

South Australia's Strategic Plan – a sustainable planning (Permaculture) perspective

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The SA Strategic Plan is typical of progressive approaches to state government planning by its inclusion of objectives covering economic, social and environmental indices and stating measurable targets against which the effectiveness of government, community and business actions can be assessed. However the South Australian Strategic Plan suffers from a problem common to public planning documents, in that it appears to be based on a set of unstated assumptions about the wider geopolitical, economic and environment forces. These apparent assumptions reflect trends and future forecasts about global economic conditions that come from national, intergovernmental and international institutions as well as global corporations. The weakness of the current version of the plan is not so much in the detail but in its limited provisions to adapt to futures that are outside of these assumptions about the future.

How relevant will the Strategic Plan be if some of these assumptions prove to be wrong over the review cycle of the plan let alone its long range planning horizon?

The now clear and little-disputed acceleration in climate change symptoms is already showing weaknesses in the assumptions behind the plan. The imminent peak of global oil supply and the severe consequences that are likely to follow, have the potential to discredit this state planning process.

Several well recognised planning and decision-making tools could be used to help deal with inherent uncertainty and debate about future conditions. They include;

- “Insurance policies”
- Risk assessment and management
- Scenario planning
- Transparent and relevant accounting

It may be unrealistic to expect that updating of the plan will include radical reassessment of “likely global conditions” that form a context for the ongoing update of the Strategic Plan; however, incorporating some of these assessment tools in the fabric of the Strategic Plan, could allow those organisations using the Plan as background for their own decisions, to make their own judgements in a context of a more open, transparent and resilient planning framework.

Inevitably this will make the plan a more controversial document, maybe controversial enough to initiate serious discussion in all sectors of the state economy and community about the future and how we can make meaningful plans in the context of uncertainty and risk.

Unstated Assumptions

I believe the following is a fair but not exclusive list of unstated assumptions behind the current plan. These do not represent some sort of exclusive view of state officials but more society-wide assumptions.

- Global extraction rates of all important non renewable commodities will continue to rise.
- There will be no peaks and declines other than through high energy substitution such as the historical transitions from wood to coal and from coal to oil.
- Economic growth, globalisation and increase in technological complexity will continue to grow
- Climate change will be marginal or slow in its impacts on human systems, such that adaptation will be possible
- Household and community economies and social capacity will continue to shrink

Global oil peak has the potential to shake if not smash these unstated assumptions. Peak Oil and Climate Change are two closely coupled forces that will shape future realities more than any other factors.

Four Energy/Climate Scenarios

A simple scenario planning model can be constructed based on slow to rapid climate change and slow to fast oil production declines. These alternative scenarios are not primarily the result of choice by human actors but emergent realities driven by geologic and climatic forces.

The four scenarios:

- ‘Green Tech’: top down transformation featuring slow oil decline & slow climate change
- ‘Brown Tech’: top down control (slow oil decline & fast climate change)
- ‘Earth Steward’: bottom up Powerdown (fast oil decline & slow climate change)
- Collapse: lifeboats (fast oil decline & fast climate change)

While the characterisation of the four scenarios is complex and inevitably speculative,¹ they do provide a framework for considering how Peak Oil and Climate Change are likely to interact to reshape global and local energy resources, settlement patterns and economy as well provide some guidance on potentially effective policies. The scenarios also provide a framework for considering the likely relevance of current institutions attempting to shape public policy.

¹ See Powerpoint presentation for the characterisation of each scenario

Permaculture

These scenarios also provide a framework for exploring the relevance of permaculture to the strategic planning process. Permaculture has an extraordinary perhaps unique role in Australia as a concept, a collection of design strategies and an environmental movement. In Australia it is defined in the dictionary and is almost a household word.² As a “brand” it carries a great deal of good will but also much baggage and is generally regarded in policy and planning circles as marginal to mainstream decision making. Some more thoughtful people recognise it as a design system tuned to a world of declining resources that will require adaptive strategies quite different from those being pursued currently. This awareness is supported by the fact that permaculture strategies have, in recent decades been more effectively applied in third world development projects than in affluent societies like Australia.

The relevance of permaculture to these energy descent and climate change scenarios can be considered at two levels. Firstly permaculture strategies and techniques that have been developed, promoted and applied by permaculture practitioners and activists may grow and spread rapidly in the social and economic conditions described by some of these scenarios. Examples of permaculture strategies might include household food production, owner building and retrofitting of houses, water and nutrient harvesting, ecovillages and co-housing, community gardens or local currencies. Examples of more specific techniques promoted through permaculture could include worm farming, sheet mulching, straw bale building, compost toilets etc.

However it is the fundamental design principles that underpin the diversity of permaculture strategies and techniques that are more likely have relevance than any specific set of strategies and techniques.

Relevance of Permaculture to Energy Descent/Climate Change Scenarios

Scenario	Classic Permaculture Strategies	Fundamental Permaculture Principles
Green Tech	★	★★★
Brown Tech	-	★★
Earth Steward	★★★	★★★★★
Collapse	★★★	★★★

In this context permaculture is a set of thinking tools that can be used to assess current and future strategic decision-making well beyond the personal and household level.

Peak oil and climate change have the potential to generate a cascade of novel threats and opportunities for planners and policy makers. Permaculture offers a conceptual framework including ethics, design principles, practical strategies and a robust history of grass-roots community activism able to contribute to the strategic planning process in a context of unfolding climate change and imminent global oil peak.

² This apparent familiarity with permaculture can be misleading. For an in-depth understanding see Holmgren, D. *Permaculture Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* 2002. For an overview see *The Essence of Permaculture* at www.holmgren.com.au (Writings Page)