

CHAPTER

1

# Introduction



# Many small people, who do many small things in many small places, can change the face of the world.

## – Writing on the Berlin Wall

**This report** looks at how people and societies can learn to live in sustainable ways. Its focus is on Aotearoa New Zealand. It is about the quality of life that New Zealanders enjoy and what people cherish about living in the 'land of the long white cloud'. It is concerned with the environmental impacts that people (often inadvertently) leave in their wakes, and the need for social justice and economic concerns to be included in sustainability debates. It highlights how education, in its broadest sense, needs to bring about some fundamental changes in the world today.

### 1.1 Background to this report

Education for sustainability was first highlighted as a priority for the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) in 1997. The PCE's first strategic plan raised concerns about the adequacy of environmental education in New Zealand (which, as chapter 3 will explain, is a vital part of education for sustainability). The Commissioner therefore decided to monitor progress in this area. Many significant developments have occurred since 1997, but in 2002 the Commissioner decided to look at this area in more detail. This followed the release of *Creating our future*<sup>1</sup> – a PCE review of progress on sustainable development in New Zealand. Many people interviewed during that investigation highlighted a need for better education for sustainability.<sup>2</sup> The review also noted that progress in implementing education for sustainability had been slow.

The Commissioner therefore decided to begin an investigation into education for sustainability in New Zealand. Shortly after the investigation began, participants at the PCE's strategic planning workshops endorsed the need to examine education to "capture the heads, hearts and hands" of New Zealanders for sustainability.<sup>3</sup> More recently, countries from around the world (including New Zealand) declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development from 2005 onwards. As this decade approaches, New Zealanders need to reflect on changes that need to be made to ensure that people can learn to live in sustainable ways. This report represents the PCE's contribution to that debate.

## 1.2 The language of learning, education and sustainability

Subtle shifts in language often conceal more fundamental shifts in meaning and understanding. It is therefore important to consider how words are used and why. This report often uses the terms 'learning', 'education' and 'sustainability'. It also uses the phrase 'education for sustainability'. A brief discussion is included here to make it clear what these terms mean in the context of this report.

### Learning and education

Learning is a process that influences the ways people think, feel and act. People learn through experiences over their entire lives. Learning can occur at both a conscious level (e.g. through critically thinking and reflecting on issues) or subconsciously (e.g. by following the actions of others without questioning why). People often learn by interacting with other people and their environment.

Education is closely connected to learning. It comes from the Latin words *educare*, meaning to rear or foster, and *educere*, meaning to draw out or develop. Over time the meaning of the word has changed significantly. Today it is usually associated with the formal education system where teaching and instruction occur.<sup>4</sup> Many people we (the Commissioner and his staff) spoke with during research for this report automatically assumed that education for sustainability was just concerned with schooling. But because people always learn throughout their lives, it is very important to look beyond education in schools. This report uses both words – learning and education – in its title to emphasise this point.

Confused? A useful distinction between learning and education is to think of them in this way:

- **Learning** is more of a psychological phenomenon. It is a process in which people develop ways to see and interact with the world around them.

- **Education** is more of a sociological phenomenon. It is more focused on what educators (such as parents and teachers) do to facilitate learning in others.

It is also important to point out that people do not just learn as isolated individuals. Learning and education always take place within social contexts, and organisations (groups of people) are also involved in learning. The phrase 'education for sustainability' is used in this report to refer to how people and groups in society can learn to live in sustainable ways.



## Sustainability

The word 'sustainability' is often used in very different ways to mean vastly different things.

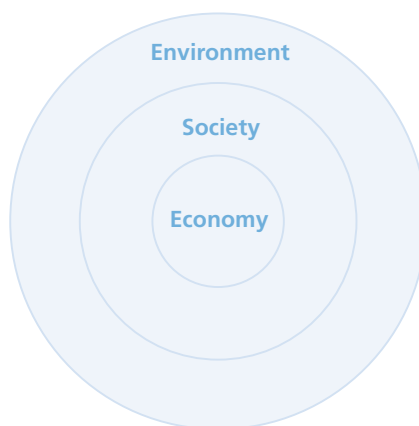
Sustainability in this report is the goal of sustainable development – an unending quest to improve the quality of people's lives and surroundings, and to prosper without destroying the life-supporting systems that current and future generations of humans (and all other species on Earth) depend on. Like other important concepts such as equity and justice, sustainability can be thought of as both a

destination (something worth aiming for) and a journey (that has no pre-ordained route). A detailed discussion on sustainability and sustainable development can be found in *Creating our future*.<sup>5</sup>

The focus in this report is on the *environmental* dimensions of sustainability. Environmental sustainability aims to enhance and maintain:

- The life-supporting processes (ecological systems) that provide people with good quality air, water, soil and marine life, and a viable climate. This is essential for sustaining a world that humans and other species can survive and flourish in.
- Other environmental factors that contribute to people's quality of life. What people value about the environment is always changing, but most people in New Zealand today enjoy living in a good quality environment (see chapter 2).

The Commissioner often uses the model of 'strong sustainability' to communicate some thinking in this area (see figure 1.1).<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.1: Strong sustainability**

This model recognises that economic systems always exist within a social context and many important aspects of society do not involve economic activity. Similarly, human societies (and the economic activities that are conducted within them) are totally constrained by the ecological systems of Earth. Economies may expand or contract, and societies' expectations and values may change over time, but, to function in a sustainable way, human societies must not exceed the capacity of the biosphere to provide them with resources or to absorb the effects of their activities.

