*Environmental policy*

BRIAN COFFEY

***Key terms/names***

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Environmental policy is a highly contested, critically important, and intellectually interesting area of politics and policy.[[1]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-1) Environmental policy not only concerns the relations between people and the forms of social co-ordination that they create (i.e. the relations between states, markets and civil society) but also concerns the fundamental relations between humans and other species (what is our place in the web of life). Environmental policy re-energises the age-old question of ‘How should we live?’ by reframing it as ‘How should we live on this planet, in ways that sustain it, others, and ourselves?’ Put another way, environmental policy is important because everything that we do as humans (as individuals, as employees of companies, as consumers of goods and services, as members of a community, as citizens of a country, and as inhabitants of planet earth) directly or indirectly has environmental implications – we are part of nature and rely on it to survive.

A good example of the connection between how we live and the environment can be seen at a very simple level. At a local level, have you ever considered the environmental implications of something as simple as washing your face? First, where does the water come from, how is it treated, and what is involved in getting it to your tap? Second, how often do you wash your face and what with (what packaging does it come in, and how is it disposed of), what ingredients are in the cleanser, where was it manufactured, where did you buy it, and how did you get it home? Third, how is the ‘waste’ water disposed of, where does it go, and with what effects? (e.g. microplastics in cleaners may end up in the stomachs of fish and other marine life.) By contrast, the issue of coal mines raises more obvious questions regarding our relationship with the environment. The proposal by the company Adani to develop a coal mine in central Queensland has attracted considerable opposition in terms of both the local (possible impacts on water systems and some native species such as the black-throated finch) and global (greenhouse gas emissions associated with the burning of the coal extracted) consequences of the mine.

ORIGINS OF THE POLICY DOMAIN

While our relationship with the environment and how human behaviours impact the environment may seem more commonplace in contemporary society, environmental policy is a relatively new phenomenon. What we now know of as ‘environmental policy’ only emerged as a significant, and distinct, field of public policy interest since the late 1960s.[[2]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-2) Influential books such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*[[3]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-3) contributed to raising public awareness about the environmental consequences of human activities, and the emergence of the environmental movement provided a political constituency around which concern about environmental issues was mobilised.[[4]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-4) Many of the major environmental non-government organisations, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, have their origins in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, it is important to realise that environmental thought contains threads from many different intellectual traditions,[[5]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-5) and that major political ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism, Marxism and anarchism, have developed their particular perspectives on the politics of the environment.[[6]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-6) A distinctly ‘green’ political ideology – ecocentrism (aka ecologism) – has also emerged in recent decades.[[7]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-7)

Significant shifts in environmental policy debate and practice have occurred during a period of major technological, social, political and economic change. The widespread influence of neoliberalism and the development of information and biological technologies go hand in hand with increasing knowledge of human impact on the environment. Scientific knowledge now provides abundant evidence about the impacts of human activities as demonstrated by issues such as biodiversity decline, climate change and the pervasive spread of plastics in the environment.[[8]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-8) Alongside these concerns is the necessity of better meeting the development needs of the marginalised and disadvantaged people living in Africa, South America and Asia, as well as in Western societies.

Within this broad context, environmental policy debate revolves around widely divergent views about how serious environmental issues are, why they are important, what has caused them, and what may need to be done to address them. What is at stake are competing conceptualisations of the ‘proper’ relationships between humans and the non-human world and between humans and other humans, which have profoundly important implications for how the environment is governed.

This chapter explores these issues and draws on Australian examples. The chapter proceeds as follows: Section 1 provides a brief overview of what is at stake in environmental policy debate; Section 2 considers some of the major actors involved in Australian environmental policy; Section 3 explains the place of the environment in Australia’s federal system of government; and Section 4 highlights some areas of ongoing debate/non-debate.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS AT STAKE IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY DEBATE

