

12 – Achieving a sustainable future

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The scale and seriousness of Australia's social and environmental problems are no longer in doubt. We are consuming the opportunities of future Australian generations by our lifestyle choices. And at the global level, human activities are altering the very systems on which our species depends. Doing nothing about the many problems identified in this book, such as climate change, is not an option. It is possible to move to a sustainable future but it will require fundamental changes to our values and national social institutions. We must recognise that we share a common future with the entire human family and the other species with which we share the planet. It is not just our humanitarian duty to improve the lot of the poorest people of the world. It is also enlightened self-interest because a world of increasing inequality will be a world of increasingly destructive tension.

The evidence is clear. If civilisation is to survive, the next century will have to be a time of transformation – not just in technological capacity but also in our approach to the natural world, and to each other. The second report in the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) series on the global environmental outlook, *GEO2000*, said: ‘The present approach is not sustainable. Doing nothing is no longer an option.’ A sustainable society would not be eroding its resource base, causing serious environmental damage or producing unacceptable social problems. It is clear from the earlier chapters that our present lifestyle does not satisfy *any* of these main criteria. We are dissipating resources future generations will need, damaging environmental systems, and reducing social stability by widening the gap between rich and poor. In so doing, we are acting irresponsibly. It is possible