

# The Natural Country

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It's not easy being green...but the first country to manage it will have a head start in one of the biggest economic opportunities of the next century. Australia is uniquely placed to define a distinctive development trajectory based on products, technologies and services which celebrate and sustain nature, rather than consume and degrade it. Australia is different, and in an era of homogenising globalisation this can be turned to our lasting advantage. The contrast between Australia and other developed nations in terms of the richness, biological diversity and naturalness of its landscape is sufficiently stark that we still have options: we can continue on an essentially European/North American development path; or we can establish a distinctively Australian route. This paper is about seeing through the stale arguments that environmental integrity and economic viability are incompatible. We can turn tension into synergy by achieving excellence in natural resource management, something which is already in great demand and will become an urgent global priority in this generation.

Many of the ingredients are there already: a renewed focus on regional development, an extraordinary platform of participation in the landcare movement, and programs for improving skills and developing new enterprises. What is missing is the overarching vision to unify diverse strands of activity and to inspire long term investment. Here are some broad brush strokes outlining The Natural Country—a strategy built around celebrating and sustaining Australia's unique natural endowment as a basis for a more robust and autonomous economy. Along the way we will redefine Australians' relationship with the land, and consequently perceptions of that relationship here and elsewhere, to the point where environmental quality and innovation is automatically associated with—

**Australian....naturally.**

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## A point of departure

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What images surface when people think of Australia? Vast blue skies, red earth, open landscapes and white beaches, the scent of eucalyptus, the incomparable bounce of the kangaroo and the quizzical stupor of the koala; perhaps laced with iconic visions of a tough outback, remorseless droughts and terrible fires; further confused by quirky films, suburban soaps, sporting legends? What do people know of Australian products? When they wear Armani do they think of Australian wool? Do they think of Aboriginal art, environmental quality, energy efficiency, biological diversity sensitively managed, livable cities, healthy lifestyles or community landcare? What Australian images come to the fore? A creative, tolerant, multicultural society in tune with its natural heritage? An economy based on smarter resource use, green technologies and institutional innovation? A country where you can get a superb twenty-first century education, acquiring relevant skills and insights? Do they imagine

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a country which bounds market forces with considerations of social equity and ecological integrity?

In short, The Natural Country, a country with its act together, with a clear sense of direction and its place in the world.

No they don't. But they could, given vision and energy here over the next decade. Such perceptions (or contrasting ones) will gel rapidly and extensively when the world spotlight focuses on Australia in 2000. Imagine a twenty-first century response to the question "*how would you like to live your life?*" — **Australian....naturally.**

The Natural Country provides a framework for tackling constructively the major challenge of our time—how to develop a vibrant, self-reliant economy and sustain a reasonable quality of life, equitably shared, without depleting or degrading the resources upon which we and future generations depend. This challenge is universal, grappling with it is the one certain growth industry of the next century, and Australia is uniquely placed to make an important contribution. Here's how.

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### **An overarching strategy**

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Australia already has most of the ingredients for The Natural Country—in bits and pieces all over the place, uninspired by any sense of pulling in the same direction, being part of the same main game—positioning Australia for a leadership role in one of the key challenges of the next millennium. Rural people, scientists and economists all recognise that Australia's essentially colonial primary industries and the economy as a whole must undergo profound change. There is less consensus as to the directions of that change: economic fundamentalists promote the dictates of global capital markets (lean, mean and hungry private outfits work ever smarter to remain internationally competitive); greens argue for retiring land, extending reserves and leaving nature to her own devices (where humans fit and how they make a living is problematic); and farm families feel that they are the real source of Australian wealth (undervalued, socially and politically marginalised).

