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Environment



On the 7th April 2008, YACSA ran the YOUTHink Forum for young people across South Australia to discuss issues important to them. YACSA identified the issues of **bullying, media, social networking sites, body image, debt and the environment** for discussion.

Australian young people are well aware of, and worried about, local, state, national and global environmental issues, because they have an affect on everyone. They have identified global warming and climate change as being the most important environmental issues, followed by animal cruelty, the effects of drought (in particular the decline of the Murray River), endangered species of flora and fauna, poor maintenance of community spaces and local parks, and water pollution. There is a call by young people for wealthy nations in particular to lead the way in terms of stopping climate change, and for governments to take more responsibility. Sustainability is a large environmental issue, with young people identifying a link between climate change and potential for conflict over resources in the future, and recognising that to be truly successful in combating global warming, individuals, communities, and countries will need to work together.¹

The Greenhouse Effect

Greenhouse gases are a natural part of the atmosphere. They trap the warmth of the sun and so regulate the surface temperature of the Earth at levels that can support life. Unfortunately human activity such as burning fossil fuels and clearing land are increasing the amount of these gases, which results in more heat being trapped and therefore a change to the climate. This contributes to global warming, considered to be one of the most important international environmental issues, and is known as the greenhouse effect.²

The Ozone Layer

The average global surface temperature has increased over the last century, and it is estimated that Australia will become hotter and drier over the next decade. Ozone near the surface of the Earth can be a harmful pollutant, but in the stratosphere it is helpful because it absorbs most of the damaging ultraviolet radiation (UV) in the sun's rays. Problems can be caused for ecosystem and human health when excessive UV radiation reaches the surface of the Earth. Concentrations of substances that deplete ozone in the stratosphere are increasing because of human activity. Approximately 2% to 4% of ozone over Australia has been lost every decade since the 1950s due to the emissions of these substances that deplete ozone, and as such people are now more exposed to UV radiation than before.³

Water

In Australia, water is a limited resource, which is stretched and pressured even further with the population increase, particularly in urban coastal areas.⁴ Taking too much water out of the groundwater systems and rivers of Australia is now widely recognised as having negative impacts both on the economy and the environment. Some of these include a decrease in native flora and fauna populations, as well as a decline in agricultural production caused by limited availability of water or increasing rates of salinity. The quality of water is related directly to the health of rivers and wetlands. River health problems such as blue-green algae outbreaks and turbidity can be exacerbated by human activities. These health problems, which decrease water quality and

¹ Garcia de Heer, N 2008, 'Youth Speak: a conversation for the future', United Nations Youth Association of Australia, pp. 13 – 15

² Australia Bureau of Statistics 2007, *Australia's Environment: Issues and Trends*, catalogue number 4613.0, ABS, Canberra, viewed online 16th September 2008 <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/330bc8fd50bee4ca2573c6001049f9!OpenDocument>>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

volume, can have a negative impact on industries such as tourism and agriculture, as well as damaging the flora and fauna that rely on the water for survival.⁵

Population

Australia's approximate population in early 2007 was just below 21 million, a number estimated on Census data from 2006. More pressure is put on the environment as Australia's population increases in both affluence and numbers, and the majority now live in coastal regions despite the large area of land available. This has environmental implications for air, land and water quality because of the pressure put on resources, such as clearing land for urban development which results in a loss of habitat for native flora and fauna and a decrease in vegetation cover which contributes to such land degradation problems as salinity, erosion, and weed invasion.⁶

Waste and Landfill

The bulk of Australia's energy sources are non-renewable. In 2005, only 4% of Australians used solar energy for things like heating water. Approximately 32.4 million tonnes of solid waste (1.629 tonnes of waste per person) was generated in 2002-2003. To get rid of this waste, there is a heavy dependence on landfill, with more than half (54%) of all solid waste disposed in 2002-2003 going into landfills. The main environmental concerns of having a strong dependency on landfill are the emission of greenhouse gases as well as the potential for long-term pollution through leaching of consumer electronic products, earlier generation rechargeable batteries, heavy metals, and household chemicals.⁷

Recommendations

- Encouraging young people to join community, environmental, political or social groups
- Encouraging young people to reduce their environmental footprint
- Advocating for the government to get rid of means testing on the solar rebate
- Advocating for an improvement in the public transport system
- Advocating for a proactive, rather than reactive, approach
- Advocating for more bike lanes to be developed
- Supporting more effective recycling of water
- Supporting local councils to create more green space and national parks
- Advocating for renewable resources to be used instead of non-renewable ones
- Supporting efficient energy use
- Promoting environmentally friendly lifestyles and habits
 - Encouraging people to use rainwater tanks
 - Encouraging people to use green / paper bags
 - Advocating for the reduction in packaging of products
 - Encouraging people to recycle
 - Encouraging people to turn appliances off at the power point when they are not being used
 - Supporting the use of solar power
 - Encouraging people to take shorter showers
 - Promoting the use of green transport (bikes, car pool, public transport)
- Advocating for a change to current laws and policies to become more environmentally friendly
- Supporting environmental education
- Advocating for government to allocate funding to renewable sources

Further resources on environmental issues

<http://wwf.org.au/footprint/calculator>

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia October 2008

⁵ Bureau of Meteorology 2007, *Six years of widespread drought in southern and eastern Australia November 2001-October 2007*, Special Climate Statement 14, National Climate Centre, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 1

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, loc.cit

⁷ Ibid.