

NSW COASTAL POLICY - A BLUEPRINT FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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November 11, 1997, marked another milestone in the NSW Government's environmental agenda. The long-awaited Coastal Policy was released by the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning, Mr Craig Knowles. This is the third element of the environmental agenda after the packages on forestry and waterways.

Revision of the previous Government's Coastal Policy was initially undertaken by the Coastal Committee in 1994 and has been the subject of modification over the past 3 years. It has involved wide community consultation and input. The ALP election promises of 1995 have been incorporated into the Policy, for instance the banning of canal estates.

Community views experienced on numerous occasions gave rise to a review of the definition of the coastal zone. The previous policy was essentially confined to a one kilometre strip landward of high water mark. This definition excluded estuaries and non-tidal lakes and lagoons. The new policy embraces a significantly expanded area in recognition of the strong connection between coastal estuarine processes and processes of the littoral coastal zone. It avoids the confusion of estuaries being seen in management terms simply as part of catchments, and identifies the important role of tides and waves in influencing physical, chemical, biological and socio-economic factors which link the sea, our coastal estuaries and waterways with rivers and catchments.

Both the previous policy and the new policy did not cover metropolitan areas. However, the 1997 Coastal Policy explicitly refers to the inclusion of metropolitan beaches and ocean waters and asks the reconstituted Coastal Council to undertake a "priority review" of planning and management strategies in the Greater Metropolitan Region. This review should offer Government an opportunity to rationalise processes which lead to duplication of responsibilities of agencies and councils, and to ensure better

protection of environmental attributes in coastal areas which are threatened under current conditions.

The new Coastal Council has a significant role under the Coastal Policy. No longer is it just a Section 22 Committee, but it will have a monitoring and reviewing role responsible to Parliament. In the words of the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning at the launch of the Policy, the Coastal Council will serve as a "watchdog". But just how powerful a dog will it be? Consisting of a mix of agency nominees, local government elected representatives, professional organisations, and conservation and industry interests, the new Council has been given certain specific tasks. Of utmost importance is the need to develop its own strategic plan highlighting priorities and expected outcomes for the immediate and longer term future leading to the review of the Policy in 5 years time. It must procure sufficient resources to assist Government in the implementation of policy goals, objectives and strategic actions.

The new Coastal Policy is based on two fundamental principles: ecologically sustainable development and integrated coastal zone management. The principles should be used to guide decision-making and should be read within the broader vision for the coast, being an environment which is conserved and enhanced for its natural and cultural values while also providing for the economic, social and spiritual well-being of the community.

The two basic principles underpin the nine policy goals which involve:

- Protecting, rehabilitating and improving the natural environment of the coastal zone.
- Recognising and accommodating the natural processes of the coastal zone.
- Protecting and enhancing the aesthetic qualities of the coastal zone.

- Protecting and conserving the cultural heritage of the coastal zone.
- Providing for ecologically sustainable development and use of resources.
- Providing for ecologically sustainable human settlement in the coastal zone.
- Providing for appropriate public access and use.
- Providing information to enable effective management of the coastal zone.
- Providing for integrated planning and management of the coastal zone.

While the goals of the policy relate to three key areas of conservation, human activities and implementation, it is important that the policy be viewed holistically. Its application depends on the whole policy, not on components in isolation. All nine goals are inter-related. No one is more or less important than another. It is fundamental when using the policy that a specific goal is placed in the context of the other eight goals.

The mechanism for delivering the 1997 Coastal Policy is through a set of objectives and strategic actions which flow from each goal. The actions are detailed in Part B of the Policy. State agencies and/or local government are responsible for the various actions and are accountable to Parliament through an annual report on performance prepared by the Coastal Council. Implementation processes and guidelines for local government on how to use the policy are provided in the document.

The Premier and Minister in their joint foreword to the policy, state that it recognises that the coastal zone is managed by a range of organisations which often have overlapping responsibilities of agendas. One of the Government's key objectives is to coordinate the management of the coast by these different bodies. Here lies a great challenge for all involved in policy implementation. Sectoral responsibilities backed by statutes and annual budgets often makes coordination very difficult to achieve.

The policy involves many new initiatives including an inventory of coastal features to assess conservation values, banning canal estates, prohibiting sand mining on

environmentally sensitive areas, restricting developments on foredunes, and providing for more public access to beaches. SEPP14 Wetlands and SEPP26 Littoral Rainforests will be enforced and expanded. In addition the policy strengthens the waterways package in developing strategic ways to improve water quality using the combined resources of state and local governments in both planning and management.

It is anticipated that this policy will offer a much clearer direction for the management of the NSW coast into the next century. Such direction becomes increasingly important in the face of increasing population and development pressures. In order to meet the legitimate economic and social aspirations of residents and tourists we must work in a cooperative and coordinated way to achieve that overriding vision of ecological sustainability of the NSW coast.