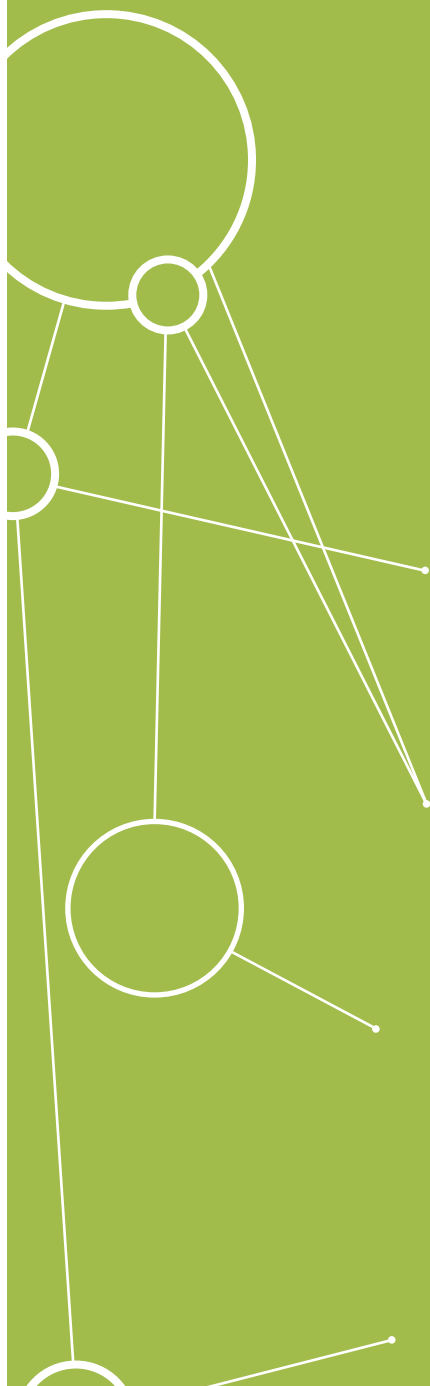




Australia  
State of the Environment  
2006

**AT A GLANCE**





Summary of the independent report to the Australian  
Government Minister for the Environment and Heritage

2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee

December 2006

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## Introduction

This summary presents the key findings made by the 2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee, achievements over the reporting period, issues which will take some time to resolve, and suggestions to the Australian Government and people for improving Australia's environment.

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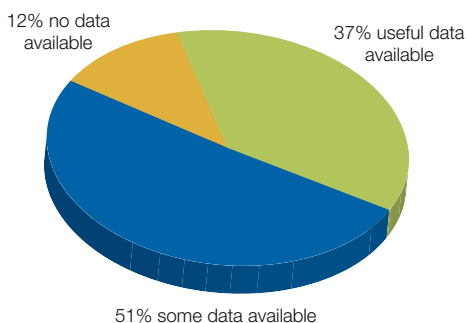
# Key findings

There is much to be proud of in Australia's environmental performance, but there remain several environmental issues of concern.

## Environmental data

It is still not possible to give a comprehensive national picture of the state of Australia's environment because of the lack of accurate, nationally consistent environmental data. Therefore, the need for an enduring environmental data system remains a high priority if Australia is to measure progress and make sound investments in the country's environmental assets.

Available data for SoE2006

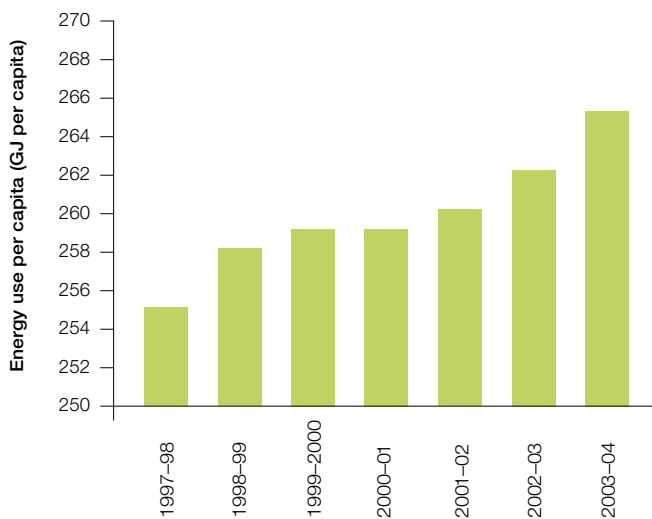




## Consumption

Many of the pressures from human activity, such as increasing consumption, that were reported in the 2001 State of the Environment Report still exist, and some have intensified.