Environmental policy is challenging! According to leading international policy scholar B. Guy Peters, environmental policy is characterised as politically and technically complex.[[9]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-9) Reflecting this, Stephen Dovers proposed that environmental issues have attributes which make them particularly challenging for policy makers, namely: temporal scale (issues emerge over time and responses may take time to work); spatial scale (what happens in one place can affect somewhere else); limits (irreversibility – extinction is forever); urgency (timely responses can be critical); connectivity and complexity (ecological and biophysical systems are complex and connected – e.g. water cycles); uncertainty (there will never be complete certainty); cumulation (some issues are like ‘the straw that breaks the camel’s back’ or ‘death by a thousand cuts’, where a large number of small actions can have large consequences); moral and ethical dimensions (they involve important philosophical questions about who or what is worthy of consideration); and novelty (humanity hasn’t faced the kinds of questions that we now face – e.g. major climate change). For Dovers, these attributes matter because:

Existing processes, which have evolved around problems that do not as commonly display these attributes, can be suspected to have limited ability in coping with problems that do [such that] the shortcomings of current responses to sustainability have a structural basis, being the products of unsuitable processes.[[10]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-10)

Dovers suggests that such responses result in policy being ‘ad hoc’ and exhibiting ‘policy amnesia’, which means that policy making is not systematic and policy learning does not occur.

According to Carter, environmental issues have seven core characteristics that distinguish them as policy problems, as summarised in Table 1. In broad terms, these views are informed by the understanding that humans are dependent upon nature for their survival and that ecological systems and processes do not conform with human boundaries.[[11]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-11)

| **Table 1 Core characteristics of environmental problems. Source: compiled from Carter 2018.** | |
| --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** | **Description** |
| Public goods | Many environmental resources can be described as public goods, whereby one person’s consumption of the good does not impact upon another person’s (e.g. clean air). |
| Transboundary problems | Environmental systems and environmental problems cross administrative boundaries (e.g. migratory species, water catchments, climate change, marine pollution). |
| Complexity and uncertainty | Ecological and biophysical systems are complex, as captured in the phrase ‘the web of life’. In nature everything is connected, but this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly how it works or what might happen. |
| Irreversibility | Species extinction is forever, and non-renewable resources can be exhausted. |
| Temporal and spatial variability | Impacts may not be experienced immediately, or in the place where they are caused (e.g. the hole in the ozone layer and the effects of acid rain are spatially and temporally displaced, which means the people who cause the problem may not be the ones who suffer from it). |
| Administrative fragmentation | Different departments have different responsibilities, which means that the activities of some departments can impact negatively (or in some cases positively) on the portfolio responsibilities of others. |
| Regulatory intervention | Addressing environmental issues can impose costs on those causing the problem. |

To provide insight into how these complexities play out in environmental policy debate, this section sketches some of the types of responses that can be made to simple questions (which feature – implicitly or explicitly – in all environmental debate) such as:

* What is the nature of ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’?
* Why should we be concerned about the environment?
* What is the cause of environmental problems (and who is responsible)?
* What should be done about them?

Considering these questions, and their associated responses, helps to identify the ways in which different ideas about the environment and environmental policy are made tangible in political debate. Importantly the different responses are associated with different interests, and so are inherently political, and have implications for the types of responses put into place.

**Perspectives on ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’**

Appreciating the different ways in which ‘nature’ or ‘environment’ can be represented is critical for understanding environmental policy. For some people, the environment is simply ‘our surroundings’, which means that our cities, suburbs and homes are part of ‘the environment’. Similarly, nature is often considered to be anything that is non-human, but, as we are mammals, we are also part of nature. In other words, it can be difficult to conclusively separate us from nature. A good example is that our survival requires the presence of beneficial stomach bacteria which call our bodies home. For the purposes of this chapter, it is enough to simply illustrate some of the many ways in which ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ can be understood, and to highlight that these are often deeply ingrained, and so frequently taken for granted.

In terms of ‘nature’, environmental historian William Cronon considers that ‘the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more tangled with human history than popular beliefs about the “balance of nature” have typically acknowledged’ and that ‘nature is not nearly so natural as it seems’.[[12]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-12) For example, viewing nature as ‘Edenic’ portrays it as something that is pure and perfect. Clearly, such a view would be unlikely to be held by people who experience natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and droughts.

