

# Ecologically Sustainable Australian Population

## Policy Position Statement

**Key messages:**

Well-functioning ecosystems are a core determinant of human wellbeing and health.

The public health movement has a role in informing the population discussion. PHAA will advocate for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Policy for Australia that recognises space and resource limits based on a detailed carrying capacity evaluation.

This policy focuses on Australian population and discussion on this topic can be used to highlight Australia's influence in global population policy through international aid and other relationships.

**Key policy positions:**

1. PHAA will bring a human ecological perspective into this discussion so that decisions are made with the need to protect ecosystems and other species included.
2. PHAA will promote and participate in an informed, rational discussion of human population at national and international levels.
3. PHAA will promote within and across generational equity in this discussion.

**Audience:**

General public, Federal, State and Territory Governments, and policy makers, PHAA members, media.

**Responsibility:**

PHAA's Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group

**Date adopted:**

18 September 2019

**Contacts:**

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# Ecologically Sustainable Australian Population

## Policy position statement

This policy should be read in conjunction with the Constitutional Ecosystem and Health Values Statement and the suite of PHAA's planetary health related policies: [Ecologically Sustainable Human Society](#), [Limits to Growth and Public Health](#), [Preparing for Peak Oil](#), [Safe Climate](#), [The Food System and Environmental Impacts](#), [Climate Disruption, the Food System and Food Security](#) and [Ecologically Sustainable Diets](#).

### PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Protection and care of the ecosystems are core public health values and activities for ensuring human and non-human wellbeing and health.
2. Intergenerational and intragenerational equity are core facets to this discussion.
3. Environmental and social justice are core elements to national and international population policies.
4. The issue of the role of human population at local, national and global levels needs an informed discussion so that wise government and non-government policy decisions are made.
5. Australia has primary responsibility for its own population but through aid policy and international diplomacy has influence on other nation states population.
6. Free migration is a recognised right under various United Nations instruments.<sup>1</sup>
7. Australia has responsibilities within the UN High Commissioner for Refugees framework.

### PHAA notes the following evidence:

8. Well-functioning ecosystems underlie human wellbeing and are essential for our survival.<sup>2</sup>
9. Human impact on the planet is undermining ecosystem functions and health.<sup>3</sup>
10. Planetary health and human ecological perspectives can broaden discussions about determinants of health, and broaden the focus of public health action to include protecting and promoting the health of the natural systems which support the health of human civilisation and the public's health.<sup>4</sup>
11. The total human impact on the environment depends on the human population together with people's basic and discretionary energy and materials consumption, waste generation, the capacity of technology to mediate these factors, and how these interact to influence carrying capacity. This is an expansion of the Ehrlich-Holdren function of  $\text{Impact} = \text{Population} \times \text{Affluence} \times \text{Technology}$ .<sup>5</sup>
12. Carrying capacity is the number of a species that can be supported, sustainably, by the ecosystem. The ecological concept of carrying capacity provides a means to link the human impact-on-nature factors with the factors that influence population change to better inform a discussion about population.<sup>6</sup>

13. There is no ideal population level; population level that is within ecosystem carrying capacity is also a function of the other factors; see [figure 1](#).

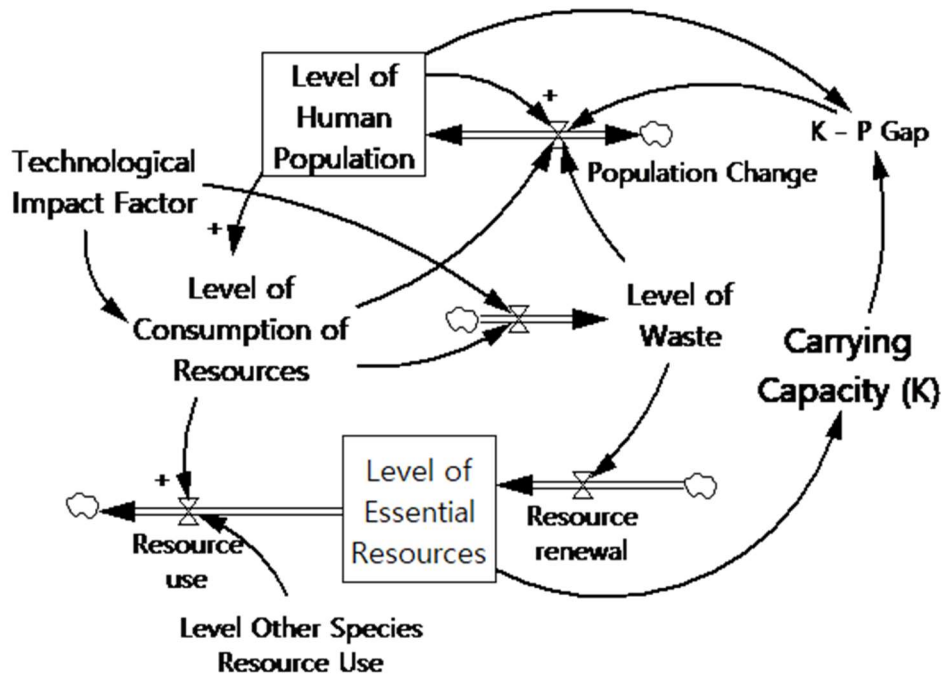


Figure 1: Resource - carrying capacity - human population relationship model

Demonstrating major ecological factor influences on population change; adapted from Figure 6.11 in Dyball R, Newell B. Understanding Human Ecology: A systems approach to sustainability. London, New York: Routledge; 2014 <sup>5</sup>