The country is crying out for national leadership in natural resource management. Much of the demoralisation in the landcare movement and rural Australia in general stems from feelings of not knowing where we are going, of not having a sense of direction, even in the most general long-term sense. Some trends are clear: aging, depressed farmers going broke, shops and businesses closing down, services being withdrawn, the land being flogged, towns withering, young people leaving; but we are told that these are merely the symptoms of an inevitable period of 'adjustment', from which we will emerge better placed to grasp the fruits of being on the edge of the fastest growing region on earth. Yet rural people perceive that decline is happening by default, that Australian agriculture and rural land use is being swept along by international forces beyond our influence, to the approval of free market ideologues in their salaried security. They feel that no-one is steering this ship, or if they are, it is without chart and compass. There is no sense of a shared corporate strategy for natural resource management, nor for rural Australia as a whole. The big picture themes of the republic, Aboriginal reconciliation, multiculturalism and economic reform have yet to be complemented with a vision for the development of the underlying wealth of Australia—its extraordinary natural resources and its people.

Partnerships of all kinds at many levels are needed: for example between governments, between government and private investors, between researchers, producers and marketeers, and between business, unions and community groups. Establishing a framework within

which such engagement can take place, partnerships can develop and investments can mature will be possible only under the umbrella of a coherent national strategy. Investment on the scale needed over the necessary timeframes will not be delivered by the market, nor is there any point in long-term investment on the part of private firms and individuals without the security of a supporting strategic national direction and complementary policy framework.

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## Natural Country themes

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### REDEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND LAND

Australian land use and management still reflects our origins as a gaggle of English colonies, exporting raw materials for the mother country, not using natural resources as if we were here for the long term. In line with a general redefinition of Australia, we have a wonderful opportunity to assert that this unique island continent is ours, we are here for good, and we are going to respect and manage it accordingly. This does not just mean getting serious about conservation of priceless biodiversity. It means celebrating the uniqueness of Australia, of what it means to be Australian, and using that uniqueness as the basis of a new trajectory of economic and cultural development. Artists, writers, musicians, dancers, films and television all have a crucial role to play in such celebration, in the integration of the Natural Country into Australians' sense of place, self and country.

### CELEBRATING NATURE AS A DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORY (beyond "Clean and Green")

The Natural Country will be economically viable marketing distinctively Australian products and services. Yes, we already have a 'clean and green' campaign, but it is just that—a marketing campaign, not a substantive basis for more sustainable natural resource management. We still regard environmental standards and regulation with suspicion and resentment, something to be negotiated at minimum cost. This culture sponsors lowest common denominator environmental management, tolerating poor and dirty operators, land clearance, stream pollution. Several other countries could claim with reason that their agriculture is far less damaging to their environment. A quick exposé of the Darling in full algal bloom, intensive feedlots, effluent discharge, saline rivers and lakes, marsupial and bird extinctions, or the social dimensions of rural decline would soon give the lie to Australia's clean and green spiel.

The Natural Country is deeper and broader, much more encompassing than clean and green (yet compatible with it). It is about jumping off the treadmill of competing in distorted commodity markets with declining terms of trade, not just by dramatically improving current practices, but by developing new industries for new and emerging markets. The Natural Country could be a common thread running throughout Australian natural resource management, permeating how Australia presents itself and its products to the world. Clichéd national images are powerful marketing tools: "Japanese efficiency"; "Swiss precision"; "German engineering"; "Italian design". What about "uniquely, naturally Australian"? Clothing, food, holidays, water management systems, solar energy systems, software (eg for biodiversity modelling and management), social technologies (eg Land Literacy programs); all marketed under a generic theme— "**Australian....naturally**".

## A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

Investing in fundamental land use change and rural development is macro-economic reform which will accelerate the process of creating a more autonomous and robust economy. The Natural Country is not a blueprint, but rather a guiding theme which adds value and direction to many currently disparate threads of economic activity. It is a theme capable of weaving together art, tourism, natural resource management, education and training, manufacturing and information technology into a distinctively Australian pattern which will become more and more recognisable, and with which Australian enterprises and agencies will increasingly want to be associated and identified. The Natural Country is a story capable of distinguishing Australian products on world markets, using an angle which by definition no other country can emulate—the sheer uniqueness of the island continent, exemplified by its natural cornucopia; and uniquely placed in geopolitical terms as a multicultural English-speaking society, culturally of the north and geographically of the south, able to take an independent line on most issues and to act as a broker in international fora, a young/ancient nation engaged in a fascinating phase of redefining its identity and sense of itself.