In relation to the ‘environment’, Barry identifies four ‘environments’: wilderness, countryside/garden, urban environment, and global environment.[[13]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-13) These suggest that the environment can be partitioned in different ways for different purposes. These kinds of themes are evident in a study by Coffey, whose investigation of national park policy and management in Victoria, Australia, revealed nature variously thought of as: something to be managed; something to be improved upon; a frontier or source of adventure; Eden; and a source of balance, calmness and harmony. For Coffey, these representations, which were associated with neoliberal-inspired reforms to national park management, were evidence of a commodification of nature, whereby ‘nature was portrayed in ways which targeted consumers for whom a visit to national parks had become synonymous with a recuperative respite from urban life’.[[14]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-14)

This raises the question about where the environment begins and ends: for example, are suburban backyards or nature strips part of the environment? Further, the environment is often considered simply as a ‘resource’ which is there solely for the benefit of humans. It is very commonplace to hear waterways, forest ecosystems, landscapes and minerals considered simply as natural resources, which brackets and therefore minimises consideration of important ecological (e.g. rare and endangered species) and cultural (e.g. Indigenous cultural heritage) factors. In effect, positioning the environment as a resource privileges economic value over the intrinsic ‘value’ of the environment. In other words, it assumes the only thing that matters is whether or not someone can make money out of them. Such viewpoints are often a feature of debates about mining in Australia, where proponents may emphasise the revenue to be gained from selling gold, coal, bauxite, iron ore, or some other mineral, while overlooking the other ‘values’ associated with the site.

More conceptually, there is interest in ‘social-nature’, which can be understood as a perspective that seeks to break down the barriers between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, and which instead focuses attention on the various ways in which humans influence how we might conceptualise nature and how nature might influence humans.[[15]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-15) Relatedly, given the longstanding relationship between Indigenous Australians and the environment,[[16]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-16) it is critically important that their knowledge and deep cultural connection to country is given due consideration in environmental debate.

Clearly, there are many ways of understanding and categorising the world in which we live, and our place in it, each with strengths and weaknesses. Politically, views about nature and the environment are enlisted in particular ways to either promote or marginalise environmental concerns. Some of these diverse understandings and perspectives are clearly summarised in the work of Dryzek, who identifies and discusses nine different overarching approaches to environmental issues, as summarised in Table 2.[[17]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-17)

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| **Table 2 Major environmental discourses. Source: compiled from Dryzek 2012.** | |
| **Limits to growth and their denial**  *Looming tragedy:* Survivalism (limits to growth)  *Growth forever:* The Promethean response (infinite growth) | **Problem solving approaches**  *Administrative rationalism:* Leave it to the experts (technocratic)  *Democratic pragmatism:* Leave it to the people (mainstream democracy)  *Economic rationalism:*Leave it to the market (neoliberalism) |
| **The quest for sustainability**  *Sustainable development:* Environmentally benign growth (having our cake and eating it)  *Ecological modernisation:*Industrial society and beyond (pollution prevention pays) | **Green radicalism**  *Changing people:* Green consciousness (deep ecology)  *Changing society:*Green politics (social ecology) |

**Why care about it?**

Peoples’ concern for the environment may be informed by diverse motivations, which reflect different philosophical foundations.[[18]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-18) For this discussion it is sufficient to highlight five broad sources of environmental concern discussed by Eckersley and summarised in Table 3. Debates around whether or not native animals (e.g. kangaroos) should be used for human consumption illustrate why it is important to be aware of the diverse philosophical motivations underpinning the different arguments being made. For example, resource conservationists may support human consumption of kangaroo meat (it would be wasteful not to eat them), animal liberationists may oppose culling (on the basis of animal rights), while some ecologists may not oppose human consumption of kangaroo meat because kangaroo farming may be less ecologically damaging than grazing sheep.

| **Table 3 Sources of environmental concern. Source: compiled from Eckersley 1992.** | |
| --- | --- |
| **Approach** | **Major characteristics** |
| Resource conservation | Resources should be used efficiently because it is wrong to be wasteful. |
| Preservationism | Parts of the environment are unique, inspire awe, or are highly aesthetic and should be protected from development. |
| Human welfare ecology | The environment provides us with goods and services and therefore it is in our own long-term self-interest to look after it (enlightened self-interest). |
| Animal liberation | If animals can feel pain or suffer, then we have no moral right to cause them harm. |
| Ecocentrism | The various multi-layered parts of the biotic community are valuable for their own sake. |

