](#) Readers are encouraged to access such advice when necessary.

*(Written by Andrew Nicholson, HOPE senior researcher Qld, 10 May 2021)*