The Natural Country will not emerge spontaneously. It will require strategic investment, in thinking, in communicating, in researching, and in facilitating new industries and enterprises to establish a critical mass of intellectual and commercial effort. The **Natural Country Investment Agency** would be the vehicle for organising such investment and for supporting strategic activities such as education and training, research and development and marketing—working cooperatively and catalytically through existing institutions and programs (eg *Creative Nation*, *Working Nation*, *AusIndustry*, the *Investment Promotion and Facilitation Program*, the *National Landcare Program*, the *Agribusiness Program*), rather than creating another empire.

### **Natural advantages —defining areas of excellence and redefinition**

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The nature of Australia and our capabilities in several fields suggest a number of activities in which we are capable of international leadership, identified with the distinctive themes of the Natural Country. These include:

#### **NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

This is at the heart of the Natural Country—if we get this wrong, the rest falls over. Unless Australian land use systems move urgently to a more sustainable footing, the opportunity to build on Australia's uniqueness will be lost, and the record of species extinctions and depletion and degradation of natural resources will be so lamentable that any attempts to promote a natural, or even a merely 'clean and green' image, would be risible. Opportunities are still there, but must be grasped immediately with a serious long-term commitment. Australia has expertise in many of the necessary disciplines, but there is as yet no overall framework and direction for marshalling this talent, nor for investing the necessary resources to turn intellectual energy into new industries, enterprises and products. The Natural Country can foster a culture of long-term thinking, long-term investment horizons and cooperation across sectors and disciplines to achieve agreed national goals, a core of which is sustainable natural resource management.

Several issues spring to mind, each with widespread international relevance: water conservation and management; coastal zones and fisheries; management of weeds and feral animals; nature conservation and biodiversity management; native species industries; indigenous land management; and tourism.

For each of these issues, generic activities need to be planned for, managed and resourced: such as resource assessment, inventory and monitoring, natural resource accounting, research and development, stakeholder participation, reconciling intrinsic/utilitarian, market/non-market and social/private values, resource use planning, setting environmental standards, developing regulatory frameworks, structural adjustment and enterprise development. The social processes, technical content and institutional delivery mechanisms within each of these areas would be consistent with Natural Country principles. They would of course be eminently marketable.

It is worth expanding on some of the potential exemplars of natural resource management in the Natural Country.

### **Native species industries**

We have an extraordinarily rich flora and fauna, yet we persist in commercialising European species (essentially those which came on the first fleet). Australian research investment remains overwhelmingly biased towards refining the status quo, rather than developing more sustainable and uniquely Australian land use systems. This is not a call to abandon European agriculture, but to complement it, starting in the most marginal areas, with new forms of land use. These may not be exclusively agricultural or pastoral, but might involve combinations with tourism, nature conservation or other secondary and tertiary industries, so that most land users would have several income sources. Developing Australian farming systems will involve looking much more systematically with a long-term outlook at industries based for example on kangaroos and emus, bush tucker and bush medicine (especially on Aboriginal lands), essential oils and pharmaceuticals, native timbers, high quality fibre and leather, fruits, nuts, herbs and flowers. Given the ecological disturbance which has already taken place in many areas there is little point being purist about endemic or even indigenous species in these regions. Introduced species of plants and animals will continue to play a role, but within farming systems much more structurally and functionally analogous to undisturbed ecosystems (for example based on perennials rather than annuals, and soft-footed browsing rather than cloven-hoofed grazing animals), and thus more compatible with conservation of biodiversity.

There may always be a place for wool, wheat and beef in the more productive zones, providing these industries learn from the wine and dairy sectors about product differentiation, about targeting niche markets, about value adding and retaining equity in downstream/off-shore processing and marketing; and providing the highest environmental standards are not only observed, but celebrated. There are also opportunities to develop import replacement industries, especially in forest products and food. In the very long term however, one can imagine farming systems in which key features of European farming systems such as cloven-hoofed animals, soil cultivation and flood irrigation have been displaced from much of the Australian landscape.