In recent years there has been growing use of the concept of ecosystem services (which encompasses the resource conservation, preservation, and human welfare ecological positions). This is illustrated in the United Nations (UN) sanctioned Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, where ecosystems services are considered as the benefits people obtain from ecosystems, with these benefits encompassing provisioning services (food and fibre); regulating services (floods, drought); supporting services (soil formation and nutrient cycling); and cultural services (recreational, spiritual, religious and other non-material benefits).[[19]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-19) However, a number of authors critique the use of ‘ecosystems services’ and associated economic terminology because these terms frame nature narrowly and serve to commoditise the way in which we understand and govern the world in which we live and share with other species.[[20]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-20)

Clearly, having an appreciation of different sources of environmental concern provides insight into the motivations informing different perspectives in environmental debate. This is important because environmental conflict frequently involves debates about competing philosophical positions, and the desirability of different responses. For example, approaches to biodiversity management will vary depending upon whether decision making is informed by a ‘hands off’ (resource preservationist) approach or a ‘wise use’ (resource conservationist) approach. Further, debates about the live export of sheep and cattle or the culling of native animals are more concerned with issues of animal rights than they are with ecocentrism.

WHAT CAUSES ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS?

Another important element of environmental policy debate concerns the ‘identification’ of the cause, or causes, of environmental problems. For Stone, such debates involve competing ‘causal stories’ which means that part of what is at stake in political debate about environmental issues is what is considered to be the cause of the problem: identification of the cause of the environmental issues is as much political as it is technical.[[21]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-21)

At a systemic level, environmental degradation has been attributed to factors such as overpopulation, technology, production and consumption, Western science and patriarchy, and the Judeo–Christian tradition. Paterson’s analysis of international relations literature discusses some of the different ‘causes’ of global environmental issues identified and the implications of these different framings for the types of solutions advocated. For example: *liberal institutionalists* see global environmental issues as being caused by an inter-state ‘tragedy of the commons’[[22]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-22) with no systematic pattern of winners and losers, with these issues able to be addressed through the building of international institutions. *Realists*see discrete trends such as population growth or technology as the cause, with these amenable to solution through a focus on security.*Eco-socialists* see capital accumulation as the cause of global environmental issues, with the solution being the overthrow of capitalism. *Deep ecologists* have philosophical outlooks which see the domination of nature as being the cause, with their response being grassroots resistance to create decentralised, egalitarian, self-reliant communities.[[23]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-23)

Further, Caldwell identified three different ways in which environmental problems can be interpreted as a political issue. First, environmental disruptions can be seen as accidents or miscalculations and thus amenable to admonition, education, indoctrination and a few legal sanctions such as anti-litter laws (which may be amenable to incremental responses). Second, environmental problems can be seen as largely inadvertent but caused by inadequate or inappropriate organisation and management of economic and public affairs (which can be amenable to operational responses). Third, environmental issues can be seen as a direct consequence of the socio-economic systems currently in operation (which require systemic responses).[[24]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-24)

Responsibility for environmental problems can also be assigned to individuals, groups and organisations, such as past and present governments, the failings of bureaucracy, or the operations of particular businesses or industry sectors. For example, Coffey and Marston explored how the causes of environmental issues were represented in a sustainability framework developed by the Victorian government in 2005. Their analysis showed that the Victorian government placed the primary responsibility for Victoria’s environmental challenges on the everyday choices made by Victorians, rather than the policy settings established by governments or the activities of industry and business.[[25]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-25)

Clearly, how the causes of environmental problems are interpreted influences how environmental problems are understood. Analyses of environmental policy therefore need to be alert to the implications of different causal stories, because of the way in which they focus attention and enable and constrain the possibilities for taking action. For example, economic interests will seek to have environmental issues defined in ways that avoid them being blamed, whereas environmental interests will seek to define issues in ways that emphasise the need for greater priority to be given to environmental objectives.