The environmental focus that is taken in this report is consistent with the role and functions of the Commissioner.<sup>7</sup> However, as this report often stresses, the environments in which people live, work and play cannot be separated from broader systems in society. Environmental sustainability cannot be maintained without resolving the social, cultural and economic reasons behind unsustainable practices and inequalities that contribute to exploitation of the environment in unsustainable ways. It is therefore essential to look at these issues as well.

### **Education for sustainability**

Education for sustainability examines how people and groups in society can learn to live in sustainable ways. It is not simply education 'about' sustainability. As chapter 3 explains, education *for* sustainability has a strong purpose. It aims to empower people of all ages and different backgrounds to contribute to a better future. It encourages people to ask lots of questions, challenge underlying assumptions, and to think for themselves. It looks at individual and systemic changes that are needed to resolve unsustainable practices. Education for sustainability will require people and organisations to see that changes for the better can be made, and that there will need to be a transformation (a redesign of many systems and established ways of doing things) to achieve a good quality of life for people far into the future.

### 1.3 Purpose of this report

This report is a think-piece – an expression of thoughts and ideas supported by rigorous analysis. Its purpose is to raise the level of debate about education for sustainability, and to stimulate effective action so that New Zealanders can learn to live in sustainable ways.

#### Terms of reference

This report was carried out pursuant to s 16(1), parts (f) and (g) of the Environment Act 1986. These state that:

- 16. (1) The functions of the Commissioner shall be ...**
- (f) To undertake and encourage the collection and dissemination of information relating to the environment.**
- (g) To encourage preventive measures and remedial actions for the protection of the environment.**

This is reflected in the purpose above. The objectives were to examine:

- whether there is a robust foundation to justify education for sustainability
- different facets of education and learning
- differences and tensions between environmental education and education for sustainability
- tensions between education for sustainability and current governance and economic systems
- how changes in behaviour may be encouraged and fostered to achieve environmentally sustainable outcomes
- possible future directions for education for sustainability in New Zealand.

#### Our focus

Education for sustainability is an enormous area for investigation. We spoke with a wide range of people to develop an appropriate focus for this report.<sup>8</sup> Instead of looking at just one sector in society, such as the formal education system, we took a broader perspective. As noted above, this was because people learn throughout their lives. It is therefore important to examine education for sustainability in an appropriate context.

Although we have taken a broad approach, a major focus is on government. This is because government plays a significant role in shaping the formal education system. The government has also developed various strategies and programmes to influence sustainable development in New Zealand. The

Commissioner's mandate under the Environment Act 1986 enables him to review the actions of the government that affect the environment.<sup>9</sup>

To bring together some of the thinking in this document we looked at the issue of waste (see chapter 6). We chose this topic due to the large size of New Zealand's ecological footprint and the huge volumes of waste that are generated in this country (see section 2.3). Concerns about waste are also closely connected with the development of a consumer society in New Zealand. As noted in a previous report:

**There is a need to have some more information and debate about the serious issues facing the world including New Zealand. This extends across the 'too hard' issues such as the huge impact of 'consumerism', the alleviation of poverty, through to the many ways in which a household impacts upon the environment around it.<sup>10</sup>**

Many people interviewed for both *Creating our future* and this report suggested that a culture of consumerism is acting as a major barrier to getting people to think about, and to act on, sustainability issues.<sup>11</sup>

### **What this report does NOT cover**

There is often a tension between breadth and depth of coverage in an investigation. By looking across society we did not attempt to examine all areas in depth. For example we did not investigate the content of all school courses related to education for sustainability throughout New Zealand. Instead, we focused on the broader systems in which education efforts take place. To provide more in-depth analysis we sometimes refer to other recent studies. We also highlight areas of future research that may be necessary to advance education for sustainability in New Zealand.

Furthermore, this report does not attempt to analyse the *techniques* of education for sustainability, such as methods to develop critical thinking. Our focus has been on over-arching messages important to education for sustainability in New Zealand. We believe it is more appropriate for people to develop techniques that fit the context of more specific issues and situations.

Education for sustainability needs to be implemented in locally relevant and culturally appropriate ways.<sup>12</sup> The focus of this report is on New Zealand. However it is also important to point out that we have not examined Maori perspectives on education for sustainability in close detail. This is not because these issues are unimportant, as it is essential to build a better dialogue between Maori and non-Maori over sustainability concerns. The PCE believes that this sort of research needs to be conducted by Maori in a culturally appropriate way,<sup>13</sup> so further research is needed in this area.

## 1.4 Methodology

As noted above, the PCE has been monitoring education for sustainability for many years. When this investigation began we (the Commissioner and his staff) developed our thinking in this area through further reading and attendance at environmental education conferences in New Zealand and Australia. To determine an appropriate focus for the investigation we spoke with people in the environmental education community, and people with an interest in this area, throughout New Zealand. This included teachers and students in primary and secondary schools, academics, business people, staff in local and central government agencies and Maori individuals. Participants were contacted through networks in the environmental education community and via word of mouth. Key themes from these discussions are summarised in a background paper to this report.<sup>14</sup>

Terms of reference were then drawn up to focus our reading, analysis and writing. Articles and books from academic sources and the popular press continued to inform our thinking and research. Throughout this process we maintained an ongoing dialogue with people interested in education for sustainability. We also held a reference group meeting to discuss key issues. Two rounds of peer review were used to provide additional scrutiny. A wide variety of people with in-depth knowledge of education and/or sustainability issues provided feedback on an early draft. A smaller group of people provided more detailed scrutiny before the final report was completed.

This report is not the end of our involvement in this area. We will continue to monitor education for sustainability in New Zealand. In 2006-07 the Commissioner will formally re-examine efforts to educate people for sustainability. This will form part of a wider review of sustainable development in New Zealand (see chapter 7).