Energy use per capita in Australia, 1997–98 to 2003–04

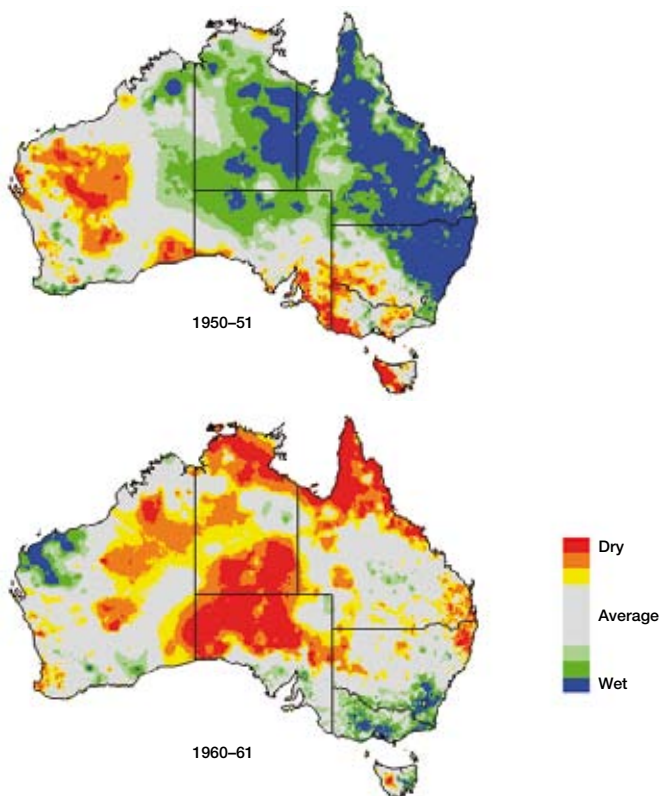




## Variable climate

Australia's climate has always been extremely variable. In the last 200 years we have not seen the full range of extremes. There are consequences of this variability that need acknowledging. Foremost amongst these is that we have to learn to live in Australia's environment. For example, the recent drought was hotter than previous droughts, has affected almost the entire continent and could continue. Our cities, lands, biodiversity and irrigation-based industries have been shown to be vulnerable to this climate variability.

### Australia's variable rainfall

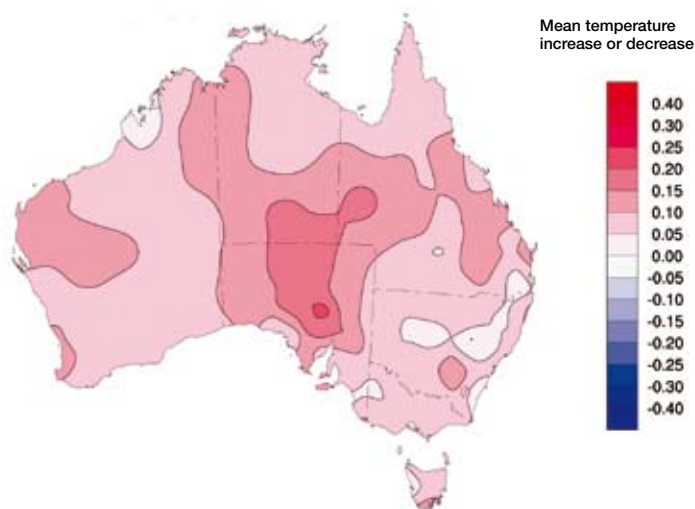




## Climate change

Climate change is an important issue for Australia. While there is debate about scientific predictions, it is almost universally accepted that temperatures are rising. The consequential overall changes in Australian climate variability cannot be accurately predicted. In the face of uncertainty, continuous adaptation of environmental and sectoral policies is the key. This will require adapting for conditions outside of people's experiences and encouraging better management on a national and international scale in order to secure Australia's environmental future.

