

Having our cake, and eating it too

By Melissa Fyfe
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At this rate it would take four planets to sustain our hungry lifestyle.

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If Victoria's eco-status were a bank account we would be in the red.

Life is good in Victoria. In fact, if all the world lived as ravenously, four planet Earths would be needed to supply the resources.

For the first time, the Environment Protection Authority has calculated what Victorians demand of nature to sustain *la dolce vita*. And the news is sort of embarrassing. Each Victorian has a global "footprint" bigger than the average Australian. Only the United States, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates tax the planet more.

An ecological footprint is the land and water area needed to produce a society's resources and absorb its wastes. Divide the world's resources into its population and each person gets 1.8 hectares of productive land and sea. Each Victorian, however, uses 8.1 hectares (the Australian average is 7.7).

So if the state's dependence on nature is like a bank account, we are in overdraft. Scientists call it "ecological overshoot" - munching resources faster than they regenerate.

The EPA report comes as the State Government vows to tackle environment woes with a new authority, Sustainability Victoria, and a framework that, says Environment Minister John Thwaites, will underpin "everything we do as a state".

The biggest contributor to the Victorian footprint is food, particularly red meat and dairy. Victorians also eat more seafood, drive further and use more energy in homes.

But our wealth is at the core of our elephant-sized footprint. The more we earn, the more we consume.

The EPA is asking Victorians to peel back their profligate ways: eat one meal fewer of red meat each week, catch public transport, set up a teleconference meeting instead of flying to Sydney, buy green power and stop wasting food (last month an Australia Institute report found the nation wasted \$5.3 billion on all forms of unused food in 2004).

"We are not asking people to reduce the wealth we have," says Terry A'Hearn, the EPA's director of sustainable development. "It's about working out the things we want and applying our human cleverness to come up with ways that use less of the planet and create less waste."

The State Government has also released a Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation analysis on Victoria's sustainability, which rings alarm bells.

Victorian landscapes, says the CSIRO, are "probably the most stressed in the country", a legacy of clearing 70 per cent of the state, and intensive agriculture.

About 35 per cent of the state's major rivers are in poor or very poor condition, and 44 per cent of native plants are thought to be extinct or threatened.

Meanwhile, our water use has spiralled: between 1984 and 1997, the use of groundwater has increased by 202 per cent.

One of the report's authors, Barry Fordham, said the CSIRO team found Victoria's situation surprising. "You have this subjective impression that Victoria is a green state, but when you look at the indicators in an objective way, you notice it is a very highly impacted state," he said.

The CSIRO's most startling finding was that more than 3 million hectares could lose productivity - due to erosion, soil salinity and acidity - by 2050. In future, less water will flow to Victoria's dams and in its rivers, says the CSIRO, because of climate change, reforestation and other factors.

These are the predictions that will drive sustainability. The CSIRO predicts farmers will squeeze more from their crops with each litre of water, waste less of their liquid gold, move into different products, and revive land by reserving some for native vegetation.

To avoid degrading the land, Victoria must switch some farming to high rainfall areas and irrigate less, says the CSIRO. Sustainability - living well within the earth's capacity in a way that does not deplete resources - is still a concern of the minority in Victoria, but is slowly catching on in some of the biggest board rooms.

BP's green office program in Melbourne has cut waste to landfill by 84 per cent since 1997, and saved more than a \$1 million in paper and power costs. Lend Lease's retail group is using the ecological footprint calculation to reduce the impact across its shopping centres, including Melbourne Central.

The Australian Conservation Foundation's vice-president, Peter Christoff, said the ecological footprint and the Government's sustainability framework focused on the behaviour of individuals and businesses. But he said a few government decisions - such as extending the life of Australia's most polluting power station, Hazelwood, and building a new freeway - could lock people into "patterns of consumption that we would rather not pursue".

WHAT MAKES UP OUR FOOTPRINT

An analysis of Victoria's Footprint results shows that the largest contributor to the total Footprint is food, followed by goods, and then housing. On the basis of their contribution to the total Victorian Footprint, the Footprint activity categories are ranked in the following order:

1 FOOD

The consumption of plantbased and animal-based food products, including the Footprint associated with food production, processing, packaging, storage and transport.

2 GOODS

The consumption of products and materials and their associated end-of-life disposal.

3 HOUSING

The consumption of land and resources for the construction and maintenance of housing, and the residential consumption of electricity, natural gas, and other fuels.

4 SERVICES

The consumption of services, such as water, sewerage, medical and telephone, and their associated resource costs.

5 MOBILITY

The consumption of fuel for personal transport and associated energy, and the transport infrastructure, such as roads, rail and air, needed for transportation.

LINK

www.epa.vic.gov.au/Eco-footprint