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## No sustainable population without sustainable consumption

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

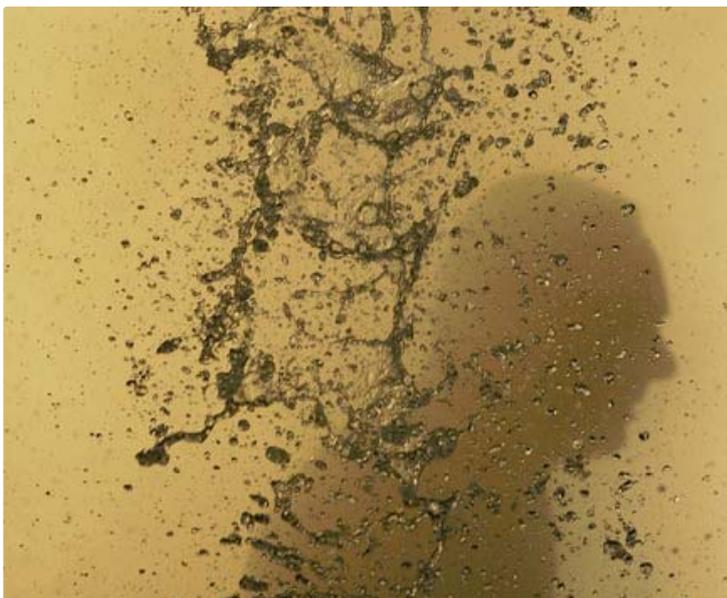
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Australians over-consume water, energy and space. AAP

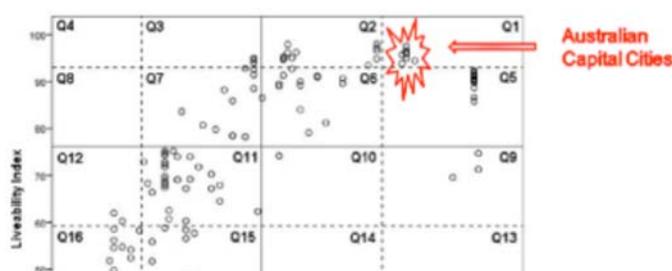
In recent weeks, two major federal government strategy papers have been released: [Our Cities, Our Future: A National Urban Policy for a Productive, Sustainable and Liveable Future](#) and [Sustainable Australia – Sustainable Communities: A Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia](#).

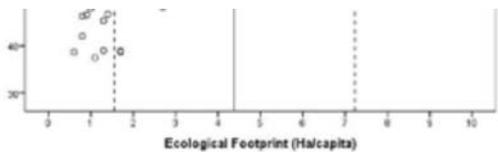
They have a common focus on sustainability and liveability. They have to be closely aligned to the extent that over 80 per cent of Australia's future population growth will need to be accommodated in its cities – especially the capital cities.

Achieving a sustainable population in Australia will critically depend upon the sustainability of its urban development.

The liveability of Australia's cities is recognised internationally, and acts as a strong magnet for migrants and foreign capital. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Liveability Index, calculated for over 140 cities worldwide, routinely places Australia's capitals in the top ten.

However, this liveability is being achieved by levels of resource consumption that are also world-leading. In a soon to be released book on [Urban Consumption](#), I undertook a joint "mapping" of liveability and consumption (see chart). It demonstrated the close connection that currently exists BETWEEN the two.





Urban consumption (Peter Newton)

In a growing and urbanising 21st century world it is an unsustainable and inequitable nexus.

Australia's ecological footprint (the area required to support the consumption lifestyle of its population) is approximately 7 ha per person. The global average is 2 ha per person.

The challenge is this: how do we wind back resource consumption in high income urban societies such as Australia while maintaining liveability?

Consumption does not feature in either federal strategy – population or urban – yet it remains the elephant in the room in any sustainability debate in high-income societies.

High rates of direct consumption of resources are a feature of Australian households: the energy and water they use, the amount of housing space they occupy and the type and extent of urban travel they undertake.

The built environment (buildings, infrastructures) also consumes a massive flow of materials in its construction and maintenance.

Population continues to occupy centre stage in this debate and throws up the usual groups of protagonists for and against a “big Australia”. This time around, the “fors” have a spokesman in Bernard Salt (The Big Tilt) and the “againsts” in Dick Smith (Population Crisis).

Yet for over 30 years it has been acknowledged that environmental impacts (I) occur as a result of population size (P) and levels of consumption ©. Technology (T) is capable of acting both as villain or white knight in relation to both environmental and natural resource impact.

There is a substantial challenge involved in winding back Australia's world-leading rates of consumption in critical areas such as energy, water, housing and travel.

Intervention will be necessary in both of the following areas: households and dwellings.

The household is where key socio-demographics such as income and household size play leading roles together with a range of habituated “domestic practices” (such as car dependency). The dwelling is where type, size and vintage are influential factors in consumption.

Individuals and households can reducing their consumption in each of these domains: living a “simpler life”. But the gap between intentions and actions in household consumption can be significant. In fact, individual values, attitudes and intentions have [little or no impact](#) on actual consumption.

It seems clear that transition to a more sustainable and liveable Australia will require supply-side as well as demand-side (behaviour change) transformations. Consumers can't do it all.

Technology could help us deliver more [eco-efficient](#) water, energy, transport and buildings. We will need [innovation](#) in the planning, design and regeneration of our cities. We also need to look at [regenerating greyfields](#), those parts of our cities that have become physically, technologically and environmentally obsolescent.

Together, these three pathways provide the prospect for a sustainability transition for our population and settlements within what is now a shrinking window of opportunity for change.