Trend in mean temperature, 1910–2005 (°C/10yrs)





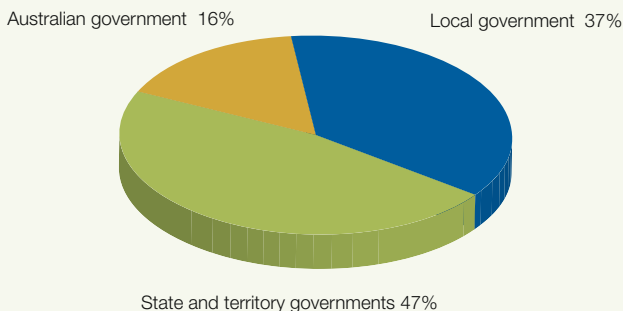
# Achievements over the last five to ten years

There has been significant progress in Australia's environmental performance but these achievements are not a reason for complacency.

## Increased expenditure

Australian Government environmental expenditure has increased at least four-fold over the reporting period. Other governments and the philanthropic and business sectors have also contributed significantly to environmental management.

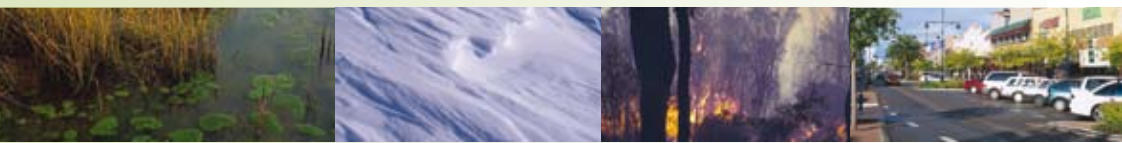
### Environmental expenditure by sphere of government in 2002–03



## Cooperation

Cooperation in environmental stewardship has been increasing between governments and the community, including the Indigenous community. Projects include the establishment of regional natural resources management entities — although these are not without challenges.





## Our cities and towns

The condition of most human settlements continues to be generally good except for some remote Indigenous communities.

## Air quality

Urban air quality continues to be generally good although photochemical smog is an issue in some urban areas.

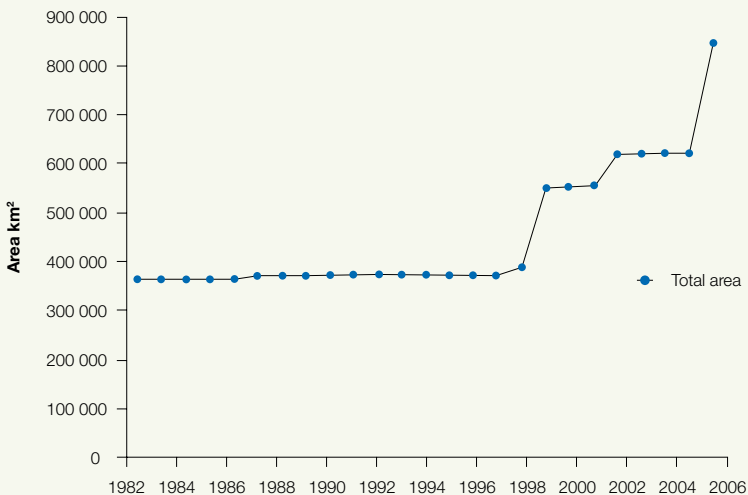
## Ozone levels

After 18 years of global and Australian action to reduce the use of ozone-depleting substances, ozone levels in the atmosphere are slowly recovering. This is reflected in the long-term data on the size of the ozone hole. However, natural variation does occur and the size of the ozone hole over Antarctica varies from year-to-year due to the effect of wind and temperature. It is too early to determine if the size of the 2006 ozone hole is due to natural variation or a new phenomena.

## The marine environment

Protection of the marine environment continues to improve through changes to fisheries management and substantial increases in the number of marine protected areas.