**What should be done, and by whom?**

Environmental issues also involve debate around what should be done and by whom. At its simplest, such debates centre on what type of policy instrument, or instruments, should be used to address an issue. Policy instruments are ways in which governments take action and may involve:

* *Advocacy*: advocating for something or providing information and advice to inform and educate people
* *Networks*: bringing people together to develop collective responses
* *Money*: spending and taxing
* *Government action*: direct provision of services and infrastructure by government
* *Law*: regulation.[[26]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-26)

For example, reducing water consumption in cities during times of drought may be achieved by: encouraging people to take shorter showers and turn off dripping taps (advocacy); charging people according to how much water they use or providing subsidies for the installation of water tanks and other water-saving devices (money); introducing water restrictions so that people are no longer allowed to water their lawns using sprinklers or wash their cars using a hose (regulation); or constructing a water desalination plant to produce fresh water (direct provision). There is also considerable debate about the merits or otherwise of regulation, subsidies, carbon taxes and emissions trading as preferred mechanisms to manage greenhouse gas emissions. In such debates, economists are likely to advocate for market-oriented approaches and ‘user pays’, while welfare advocates may advocate for subsidies, regulation and information-oriented approaches. Importantly, ideological underpinnings inform policy actors’ views about the merits or otherwise of different policy tools, even if they deny this is the case.

Environmental policy debate is also concerned with how much change is required, as is illustrated in the three types of responses – incremental, operational and systemic – identified by Caldwell.[[27]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-27) An analysis of policy change in the UK under the Thatcher government by Peter Hall provides a similarly useful framework. It focuses on three distinct kinds of policy change:

* *First order change*: policy instrument settings are changed in light of experience and new knowledge, while overall policy goals and instruments of policy remain the same
* *Second order change*: the instruments of policy as well as their settings are altered in responses to experience although the overall goals of policy remain the same
* *Third order change*: a simultaneous change in all three components of policy: the instrument settings, the instruments themselves, and the hierarchy of goals behind policy.[[28]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-28)

Drawing on this typology, Carter suggests that ‘although incremental changes in environmental policy are possible within the traditional paradigm [i.e. incremental approaches to policy] an accumulation of first and second order changes will not automatically lead to third order change, because genuinely radical change requires the replacement of the traditional policy paradigm with an alternative’.[[29]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-29) Debates about what should be done also inevitably involve debates about who should be doing it. In broad terms, in recent decades the relative roles and responsibilities of government (the institutions of the state), the private sector (private companies and industry sectors) and the community (the general public or members of particular groups or communities) have attracted considerable attention.[[30]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-30)

In relation to government and the broad apparatus of the state, central questions relate to the role and capacity of government (and the state) in dealing with environmental issues. Views about the role and capacity of the state are contested.[[31]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-31) There are questions about the disposition of governments to intervene in policy matters, as highlighted by debates between Keynesian and neo-classical economic perspectives on the role of government.[[32]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-32) However, there are limitations in using these terms in discussing the role of government in environmental policy issues, as they both remain wedded to promoting economic growth, and only differ in terms of the role of government. By contrast, some environmentally oriented economists highlight the need for government to encourage a shift beyond the paradigm of economic growth.[[33]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-33)

The ‘public’ may also occupy various roles in relation to environmental matters and can be viewed as either consumers (where their only form of agency is through spending decisions), or citizens (where people have important rights and responsibilities within democracy).[[34]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-34) Finally, the role of the private sector in environmental matters is also subject to considerable debate, with a central issue being whether business is ‘part of the problem’ or ‘part of the solution’. Business is often viewed as central to economic growth, and hence the cause, or at least part of the cause, of environmental problems, although some people consider the potential role of business positively (e.g. free market environmentalists).

ACTORS AND POLITICS OF THE DOMAIN

Given the diversity of environmental issues (e.g. biodiversity decline, climate change, water pollution, water quantity, air quality, soil erosion, invasive species, toxic waste, microplastics, etc.) and the range of levels at which environmental policy debate occurs (e.g. local, regional, state, national, international and global) it should come as no surprise that environmental issues involve a diverse and dynamic range of ‘policy actors’, where policy actors are understood as ‘any individual or group able to take action on a public problem or issue’.[[35]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-35) Effectively every person, individually or as part of a group, has the potential to inform environmental policy debate. Within the context of Australian environmental policy, Table 4 illustrates some of the actors involved.