## **Nature conservation, biodiversity, water and coastal management**

As one of the dozen most biologically diverse countries on earth, alone among the rich industrialised economies, Australia has unique opportunities to both conserve its natural resource endowment and to celebrate nature as a defining element of national identity. An obvious path along which progress has already been made is the establishment of a comprehensive, representative system of parks and reserves, which could be substantially augmented and much better resourced and managed. Such a network must be integral to the tourism industry to ensure that human impacts complement biodiversity management. We need a spectrum of reserves (in terms of the type/intensity of human interaction) from wilderness to urban parks. We also need to rethink the management and funding of such reserves, especially in the rangelands, to move away from the assumption that reserves must be managed by a government agency and funded from the public purse. An area in which drastic improvements are needed is biodiversity management in the 93% of the landscape which is outside the reserve system—on farms, along roads and streams, in urban and coastal areas and so on.

The driest, flattest, sunniest, most poorly drained continent with the most variable climate has compelling reasons to be a world leader in water management: in water use efficiency, water pricing, demand management, in improving water quality, and in valuing and protecting wetlands. There will be many commercial spin-offs from excellence in this field, from the household to the city, the farm, the factory and the water authority. The emerging water crisis in Asia (supply and quality, fresh water and marine resources) will see huge export opportunities—opportunities from which we will be excluded if we have sold off our water utilities.

Australia's vast, spectacular coastline with its glorious beaches, tropical reefs and islands will be a signature image for the Natural Country, but not unless current pervasive problems such as incoherent planning of coastal subdivisions with ill-conceived roads, utility easements, clearing, drainage and effluent disposal are dealt with. Good work is being done and improvements mooted, but there is room for better coordination within a strategic national framework.

## **ENERGY AND WASTE MANAGEMENT, GREEN MANUFACTURING PROCESSES, URBAN RENEWAL**

Australia's uniqueness is less clear in these areas, and we are already well behind other countries such as Japan, northern Europe and Scandinavia, and even the USA in some aspects. However we have a large land surface, few (mostly well educated) people and a highly developed technological capacity, so there are no reasons why we cannot adopt a policy of world best practice in these areas, and international leadership in alternative energy technologies, in particular solar energy. To settle for less than international best practice in waste and energy management would undermine the Natural Country philosophy. Energy-efficient transport systems also seem to be an opportunity of particular relevance to Australia.

As one of the most urbanised countries, with large cities experiencing real limits to growth, Australia also has both challenges and opportunities to innovate in (re)developing urban centres consistent with the Natural Country. It is critical to involve urban populations in considering issues such as water conservation and management, waste management, transport, energy, open space and conservation of the precious pockets of native bush and grasslands remaining in or near cities. Engagement of urban voters is a must to establish the bipartisan political capital necessary to underwrite sustained national investment in the Natural Country.

The Sydney Olympics presents an unprecedented opportunity to showcase Australia's progress, not only in urban renewal, energy-efficient housing and smart waste management, but also in the sweeping themes of the Natural Country. Again, the focus must be on action and real progress, not talk, brochures or intentions, or the international spotlight may well lead to national embarrassment.

## **SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION**

The Natural Country will be information-rich, and information management will be a key to the more ecologically sensitive resource management needed in the next century. This will of course require technical knowledge, but also the social processes and institutional frameworks to manage change, generating a demand for people with relevant skills and expertise. The initial and the most important demand will be from Australian managers and investors. The Natural Country will fall flat on its face if its marketing is merely cosmetic, if environmental regulation is still seen as 'green tape' to be dodged or complied with grudgingly, rather than seen as a competitive edge to be honed and promoted. This mandates a change of culture within Australian industry, Australian management and Australian government, a cultural shift which will mark the end of the colonial era. Bringing about such a shift will require significant investment in human resources—in training existing staff and in producing graduates committed to Natural Country principles and able to make it happen. This investment has huge potential spin-offs, because many other countries need to bring about similar changes. Australia already has an excellent education infrastructure, which could underpin significant export earnings. In keeping with the Natural Country theme however, we need to move beyond traditional models of education based on universities and bricks and mortar, and build on our expertise in distance education and participatory training to develop new ways of providing Natural Country information and skills. Courses, software, curriculum materials, social technologies and consultancies are significant potential exports.

