

A Submission

to the

Review and Public Hearings of the

Planning Assessment Commission

NSW State Government

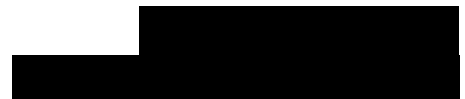
regarding the

Proposed Cobbora Coal Project

Warrumbungle, Mid Western and Wellington Local Government Areas.

Tuesday, 11th December 2012.

From Phil Jones



My name is Phil Jones and I speak on my own behalf as a high school science teacher from Sydney.

In my submission today, I will express opposition to the proposed coal mine based on the need we have as a community to move away from the Growth Economy to the Steady State Economy. In doing so I will address the need to move from the term “sustainability” as applied to projects that have an impact on the environment.

The Urgent Need for Discussion and Movement towards the Steady State Economy.

In 1972 the Club of Rome published “Limits to Growth” and more recently, research has indicated that of the various scenarios generated by their computer modelling the “standard run”, is the one that has occurred over the intervening 40 years. The “standard run” involves the world society proceeding in a traditional manner without any major deviation from the policies pursued during most of the twentieth century. This scenario strongly suggests a major breakdown in our ecological-social-economic system occurring by the middle of this century.

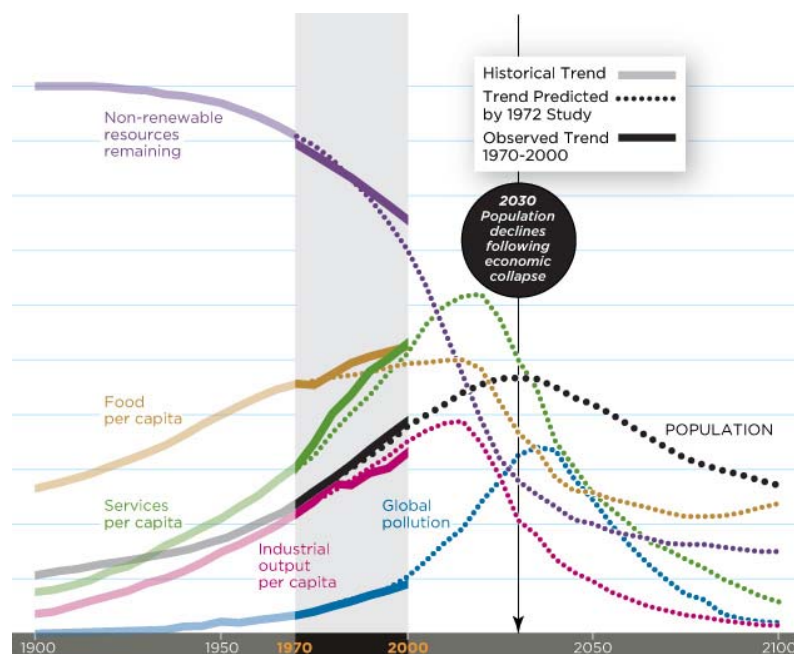


Chart Sources: Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. and Behrens III, W.W. (1972) (Linda Eckstein)

To the detriment of current thinking, “Limits to Growth” has been flippantly dismissed because Thomas Malthus was incorrect in his predictions and that some of Paul Erlich’s warnings turned out to be entirely extreme. I am not aware of any other serious study that offers a guide as to the ecological future of the planet. In the absence of any other study I strongly urge this commission to take the modelling of the Club of Rome into account as you review the options associated with this mine.

The Club of Rome also points out:

Global Society is also likely to overshoot - and then be forced to decline or collapse – because of significant reaction delays in the global economy caused by the time society needs to accept global limits, by the institutional delays made in decision making, and by the time it needs to show results once action has been taken.

Like many other reports on the world’s environment, urgency is stressed. A major collapse appears to be a question of when, not if, unless we take this threat seriously.

Briefly - Features of a Steady State Economy.

While steady states are a feature of industrial production, a comparison with steady state ecosystems is clearly more apt. Some of the more obvious features of the steady state economy can be identified when we compare our current globalised economy with a stable lake, forest, or marine ecosystem.