This diverse range of policy actors, particularly non-government organisations (NGOs) and think tanks, not only occupy different niches within the environmental policy ecosystem, they also draw on diverse resources (e.g. economic power, information and expertise, capacity to mobilise people or attract attention) and deploy, either willingly or by necessity, particular strategies[[36]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-36) in their efforts to shape environmental policy. For example, NGOs may seek to influence policy using direct and indirect strategies. Contacting a relevant minister or public servant, making a submission to an inquiry, or responding to a call for comment are direct forms of influence, while contacting reporters, writing letters to the editor, arranging strikes or marches, or holding public meetings and so forth are indirect ways to influence policy actors.

One thing to note is that environmental policy debate is not the sole preserve of ‘environmentalists’. Many policy actors with sectional/sectoral interests are also actively involved, and arguably in many instances are substantively more influential in shaping environmental policy. This would seem to be the case with respect to Australia’s policy position on climate change. High-profile contributions from Clive Hamilton[[37]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-37) and Guy Pearse[[38]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-38) identify various actors that they see as having played a noteworthy role in shaping climate-change debate and policy in Australia.

| **Table 4 Overview of policy actors involved in Australian environmental policy debate.** | |
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| **Type of actor** | **Examples** |
| Elected officials | Members of parliament in federal, state, and territory parliaments, who may occupy roles in government (prime minister, minister, backbencher) or opposition (e.g. shadow minister, etc.). At June 2019 the federal minister for the environment was the Hon. Susan Ley MP. Members of parliament may be elected to either the lower or upper house in their jurisdiction (Queensland only has a lower house).  Local government councillors. |
| Appointed officials | Ministerial advisers and electorate officers are appointed to support members of parliament.  Public servants undertake policy, planning, management and service delivery roles in public organisations including federal, state and local government departments (e.g. environment departments) and statutory bodies (e.g. environment protection agencies).  Judges (although formally their role is to adjudicate on legal matters rather than make law) appointed to various courts are sometimes called upon to adjudicate on environmental matters brought before their courts. For example, in 1983 the High Court considered the constitutional validity of federal laws introduced to protect the world heritage values of the Franklin River. |
| Political parties | Political parties generally exist to get candidates elected.  Established political parties include the Liberal Party, Labor Party, National Party, and the Greens.  Other ‘minor’ parties include Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, and the Sustainable Australia Party. |
| Non-government organisations (including interest groups, industry associations, and trade unions) | Non-government organisations represent the interests of their members, and seek to influence policy rather than be elected to parliament.  Prominent environmental interest groups include the Australian Conservation Foundation, Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth, and World Wildlife Fund. Such groups are often viewed as promotional as they tend to promote some general agenda.  Prominent national industry associations include the Business Council of Australia, Minerals Council of Australia, National Farmers’ Federation, National Association of Forest Industries, Australian Beverages Council, and Australian Food and Grocery Council. Such groups are often viewed as sectional as they tend to promote their sectional interests.  Prominent national trade unions include the Australian Council of Trade Unions (which is the peak body for the union movement), and the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union, and the Electrical Trades Union. |
| Think tanks and research organisations | Think tanks are understood as independent organisations (i.e. non-government) who seek to influence policy through the provision of ideas, information and research, although specific think tanks are often aligned with a particular perspective on policy matters.  Think tanks include the Institute of Public Affairs, Grattan Institute, Australia Institute, and Centre for Independent Studies.  Some think tanks are also established as research centres at universities. |
| Media | The role of the media is generally understood as a mechanism for informing debate and holding policy makers to account, and so has an important role in environmental policy debate.  The actual contribution of the media in environmental policy debate is contested, as evident from debates about the influence of the Murdoch-owned media on climate change debate.  There is also considerable debate about the contribution of new forms of media to environmental policy. |
| Grassroots groups | People get involved in environmental policy debate as individuals and as part of small informal grassroot campaigns, such as campaigns for the protection or enhancement of locally significant sites. |

HOW IS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY MADE IN AUSTRALIA?