## **NATURAL TOURISM**

In the rangelands, ecotourism already earns more than wool and beef combined. It will continue to grow regardless of any national strategy or government intervention, however it needs to be managed if it is not to corrupt those values which attract people here in the first place. In the Natural Country, the distinction between ecotourism and other forms of tourism would be blurred by a pervasive sense of place, of ecological sensitivity and celebration of nature, whether in a backpacker's hostel or on a host farm. Getting to such a position will require investments in infrastructure and human resources, and provision of incentives to encourage tourism enterprises consistent with Natural Country principles. Tourism development must be integrated with other elements of the Natural Country, for example native species industries and nature conservation, so that for example biodiversity management is not compromised by people pressure, and farm sales of unique products are underwritten by appropriate tourist infrastructure and marketing. King Island shows what can be achieved with a combination of distinctive high quality products, an attractive landscape and a compatible, coherent image of 'get away from it all' tourism.

## Marketing the Natural Country

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There are compelling ecological reasons for adopting the Natural Country as a development trajectory—much of Australian natural resource management is simply unsustainable. The key point here though, is that the Natural Country is not just about ecological sustainability, but also about long-term economic viability. The Natural Country offers an opportunity to re-orient the economic base of this country, by developing new export industries marketing distinctively Australian qualities.

The obvious place to start is **products** such as food and fibre, clothing, essential oils, flowers and pharmaceuticals, processed as far as possible in Australia, and if not, with Australian equity as far along the production and marketing chain as possible. Then come **technologies**, in areas such as water and waste management and alternative energy; and social technologies such as land literacy programs and property and catchment planning processes. **Services** such as education and training, tourism design and management, and consultancies in for example land use, minesite rehabilitation and saltland agronomy offer huge opportunities. Possibly the most important Australian contribution to the sustainable development debate is the **intellectual and institutional architecture** which will be required to make the Natural Country real, for example systems for land resource assessment, inventory and monitoring; accounting for, weighing up and prioritising conflicting values over different scales in space and time; greening the market; stakeholder participation; strategic planning; and structural adjustment, to name but a few.

The **Natural Country Investment Agency** would act as a broker and facilitator for such export industries, and the activities needed to develop a coherent national approach: for example developing the **Australian....naturally** campaign as a generic theme; establishing principles, standards and quality assurance programs; identifying research needs and funding generic projects; communicating across a range of institutions and programs; and providing a clearinghouse for individuals and firms seeking to re-orient their business.

### OFF THE TREADMILL OF DECLINE

Start in the countryside, with country people. Australian mythology and ecology converge when we think of 'the bush', an amalgam of native vegetation, the vast inland and its hardy inhabitants. For most of recent history Australia has developed the bush, through investments in roads, railways, electricity, communications, clearing, irrigation, reticulated water, schools, hospitals and services, and protection of rural industries. But current trends are towards disinvestment—rationalisation of government services, closure of schools, hospitals and railways, and dismantling of protection. Rural people do not have the same access to education and health and welfare services enjoyed by city people, they already pay higher prices for petrol and they fear rising costs for utilities such as electricity, water, mail and telephones as the era of privatisation, user pays and cost recovery penetrates further into everyday life. There is a general sentiment that they have been left behind, that the country no longer feels it needs them. Outpourings of urban sympathy and public appeals during droughts, floods or fires paradoxically serve to mask the underlying structural unsustainability of farmers at the bottom of the food chain on distorted global commodity markets dominated by transnational agribusiness and American and European trade policies.