14. The factors that influence population change, both within and between nations, are: birth and death rates and net migration. These are already influenced by government policy and other factors. There are summarised in [figure 2](#). In the Australian context, the major migration factor is overseas student numbers, whether permanent or temporary.<sup>7</sup>

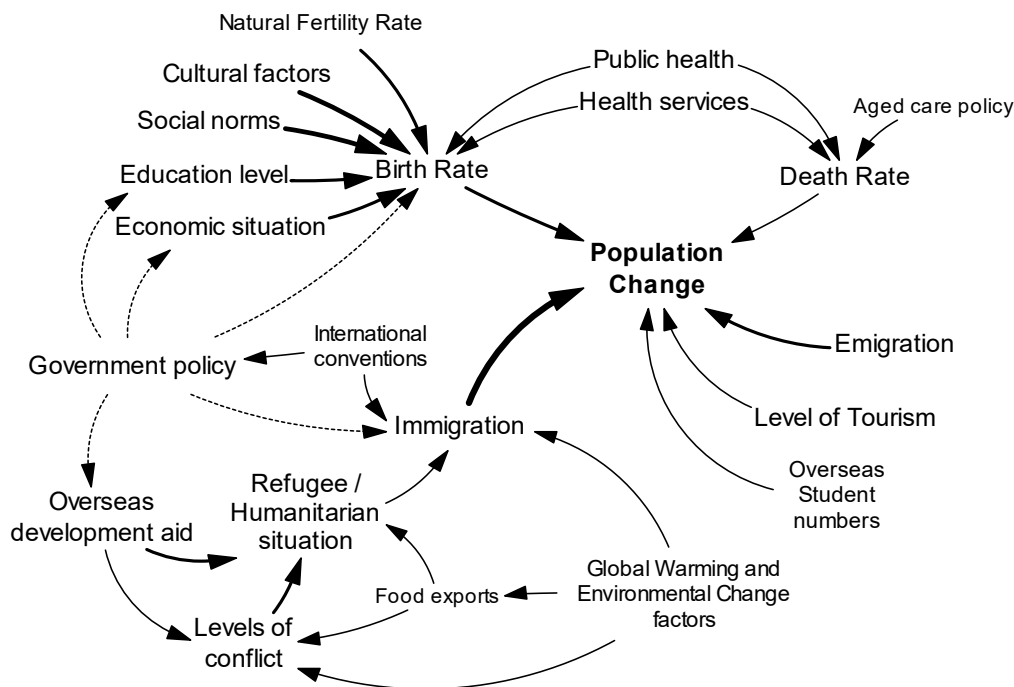


Figure 2: Social and political contributors to population change

## *PHAA Position Statement on Ecologically Sustainable Australian Population*

15. The Planetary Boundaries concept warns of impending restrictions on per capita access to resources required for healthy human existence.<sup>8</sup> For example, access to water is a basic human right,<sup>9</sup> yet water insecurity is growing, which also threatens Australia. Ensuring public health via equitable access to fundamental human needs requires matching resource availability and population demands.
16. Governments, businesses and non-government organisations already make decisions about population and the factors that affect population change. Since those conversations and consequent policy actions are already happening, the public health movement cannot ignore them. Furthermore, broader ramifications must also be considered as population changes affect future planetary health and capacity to support human wellbeing. Public health perspectives based on human ecology must therefore be central to discussions about population.
17. The effects of population levels, distribution and impacts are also subject to government policy decisions (whether written or normative). With good planning adverse effects can be minimised.
18. Local and regional overpopulation diminishes per capita access to basic human needs and standards of living, and impairs economic development. When the carrying capacity of a region and planet is exceeded, a delayed but inevitable adverse impact on population health and population levels follows. The humane approach is to prevent mismatch in population demands and per capita access to resources, and the resultant occurrence of adverse impacts.
19. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of [UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing](#), [11 – Sustainable cities and communities](#), [12 – Responsible consumption and production](#) and [13 – Climate action](#).

### **PHAA seeks the following actions:**

20. Informed and rational discussions within PHAA and across the broader Australian community within government, policy makers, business, the non-government sector and the public about Australia's population and its distribution and planetary impacts.
21. Advocacy for an Ecologically Sustainable Population Policy for Australia that recognises space and resource limits based on a detailed carrying capacity evaluation within an ecological context, and sound environmental stewardship.
22. Advocacy for Australia's overseas aid budget to be focused on supply of health and reproductive services, education and support for economic development.

### **PHAA resolves to:**

23. Advocate and organise for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.
24. Build collaboration across the International Health, Women's Health, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Primary Health Care, Food & Nutrition, Justice Health, Political Economy and Environment & Ecology SIGs to take those actions.

**ADOPTED September 2019**

**(ADOPTED 2009, REVISED AND RE-ENDORSED IN 2012 AND 2016.)**

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