

## Whatever happened to the use of the term Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD)?

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### What is Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD)?

ESD requires the effective integration of economic, environmental, social and equity considerations in decision-making processes. ESD aims to provide for the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

### What is the Precautionary Principle?

The **Precautionary Principle** (or **precautionary approach**) generally defines actions on issues considered to be uncertain, for instance applied in assessing [risk management](#).<sup>[1]</sup> The principle is used by policy makers to justify discretionary decisions in situations where there is the possibility of harm from making a certain decision (e.g. taking a particular course of action) when extensive scientific knowledge on the matter is lacking. The principle implies that there is a [social responsibility](#) to protect the public from exposure to harm, when scientific investigation has found a plausible risk. These protections can be relaxed only if further scientific findings emerge that provide sound evidence that no harm will result.



In some legal systems, as in [law of the European Union](#), the application of the precautionary principle has been made a [statutory](#) requirement in some areas of law.<sup>[2]</sup>

Regarding international conduct, the first endorsement of the principle was in 1982 when the [World Charter for Nature](#) was adopted by the [United Nations General Assembly](#), while its first international implementation was in 1987 through the [Montreal Protocol](#). Soon after, the principle integrated with many other legally binding international treaties such as the [Rio Declaration](#) and [Kyoto Protocol](#).

Reference/further information - <https://www.edo.org.au/publication/what-is-ecologically-sustainable-development-esd/>

### The Rise of Ecologically Sustainable Development in Australia

#### 1. Early Adoption and Conceptual Framing (Late 1980s – Early 1990s)

- The concept of ESD gained formal recognition in Australia in the late 1980s, influenced by the global momentum from the 1987 Brundtland Report, which defined sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising future generations. Australia emphasized ecological sustainability as a core principle, focusing on maintaining natural systems alongside economic and social development  
[www.sciencedirect.com milespeter061.medium.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com/milespeter061.medium.com).
- In June 1990, the Australian Government released a foundational document on Ecologically Sustainable Development, marking the country's commitment to embedding ecological principles in development planning [nepa.nt.gov.au](http://nepa.nt.gov.au).

#### National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD) (1992)

- A major milestone was the 1992 release of the **National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD)**, developed collaboratively by the Australian

Government; and States and Territories. This strategy articulated clear principles such as the precautionary principle, intergenerational equity, biodiversity conservation, and the need to value environmental resources properly [lec.nsw.gov.au/research-repository.griffith.edu.au](http://lec.nsw.gov.au/research-repository.griffith.edu.au) ; [academic.oup.com](http://academic.oup.com).

- NSESD influenced legislation, planning, and natural resource management across Australia, embedding ESD into governmental decision-making and corporate practices. It also aligned Australia with the global Agenda 21 framework agreed upon at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit [lec.nsw.gov.au](http://lec.nsw.gov.au), [www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au).

### **3. Institutionalisation and Legal Embedding**

ESD principles became embedded in key legislation such as the **Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)**, which remains central to Australia's environmental regulation – **Refer Appendix A for further information**.

- State and local governments incorporated ESD concepts into planning frameworks, environmental assessments, and sustainability strategies.
- The private sector began adopting environmental management systems and sustainability reporting, reflecting growing mainstream acceptance of ESD - [envcomm.act.gov.au](http://envcomm.act.gov.au).

### **Challenges and Decline in Momentum**

#### **1. Fragmentation and Political Shifts (2000s onward)**

- Despite the strong start, implementation of ESD became fragmented across jurisdictions, with differing levels of commitment and enforcement. Political changes led to inconsistent support, with some governments prioritizing economic growth and resource exploitation over ecological sustainability - [research-repository.griffith.edu.au](http://research-repository.griffith.edu.au), [academic.oup.com](http://academic.oup.com).



- Australia's economic reliance on mining and fossil fuels created tensions between development and environmental protection, limiting the full realisation of ESD goals - [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net).

#### **2. Complexity and Implementation Barriers**

- The broad, interdisciplinary nature of ESD made it difficult to operationalize fully within existing governance systems. The challenge of balancing short-term economic interests with long-term ecological sustainability often led to compromises and weakened enforcement - [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com), [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net).
- Public understanding and political will fluctuated, sometimes reducing the prioritization of sustainable development in policy agendas.

#### **3. Environmental Crises Highlighting Gaps**

- Increasing climate change impacts, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events exposed weaknesses in Australia's sustainability frameworks, prompting criticism that ESD had not sufficiently prevented environmental degradation or adapted to emerging challenges - [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net), [www.mdpi.com](http://www.mdpi.com).

## **Current Status and Emerging Opportunities**

- ESD remains a foundational principle in Australian environmental policy and planning, underpinning legislation like the EPBC Act and informing environmental assessments and natural resource management strategies - [envcomm.act.gov.au](http://envcomm.act.gov.au) – **Refer Appendix A for further information.**
- There is growing integration of climate change mitigation and adaptation within ESD frameworks, reflecting contemporary priorities.
- Indigenous knowledge and stewardship are increasingly recognized as vital to ecological sustainability and are being more actively incorporated in policy and practice.
- Community-led programs, such as Landcare and citizen science, continue to embody ESD principles through local action.
- Recent policy discussions emphasize the need for stronger national leadership, better coordination across jurisdictions, and systemic reforms to realize ESD's full potential - [research-repository.griffith.edu.au](http://research-repository.griffith.edu.au) [www.mdpi.com](http://www.mdpi.com).



## **Summary Table**

Phase	Characteristics	Challenges
Rise (Late 1980s–1990s)	NSESD adoption, legal frameworks, community initiatives	Early fragmentation, balancing economic and ecological goals
Decline (2000s onward)	Policy inconsistency, political shifts, economic pressures	Resource reliance, implementation complexity, weakened enforcement
Current	Climate integration, Indigenous inclusion, community action	Need for coordinated leadership, systemic reform

## **Additional Resources and Key Documents**

- The original **National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (1992)** remains a foundational policy document.
- The **Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999** reflect the legal embedding of ESD principles – **Refer Appendix A for further information.**
- Reports and reviews by the **Intergovernmental Committee for Ecologically Sustainable Development (ICESD)** provide insights into implementation challenges.
- Academic analyses such as those by M. Howes (2021) and historical summaries of Australia's sustainable development policies offer detailed context

[research-repository.griffith.edu.au](http://research-repository.griffith.edu.au), [academic.oup.com](http://academic.oup.com).

This history highlights the complexity of embedding ecological sustainability in a resource-dependent economy and federal system with diverse political interests. Yet, the enduring presence of ESD in policy and community action offers a hopeful foundation for future progress.

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## **Appendix A**

The Environmental Defenders Office undertook a review of the EPBC Act on February 4, 2021 as outlined below.

‘Trajectory Unsustainable’: 10 Key Findings of the EPBC Act Review Final Report

Essential reading:

<https://www.edo.org.au/2021/02/04/trajectory-unsustainable-10-key-findings-of-the-epbc-act-review-final-report/>

The Environmental Defenders Office also provided an update on the reforms to the EPBC Act as proposed by the government on November 7, 2025 as outlined below.

EPBC Act reform update – Bills pass the House of Representatives and draft Standard for Matters of National Environmental Significance released

Essential reading:

<https://www.edo.org.au/2025/11/07/epbc-act-reform-update-bills-pass-the-house-of-representatives-and-draft-standard-for-matters-of-national-environmental-significance-released/>