Australia’s Constitution provides the formal institutional context within which environmental policy is made. The first thing to appreciate about this is that there is no explicit head of power in our Constitution, which formally articulates the role of the federal government in environmental matters. This is because state governments existed before Australia (as a nation) existed and negotiations to establish the Commonwealth resulted in the federal level of government only being granted specific powers (these powers are specified in section 51 of the Australian Constitution).

By contrast, state governments create the basic legislative settings relating to development, such as land tenure, planning schemes, primary industries, public utilities and the environment; for example, national parks legislation. Hence, many environmental policy decisions are made at the state level within decision-making processes established by the state government.

Nonetheless, the federal government has come to have considerable influence on environmental matters, should it choose to exert itself, by virtue of its dominant financial position (termed the vertical fiscal imbalance), and decisions by the High Court. In effect, a range of strategies have increased the reach of the federal government on environmental matters, through levers such as the powers over external affairs, foreign investment, and corporations. In this context, Buhrs and Christoff argue that:

Over the past three decades the Commonwealth government has gained greater formal control over environmental protection and resource development through the Constitution’s powers relating to external affairs. These enable national laws enacting treaties including international environmental agreements to ‘override’ the States. But, the States retain the capacity for policy implementation, and therefore real influence in these matters largely remains with them.[[39]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-39)

However, the federal government’s willingness to exert influence has waxed and waned since the 1980s when there was considerable conflict between the federal government and subnational governments over issues such as the proposed damming of the Franklin River and protection of wet tropical rainforests in Far North Queensland. An Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment was negotiated in the early 1990s as a way to improve intergovernmental consideration of environmental issues (including through Ministerial Council processes). In addition, a significant attempt was made to establish a national strategy for ecologically sustainable development (NSESD) in the early 1990s, although it is clear that much more could have been achieved.[[40]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-40)

Importantly, Australia’s federal system of government may not be the sole, or even primary, cause of Australia’s inability to make effective national environmental policy. While challenges such as those associated with the Murray Darling Basin Plan, the lack of a coherent national waste strategy and the absence of a nationally coherent policy on energy (and climate change) point to the role of government and politics, further factors must also be considered. For example, the scarcity of effective environmental policy may be due as much to the influence of economic interests such as policy actors advocating for the interests of industries as it is to the features of Australia’s federal system of government.

Another feature of environmental policy making in Australia is that each state has a relatively unique approach to local government, and there is no recognition of local government in the Constitution. This shapes the ways that council-level environmental issues play out, with the major tensions being between state and local governments.[[41]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-41) Put simply, local governments are the creature of state government, and so state governments determine what roles and responsibilities are granted to local government: for example, in Queensland the Brisbane City Council has a role in water management, whereas in Melbourne it is primarily managed by Melbourne Water and various government-owned water retailers.

Environmental policy in Australia is also influenced by the ways in which the federal government participates in international negotiations and processes, such as those dealing with climate change (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) and biodiversity (the Convention on Biological Diversity, and other treaties dealing with migratory species, wetlands of international importance, and ozone depleting substances). Australia’s contribution to such processes varies considerably depending upon the orientation of the government in office at the time. This variation in commitment to being a ‘good global citizen’ is clearly captured in both the title of an article by Christoff, ‘From Global Citizen to Renegade State: Australia at Kyoto’, and the vignette used to begin the article:

In 1992, Australia was one of the most progressive advocates of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), so much so that at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro Ros Kelly, then Labor Minister for Environment, almost signed in place of Afghanistan in her enthusiasm to see Australia become the first of some 160 signatories to the multilateral Convention. Yet merely five years later, by the Third Conference of the Parties (COP-3) held in Kyoto from 1–11 December 1997, Australia distinguished itself by refusing to accept binding greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and by pushing for a mandate to increase its emissions by up to 18 per cent.[[42]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-42)

More recently, Australia’s inability to submit its national progress report on biodiversity to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity by the required due date provides a further example of Australia’s retreat from being a good global citizen.[[43]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-43)

Environmental policy making in Australia involves diverse issues and actors and plays out in multiple settings with inconsistent results. Given this, it is not possible to provide any simple explanation of how environmental policy is made in Australia, beyond stating that it is political and involves particular actors advocating particular ideas, through particular processes, in particular circumstances: the devil really is in the detail, and this is why detailed analyses of different issues is so useful.

