

In the last edition we ran a piece “How green is my valley? No, really.”, which launched research undertaken by Wendell Cox of Demographia, whose findings indicated the urban fringe may not be the sole mass consensus of greenhouse gases as it had previously been branded. As you may imagine this indicated a range of responses. We thought we would give both the author and the data holders a chance to make their cases.

Wendell Cox’s report on the impact of housing form on greenhouse-gas emissions rightly observes – on the basis of ACF’s Consumption Atlas – that inner-city residents are responsible for more greenhouse-gas emissions, on average, than outer-suburban residents (“How Green is my valley?”, 1 April 2008). However, the implication that our outer suburbs are therefore somehow models of ecologically sustainable development is both logically erroneous and transparently self-serving.

The high environmental cost of an inner-city lifestyle is closely related to higher income levels and associated excess consumption of goods and services across the board – everything from far-flung vacations to the latest version of every electronic toy.

Conversely, the relatively lower impact of the suburban fringes is in spite of, and not because of, the large, inefficient housing and car dependency that characterise those areas. It is disingenuous to imply that cars or urban sprawl don’t have serious environmental implications, merely because inner

cities served by efficient public transport systems have a whole set of consumer-related environmental impacts of their own. In fact, dependence on cars is responsible for a host of ills, from high levels of greenhouse pollution to vulnerability to petrol prices, congestion, health impacts and the vast price tag of building and maintaining ever more roads.

But aside from this and other logical howlers, Cox’s report misses the crucial point of the Consumption Atlas entirely: neither the car-addicted suburban lifestyle, nor the frantically consuming throwaway lifestyle of the affluent urban cores, is even remotely sustainable.

Had Cox chosen to contact us when preparing his 97-page analysis of our work, we would have reminded him that Australia needs to reduce its greenhouse-gas emissions by at least 80-90 per cent by 2050, and that business as usual in urban development will not get us there. True, Melbourne’s Docklands isn’t the solution to our environmental ills – but neither are the automotive wastelands of outer Brisbane or Western



Sydney. We need a more creative solution, based on compact, well-planned cities, liveable communities with good public transport, renewable energy and environmentally friendly building design.

Charles Berger,  
Director of Strategic Ideas  
Australian Conservation Foundation

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The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is to be congratulated for its ground-breaking data compilation. However, ACF’s analysis is of a decidedly lower standard. Further, ACF misrepresents us. We said nothing like “outer suburbs are ... models of ecologically sustainable development”.

GHG emissions are not simply a matter of income (as the ACF authors note in other work). Nor is “the latest version of every electronic toy” to blame. It is notable that independent Sydney research shows more dense development to emit more GHGs per capita than detached housing.

Our purpose was to stress the importance of serious, objective research, rather than preconceived notions or ideology. Australia is already paying a steep enough price for ideology – urban consolidation has driven land prices (and consequently house prices) so

high that the Great Australian Dream could become a thing of the past. Blindly invoking compact cities ideology to fight GHG emissions would only make things worse. More efficient electricity generation, for example, offers an incredibly better return than forays into social engineering.

Indeed, the unparalleled mobility made possible by automobile and the wealth created by much greater home ownership on cheap urban fringe land have been associated with unprecedented expansion of middle-class affluence in Australia (as in Europe, Japan, Canada and the United States). The residents of western Sydney and outer Brisbane are justly proud of their communities and ACF less than honours itself in dismissing them as “automobile wastelands”.

There is more than one dimension to sustainability. Ecological sustainability depends upon economic

sustainability. Both require political sustainability. British government climate advisor Lord King criticised some “greens” as “keen to take us back to the 18th or even the 17th century”. Such policy over-reaching must fail because there is no material constituency for a lower standard of living. That is why technology is so crucial. To be effective, sustainability policies must be acceptable.

The tired, knee-jerk ideology that sees compact cities as the answer to every question will not do. Reducing GHG emissions will require comprehensive, effective and objective strategies.

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