

## 2 – Sustainability, health and well-being

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*We organise societies, run economies and build infrastructure to make life better, healthier and longer for humans. What is widely missing from some of our mainstream disciplines, including economics and demography, is the recognition that human sustenance, environmental stability and the flow of materials and other 'services' from nature are absolutely central to good health, survival and social advance. The Earth's ecosystems are the life-support systems for all human societies and the basis of our economic life, and we disrupt them at our peril. Recently, the idea has emerged that health is largely a matter of individual choice, behaviour and access to health care. But it is population level shifts in human culture, technology and environmental demands that have, throughout history, altered the patterns of well-being, disease and survival. We must now conduct our collective living on the non-negotiable terms of the natural world.*

The debate about population size, environmental management and human well-being in Australia can no longer ignore the fundamentals of 'sustainability'. There is now worldwide (including Australian) evidence that the human enterprise is increasingly overloading the capacity of the natural world to supply, replenish and absorb – and recognition of this necessarily brings a new dimension to this public discussion (Vitousek 1997). Henceforth, that discussion about the sustainable management of population and environment must refer to the indefinite, or at least very long-term, human carrying capacity of the Australian environment, and of the biosphere at large. We must recognise that we are now seriously, though largely inadvertently, disrupting aspects of the planet's life-support system. This has obvious