Some of these features are:

1. Little or no mining - as in natural stable ecosystems, there are no raw materials added to the system.
2. No net reduction in the quantity of carbon that is fixed, either organically (in the form of primary producers) or as fossil fuels – as in natural ecosystems the biomass of the primary producers of the ecosystem remains relatively constant.
3. No power generation derived from non-renewable resources – as in natural ecosystems, the energy that drives the overwhelming number of stable ecosystems comes from the sun.
4. A vast amount of repairing, recycling and reprocessing – as in natural ecosystems, organisms that facilitate decomposition play an absolutely essential role in recycling.
5. A far greater degree of job sharing or considerably reduced numbers of working hours for people.

The need for problem recognition.

Failure to recognise the Steady State Economy as the “economy we have to have” is to invite “death by a thousand cuts”.

Common expressions such as the “need for sustainable development” or “the need for sustainable growth” do not define or communicate to the public the nature of the problem that our ecological-social-economic system faces.

In focussing on “sustainability,” the ultimate solution to the ecological crisis, (i.e. the steady state economy), is overlooked. What is needed is a clear confrontation of the all pervasive acceptance of the growth economy as a desirable social objective. In the words of Ross Gittens, economics writer for the Sydney Morning Herald, “Virtually all our business people, economists and politicians believe it to be not just possible but desirable for the economy to be growing forever, and the faster the better. They regard the achievement of growth as one of the most important objectives of government and they have no doubt that this accords with the wishes of almost everyone in the electorate”. This is the challenge and all steps need to be taken for an intelligent dialogue to take place between ecologists, economists, business leaders and politicians.

The fact that economic growth can be and has been achieved by an increase in productivity, or a movement of people from one sector or the economy to another is ultimately beside the point if we are still relying on mining rather than recycling for fuels and metals and if the associated industries are growing rather than shrinking. Of course, the appropriate matching comments can be applied to our level of waste or pollution. Nor is the problem solved by measuring “growth” in terms such as security, well-being or happiness.

What must be recognised is that our growth economy, for all its undoubted benefits, drives our ecosystem. The demand or desire for goods and services and the system we have developed for

meeting both our material and social needs and wants has now reached a point where it appears it has trapped us as a world community. To correctly identify the solution to a problem, the problem itself must be correctly named because its name is part of its definition and description.

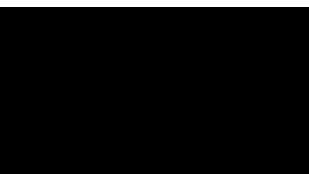
Moving to the Steady State Economy.

Moving from the Growth Economy to the Steady State Economy is not a small task. It will not be achieved easily and without community discussion. Just as the task to tackle climate change needs to be made by a large number of relatively small decisions made at individual, institutional and government levels, steps towards the Steady State Economy will need to be made in a similar way. Preventing “death from a thousand cuts” involves correctly managing a large series of individual decisions.

While the call for sustainability, a standard call made by ecologists, is completely valid and extensively used within documents of the United Nations, it is somewhat misleading in that it fails to encapsulate the full solution. It therefore represents a risky approach to achieving the desired end. It also makes the required political and economic decisions more difficult. Its particular failing is that it narrows the picture of what is to be achieved in the area of employment. However, community education on the need for a Steady State Economy is as desirable as the decisions to abandon the mine and divert the financial resources towards renewable energy resources.

Abandoning the Cobbora open cut mine on the basis that it DOES NOT conform to the goal of moving towards a Steady State Economy would focus community discussion on the “economy we have to have”. Deciding to put the billions of dollars destined for the development of the mine into renewable energy resources on the basis that it DOES help us head in the direction of a steady state economy would also reinforce this commitment.

Jane Sterk, a Canadian MP, quotes the example of the contradiction in the thinking of people when it comes to economic growth. An assembly of municipal officials in Canada, was asked, “how many of you think we can have continuous growth on a finite planet?” and nobody put their hand up. They were then asked, “How many in your communities were planning for growth?” and virtually every hand in the room went up.¹ Identifying the real world in which we live and making sound decisions in accordance with it, is the responsibility of all, but in this case of this mine it is the responsibility of the State Government. I urge the Commission to do all that it can to ensure it does not go ahead, and that it does not go ahead on the basis that it does not conform to the broad objective of moving to a Steady State Economy.



¹Jane Sterk: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnK8cn6ek8U>