Increase in area of Commonwealth marine protected areas, 1982–2006

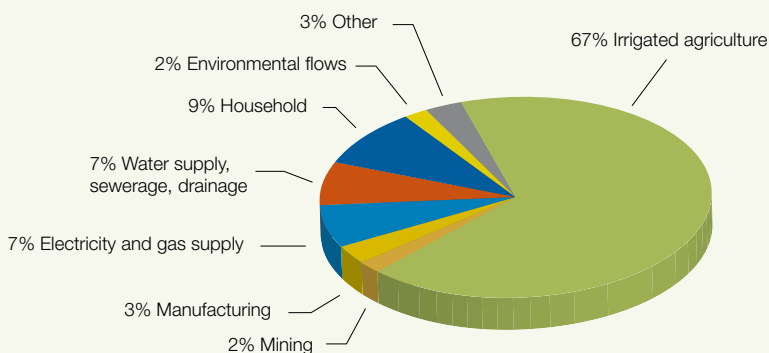




## Water management

The national water reform agenda has been implemented and will greatly improve Australia's future water management.

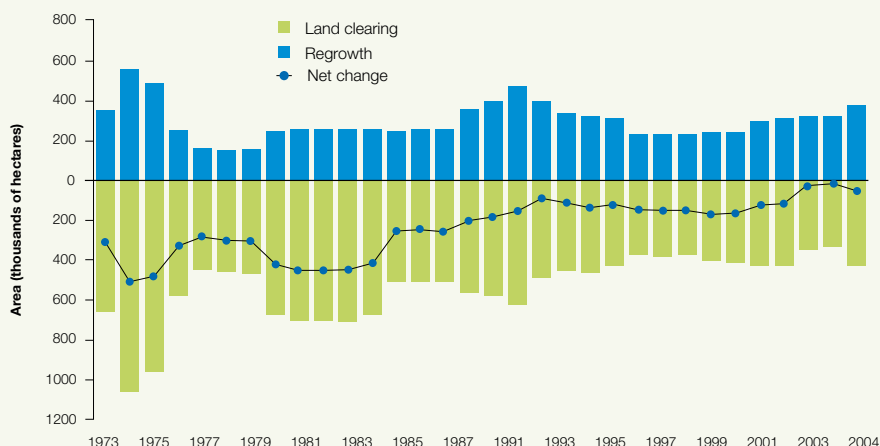
### Water consumption by selected industries and sectors, 2000-01

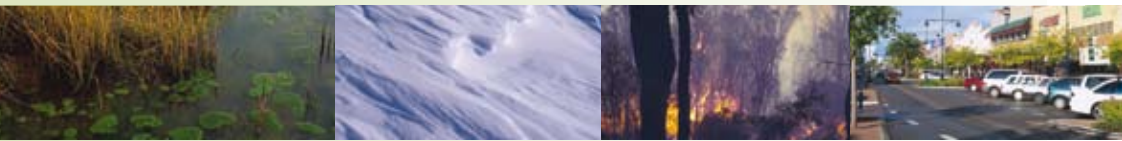


## Land clearing

Positive steps have been taken across jurisdictions to reduce land clearing and in the areas where this has occurred, biodiversity decline has slowed. This reduction in land clearing has also had a positive impact on net greenhouse emissions.

### Net forest change in Australia (using forest regrowth and deforestation data) 1973-2004





## Heritage system

The 2003 heritage amendments to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* have improved the protection of Commonwealth-owned heritage assets, clarified the responsibilities of the different levels of government, and created a new mechanism for recognising heritage places of outstanding value to the nation.



Verandah restoration on Sully's Building in Broken Hill. The building in 1911, 1992 and c2004. Photos: Broken Hill City Council.

## Working together

The importance of managing diverse aspects of the landscape in an integrated way using a mix of incentives and regulation has been recognised.



# Progress will take longer for some issues

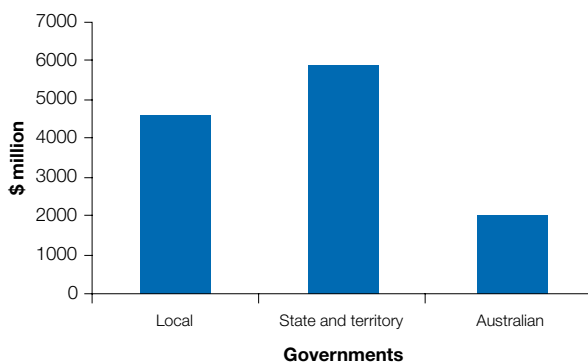
A number of issues are of concern to Australia's environmental performance.

