



# See Change

Learning  
and education  
for sustainability

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## How to use this report

This report looks at learning across society (well beyond what happens in schools). It has been written for a very broad audience, so you will probably find some sections more relevant to you than others. The report can easily be read from cover to cover. You can also read it bit by bit, or focus on the sections that interest you most.

Following the preface, an overview provides a snapshot of what each chapter is about. The Contents page identifies specific sections that you can skip to at any time. Summaries and key points are also included at the end of each chapter (except the first and last ones, as these are very short).

If you do not have much time, we recommend you read:

- Chapter 1 (a brief introduction)
- Summaries and key points at the end of each chapter
- Chapter 7 (areas for focus, action and future research).

**We hope you can use this report to help other people and organisations see change.**

## Sea change

a profound or notable transformation.<sup>1</sup>

## See change

a shift in perception and understanding that is needed among many people and organisations in society, in the ways they look at issues and search for solutions, to enable a sea change for the better.

## Preface

This century may well be one of relearning on a grand scale – relearning how we *Homo sapiens* can sustain ourselves on a planet that has limits. Why relearning? Indigenous communities, through the millennia of human civilisation, and in some cases still today, developed a good understanding of the carrying capacities of their environment. They had to learn to live within the ebbs and flows of the ecological systems of which they were part. I'm not suggesting that New Zealanders should deconstruct our twenty-first century society to pursue some hunter-gatherer model. However, along with many others, I *am* suggesting that we need a much deeper understanding of the demands and pressures of our current society and its economic systems on the health and long-term sustainability of our natural resources. Many of our needs and wants are being maintained by using nature's capital. We are living beyond nature's income, as many of us do with our personal finances.

There is a huge opportunity for New Zealand, a tiny nation of four million innovative people enjoying stunning landscapes and a benign climate, to learn along a better pathway. We could, and should, be the first in the world to become a truly environmentally sustainable nation. To do this, we need learning that is focused on quality of life, and on the opportunities to design and craft more sustainable ways of achieving it. We need to learn why it is important to live within nature's limits and to understand the many factors that contribute to unsustainable practices and lifestyles. This learning needs to be deeply embedded in all our formal and informal streams of education. In fact, it needs to be a core part of learning across society, necessitating a metamorphosis of many of our current education and learning constructs.

Is such a 'sea change' in learning likely? Yes, because the first lappings of the turning tide are already with us, as outlined in this report. There will be heated debate, because this learning will increasingly challenge deeply held beliefs about our social and economic systems and the sustainability of our lifestyles. Such debate is inevitable, and there will be strong resistance in some sections of society, governance and business. However, as with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republic, or, on a more local scale, the decline in social acceptance of drink-driving or smoking, when a wave of change begins to swell, the quantum and speed of transformation can be dramatic.

This report is a think-piece to contribute to New Zealand's sustainability challenges. It's a story of the great things that individuals, communities, local and central government, businesses, schools and universities are doing in the field of education for sustainability. It's also a story about where we need to step up our efforts. While it is clear that our documentation of unsustainable practices has increased in recent years, changes to resolve these practices have been

remarkably slow. As the United Nations Economic and Social Council commented in 2002:

**No major changes have occurred since UNCED [the 1992 Earth Summit] in the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production which are putting the natural life-support systems at peril. The value systems reflected in these patterns are among the main driving forces which determine the use of natural resources.<sup>2</sup>**

Our dominant value systems are at the very heart of unsustainable practices. Making progress towards better ways of living therefore needs to be a deeply social, cultural, philosophical and political process – not simply a technical or economic one. Technical and economic mechanisms will certainly be key parts of the process. However, they will not come into play unless we, as a society, are prepared to openly and honestly debate the ways that our desired qualities of life can be met. That is why there must be a vastly expanded focus on education for sustainability.

By now I'm certain that some readers of this preface will be thinking the Commissioner is running some covert anti-growth, interventionist or similar agenda. Absolutely not! What I am arguing, with passion, is that New Zealanders need to take much more seriously the opportunities that lie in reshaping the whole way we provide for ourselves and future generations. This will require a long-term process to build up knowledge and understanding across our society – a society that in many areas really does not know what it does not know. In turn, that understanding needs to build up our capacity to redesign many of our institutional, economic and business systems, so we can improve our quality of life without ever-expanding demands for resources and ever-intensifying pressure on the environment to assimilate our wastes. As a signatory to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development that begins in 2005, New Zealand has a huge opportunity to show global leadership in this area.

This report concludes by suggesting key areas for focus and action on education for sustainability. These are not meant to be exhaustive, but the next steps on a long and challenging journey. We welcome any comments you may have on these suggestions, and your ideas to add to the 'to-do' lists. Let's keep the dialogue going on education for sustainability in New Zealand.



Dr. J Morgan Williams  
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

## Overview of the report

### 1. Introduction

The first chapter identifies who wrote this report and why it was written. It describes the purpose of this document and the methods that we used. It also defines key terms such as 'learning', 'education' and 'sustainability'.

### 2. People, places and pressures on sustainability

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the rest of the report. It highlights pressures that New Zealand's population is placing on the environment, and why education for sustainability is needed. It also looks at environmental awareness, understanding and values in New Zealand today.

### 3. Explaining education for sustainability

What is education for sustainability, and what does it seek to achieve? This chapter explains the origins of this concept and its connections with environmental education. Values and principles that are essential to education for sustainability are also discussed.

### 4. Educating people for tomorrow, today

How are people and organisations currently being educated for sustainability? This chapter examines existing efforts in New Zealand, with a focus on the environmental dimensions of sustainability. It looks at central and local government, the formal education system, and initiatives by community organisations and businesses.

### 5. Further shapers in society

Efforts to educate New Zealanders always take place within a wider social context. This chapter briefly examines some other major influences that are shaping the ways people think, feel and act. It looks at families, peers, religions, the mass media, marketing, art, literature, language, technology and globalisation.

### 6. Waste not, want not

To bring together many of the ideas in this report, a case study is used. This chapter examines how education for sustainability could look at the issue of waste in New Zealand today, and the rise of a consumer society.

### 7. Future directions

The final chapter highlights areas for focus and action to enable learning and education for sustainability in New Zealand *now*.

**Real stories**

Throughout this report there are pages written by people we spoke with during our research. These are their stories. There are many more stories that could have been told, as many people shared their experiences with us. The people who wrote these stories have very different perspectives on sustainability, and their views often differ from those of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment. Nonetheless, there is a huge amount of goodwill to keep the dialogue open on education for sustainability in New Zealand.

**Background papers**

There is much more material on education for sustainability than we were able to squeeze into one report. Background papers have been produced to provide more detail in some areas. A list of these papers is included at the end of this document.

**Glossary – Nga kupu**

A glossary of terms, abbreviations and Maori words can be found at the end of the report.

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