No-one, not even Australian farmers, suggests that they should be protected by expensive, cumbersome, inequitable and inefficient price support regimes like their American or

European competitors. Equally however, Australia as a nation needs to do more than hope that GATT, the WTO and continued globalisation in trade and deregulated capital markets will deliver sustainable development. Patently they will not. A continuation of current trends will entrench the Murray-Darling river system as a sewer, will accelerate our world record rates of mammal and bird extinctions, and will see the demise of half the farmers and many rural communities over the next generation. We need to decide whether we want our food and fibre produced by a hundred thousand families as at present, or by a few hundred companies like the mining industry.

This paper is based on the premise that the former option is more likely to deliver the social and environmental goals of sustainable development than the latter. We have been seduced by the elegance of efficiency as a criterion for public policy assessment, and hamstrung by the influence of myopic economic theory which is incapable of integrating less tangible and quantifiable criteria such as inter- or intra-generational equity, social cohesion and ecological integrity. Taking sustainability seriously means moving beyond the comfort zone of dry accountancy, embracing technical uncertainty, value conflicts and risk.

There is middle ground between laissez-faire and extensive market intervention. The role of the state in the sustainability era involves investing in infrastructure, human resources and a sound knowledge base; and providing a framework within which market forces favour rather than frustrate more sustainable production systems, and regional communities are encouraged to innovate in developing their economies. We have made a start through Landcare, the Rural Adjustment Scheme, and various agribusiness, labour market and skills improvement programs such as Property Management Planning. These programs, while valid responses to the exigencies of rural decline, fail to tackle the underlying unsustainability of much of Australian land use. They need to be complemented by longer-term reforms aimed at fostering new industries, products and technologies, targeting and creating niches, import replacement and smarter exporting. Current moves towards regional development initiatives are timely and much needed. The Natural Country would complement a diversity of regional initiatives with a broad sense of national direction, and support for specific programs consistent with Natural Country principles.

The Natural Country goes beyond trying to ‘fix’ current problems, and envisages fundamental changes in Australian primary industries—and consequently the economy as a whole.

## Doing the hard things

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The vision sketched here—of a vibrant, diverse Australia, living with the land, producing uniquely and unmistakably Australian high value products for carefully cultivated markets, reinvigorating rural communities, providing attractive locations for people and for 21st century activities, easing pressure in the cities—will remain a dream without some fundamental changes in national thinking.

It will require institutional innovation to try to wring some synergy across boundaries which have hitherto frustrated us: for example state and federal, government and private, large and small business, bosses and workers, urban and rural.

The first challenge is to get much more sophisticated in the assessment of social and private benefits and costs, if some of the necessary Natural Country investments are to be made. Theoretical and political challenges include the need to cope with larger scales in space and time than conventional analytical tools (such as cost-benefit analyses based on net present value or internal rates of return) can handle; the problem of how to weigh up the often conflicting goals of efficiency, equity and ecological integrity; and how to value things which have intrinsic worth (other species for example) but are unpriced. A first step is to reform the national accounts in an attempt to account for resource depletion and degradation and the non-market economy. Such changes would underpin institutional and legislative reform to help market forces to favour sustainable development, rather than undermine it.

This paper has laid out some broad themes, concentrating on the what, not the who, how or when. Much detail remains to be filled in. Many existing policies, programs and institutions provide a sound base for progressing the integrated approach advocated here, and these stakeholders need to be involved in the further development of The Natural Country. The Natural Country must be a strategy with which people and institutions want to be associated—it cannot work if it is imposed. Extensive consultation will be needed to flesh out this framework, to build a constituency and a mandate. The first step is to lay out the vision, to get people talking, to give these ideas currency. The profound cultural, economic and practical changes implicit here will not happen unless all players are aware of and committed to an overarching strategic direction for Australia, articulated at the apex of political power.

In other words if they can see and appreciate the big picture. The Natural Country is an appropriate backdrop against which other major themes such as Aboriginal reconciliation and the republic can evolve. But it provides more than just an harmonious backdrop. The Natural Country sets Australia up to play a leading role in the greatest challenge of the next century—giving meaning to sustainable development. This is a real contribution, financially, ecologically and culturally, to international competitiveness and national wealth.