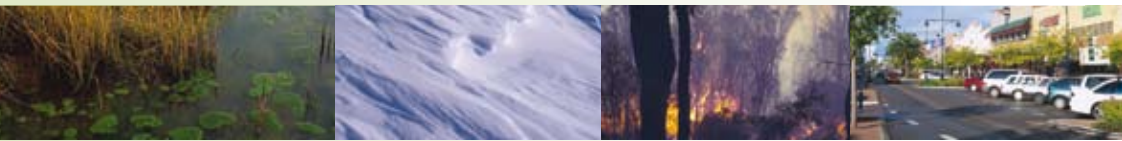
## Governance

Local government and the new regional natural resource management bodies appear to be under-resourced, in terms of capacity and skills, to deliver improved environmental results.

Clarified responsibilities and an appropriate level of funding at all levels of government are necessary for improved environmental management.

**Government expenditure on the environment, 2002-03**





## Coastal lifestyles

People are continuing to move to the coast to live, and the cumulative impacts of this trend are now apparent in some coastal areas. If this trend continues, we risk further damaging the natural and cultural values and characteristics of the coastal environments that historically have made coastal living so attractive.

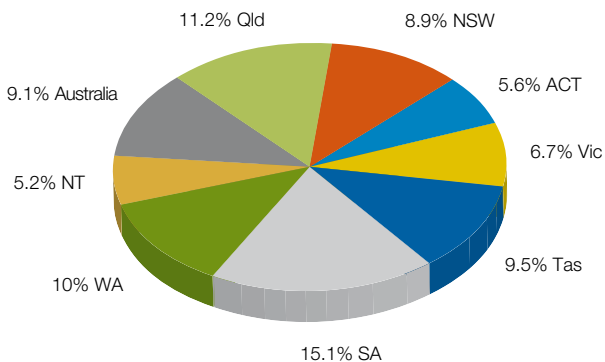


*Photo: Great Lakes Council.*

## Waste reduction

Continued and greater reductions in net individual consumption and waste are required through significant increases in recycling and reusing critical materials. The latter includes building material recycling, the capture and use of stormwater, the recycling of wastewater and biological waste.

**Percentage of sewage effluent recycled in 2001–02.**





## Dealing with uncertainty

Our inadequate understanding of the contributors to climate changes, the degree of uncertainty as to the direction and effects of such changes, and the appropriate adaptive responses, are all issues that need to be addressed to avoid variable or conflicting responses from governments.

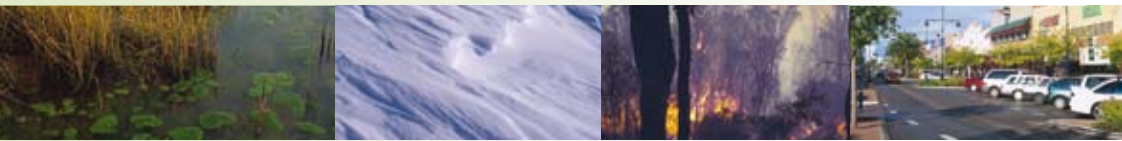
## Urban design

Although a positive step, the greater attention being paid to urban form and consolidation in Australia's major cities cannot fully address the legacy issues of previous poor urban and building design. Improvements in urban design will take time to make a difference to the environmental and social performance of Australia's human settlements.



*Adelaide's Christie Walk development is an environmentally sympathetic mixed density community housing project.  
Photo: Ecopolis Architects Pty Ltd.*





## Legacy effects

Biodiversity decline will continue because of the consequences of past actions and the time it will take to see the effects of current initiatives.

The condition of land, inland waters, and coastal lakes could either remain the same or, in some places, continue to decline for some time. However, it is possible there will be improvements in some areas because of investments made in environmental assets.