**Debates and non-agenda issues**

Environmental policy debate in Australia is almost invariably couched in terms of development versus the environment, which serves to frame environmental debate in a very narrow and conflictual way – you are either ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ development, there are no shades of grey. Useful insights into how these terms of debate play out in particular cases are well canvassed in a variety of edited collections.[[44]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-44) Read together these collections provide excellent introductions to the major lines of debate and non-debate that animate the politics of the environment in Australia, with useful coverage of issues such as climate change, the Murray Darling Basin, natural resource management, forest conflict, and coastal management, to name but a few.

Two clear themes from this literature are particularly worth noting because they highlight recurring issues. First is Walker’s notion of ‘statist developmentalism’[[45]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-45) which he considers is both a ‘state of mind’ and a ‘development strategy’ in that:

It embodies the assumptions that ‘development’ is (1) imperative, (2) popular, and (3) has self-evident advantages [which] ignores evidence that development damages ecologies and diminishes amenity for the population at large [and instead] assumes that ecologically rational policies will be costly and will eliminate jobs.[[46]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-46)

Walker’s accounts explore the dominance of ‘statist developmentalism’ in Australia from the First Fleet through to the recent times. Statist developmentalism is still alive and well, if recent debates about the Adani mine and other mines in the Galilee Basin are any indication.

Second is Dovers’ view that Australian environmental policy suffers from policy ‘ad hockery’ and amnesia, the idea that ‘what we do at a given time often appears uninformed by previous experiences, and often, previous policy and management attempts are not even recognised’.[[47]](https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/aust-politics-policy/chapter/environmental-policy/#footnote-119-47) This highlights that it is not possible to consider environmental policy making in Australia as proactive or systematic in any way. Even worse is the sense that this ‘forgetfulness’ may not be accidental but may instead be part and parcel of statist developmentalism. Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that many of Australia’s environmental achievements (e.g. halting sandmining and logging on Fraser Island, preventing the damming of the Franklin River, establishing the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, and not proceeding with gold mining at Coronation Hill) were only achieved through extensive public campaigns by the environmental movement.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has introduced the politics and policy of the environment, highlighting that environmental issues are not only incredibly interesting, but are also fundamentally important: our survival as a species depends upon how well we learn to live on this planet with other people and species. In broad terms this chapter has introduced some of the major questions that are debated in environmental policy, outlined some of the key types of policy actors and the institutional context they operate within (i.e. Australia’s federal system of government), and discussed some of the themes that seem to be a recurring feature of environmental policy debate. While this may make for bleak reading, it should not be imagined that it has always been this way, or that such a situation is set in stone.

Progressive environmental politics and policy making can, has, and hopefully will occur, with glimmers of hope evident in both successful grassroots campaigns and some government supported actions. For example, there are clearly considerable numbers of Australians with an interest in, and concern for, making Australia more sustainable if the following initiatives are any indication: the widespread adoption of solar panels (because of, or despite, government policy settings and associated programs); the ‘Lock the Gate’ campaign to oppose widespread fracking; the Victorian government’s renewed efforts on climate change; local councils declaring climate emergencies; the activist energy behind campaigns such as ‘Extinction Rebellion’; and the mass mobilisation of young people as part of the ‘School Strike for Climate’ movement.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Brian Coffey is a Vice-Chancellor’s Research Fellow in the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT University. His research centres on environmental politics, policy and governance and science policy relations. He is interested in how issues are conceptualised in policy processes, and the implications this has for how they are addressed. Brian has taught courses on public policy, environmental politics and policy, and environmental economics. Brian completed his PhD in policy studies at the University of Queensland in 2010. Prior to this he worked in the Victorian public sector for 17 years.

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