*The threatened green and golden bell frog at Kioloa on the New South Wales south coast. Across Australia frogs tend to be in decline. Photo: F Lemckert, Forests NSW.*

## Fisheries

Fisheries in Commonwealth-managed waters continue to be under pressure but, because of a lack of data, it is not clear whether fisheries managed by the states and the Northern Territory are also under pressure.

## Heritage condition

The lack of data remains a chronic problem for reporting on Australia's heritage, and the condition of many aspects of this heritage is unknown. Knowledge and management of Indigenous cultural heritage is limited, and the decline in Indigenous languages continues.



# Suggestions for future directions

The 2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee made a number of suggestions in their report, based on the insights they gained from preparing the document.

## Improving measurement of environmental progress

Preparing a State of the Environment report, or any other environmental report, requires data and information collected over time and from different places that are consistent and reliable. There is still not enough good quality accessible data and information on the condition of Australia's environment to prepare unambiguous environmental reports.

## Adaptation is crucial to survival

Whether environmental change is caused by people, by the variable climate or by actions in restoring environmental assets, is important. However, the primary concern is that Australia should build its capability to live with its environment and respond appropriately to changes in that environment. An adaptive approach to environmental issues where we learn by doing, and modifying approaches as needed, should be the underlying basis of actions and policies. Cooperation across all levels of governance is critical for this to be effective.

## Regulation and incentives

Governments should continue to encourage environmental stewardship through appropriate investment, governance and regulation at the right scale of intervention. New approaches to stewardship, including accreditation, certification and, where appropriate, markets for environmental services, should continue to be explored urgently.





## Managing our land at the right scale

Much of the present regulation is not targeted at the appropriate scale, and some incentives encourage environmentally perverse results. Management at a whole-of-landscape level, integrated with the local actions of all agencies, landholders and people, is necessary to achieve landscape-scale objectives.

## Maintaining and building a capability to manage

Environmental progress will depend on having more technologies, knowledge, skills and investment strategies to turn scientific knowledge into practical products. For example, Australia will need improved water use, reuse and recycling systems very quickly.

## Sharing responsibility

The environment is not something for which only rural and regional people have responsibility. Building understanding, knowledge and skills in environmental management for urban people, Indigenous people in their country, and rural and regionally located people would allow all sectors and people to play their part.

Australia's environment is valuable for practical reasons, such as producing food, as well as being important for its natural and cultural values. One of the implications of this, is that as environmental services are needed and valued by all, they must be paid for by all. There is also a need to manage for the benefit of future generations.

## Improving Australia's environment

We can expect future pressures on the environment from population growth and from economic growth. These pressures will continue to increase unless there is some decoupling of growth from the non-sustainable consumption of resources, particularly energy, land, water and products dependent on limited natural resources (such as forestry and fisheries). This is a major adaptive challenge.



The *Australian State of the Environment 2006* (SoE2006) report is a requirement of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC ACT). The report is prepared by an independent committee for the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Heritage to table in the Australian Parliament.

The report was tabled in December 2006 and is available on the internet at **[www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006](http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006)**.

*Australia State of the Environment 2006 AT A GLANCE* is a summary of the 2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee's key findings on Australia's environment.

The Committee commissioned 8 theme commentaries and 10 integrative commentaries on aspects of the environment that are important to more than one State of the Environment reporting theme. All were independently written by identified authors and independently refereed. In addition, 33 papers on current or emerging issues were commissioned. All this material, and the main report, is contained the accompanying CD-ROM.



**Australian Government**

**Department of the Environment and Heritage**

*Australia State of the Environment 2006* is Australia's independent five-yearly report into the state of the environment – its human settlements, atmosphere, biodiversity, coasts and oceans, inland waters, land, natural and cultural heritage, and the Australian Antarctic Territory.

This publication, *Australia State of the Environment 2006 AT A GLANCE*, includes a CD-ROM containing the main report, 8 theme commentaries, 10 integrative commentaries on major environmental issues that affect more than one State of the Environment theme, and 33 short papers on current and emerging issues. These commentaries and short papers were produced by independent writers and, although they support the *SoE2006* report, they are not a formal part of it.

For more information see [www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006](http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006)