



## **‘THE HUMAN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE’**

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**We are living in changing times and, as far as Perth is concerned, things are far from ‘business as usual’ in terms of our ecological sustainability. The time has come for us all to learn to regard our city as a human ecological system whose health is measured in terms of behaviour and social health.**

In a recent lecture by world leading botanist Professor Stephen Hopper he sounded some clear warnings for urban and regional Western Australia. According to Professor Hopper, the southern part of our State has some of the highest levels of biodiversity to be found anywhere in the world. His great concern however is the impact that urban development is having on this wonderfully rich natural environment.

His warning makes us realise that Perth should never have developed as the continuous urban environment we now have. Our suburban expansion should really have been broken regularly by continuous natural belts of vegetation running from the coast to the hills.

These undeveloped vegetation belts would have provided abundant natural habitats for our native flora and fauna as well as a wonderful visual amenity for us all to enjoy.

There would be few of us who would not understand this need to preserve our natural environment. Most of us have studied some kind of geographical or botanical science at high school and we understand some of the fundamentals of a healthy ecosystem.

We can look at a wet land area or deforested rural property and immediately recognise some of the signs that the natural conditions are not healthy. The trees may be dying, the water polluted, wildlife is virtually non-existent.

We all know, for example, that the behaviour of frogs is one sign of the health of a natural ecosystem. Even if we do not have the formal education, our instincts usually guide us.

Strangely however, we do not seem to regard ourselves as actually being part of this ecosystem. We live in it, we use it, but we don't see ourselves as part of it. We don't feel part of its fragility.

We feel confident that our scientific and technological advancements will protect us while we dominate our environment. We almost live a surreal existence.

We are mostly unaware of any social and behavioural damage we may be imposing upon ourselves. Most of us have little or no real understanding of our social environment, which is equally as fragile as our physical environment.

Understanding our social health is critical to our survival as the world becomes increasingly urbanised. The share of the world's population living in cities increased from 3% in 1800 to 14% in 1900 and by 1950 this had increased to 30%. From 1950 it has increased to over 50% and in most developed countries 75% of people live in cities.

We cannot ignore the fact that we are rapidly surrounding ourselves with man-made mechanised environments and we must learn to understand the social consequences involved.

In 2008 a major worldwide study of more than 27,000 people was undertaken to identify the key factors associated with happiness in our urban environments. It was called the Place and Happiness Survey. The most important outcome of this comprehensive study shows that providing basic needs, such as schools, safe streets and infrastructure is not all a community needs.

For us to assume that physical beauty, amenities and cultural offerings should only come when a community is rich and well off was proved to be very wrong. The study also revealed that the level of tolerance for and acceptance of minority groups and senior citizens was a highly desirable characteristic of a happy urban environment.

There are other generic indicators to help us evaluate our human ecological system. One collection of indicators often used to describe the health of a city or town includes the following:

- Comfort and security
- Employment
- Meaningful participation
- Personal relationships
- Cultural expression

- Connectedness
- Physical health
- Positiveness
- Personal growth

Each one of these should be regarded as a non-negotiable requirement for all people. Without any one of these an individual or their family will suffer, and many do.

The ability for people to achieve these essential needs is directly impacted by the area of the city in which they live and their life status. There will usually be a significantly different impact between those living in the CBD and those in outer suburban areas.

As a resident you should ask yourself how you rate your neighbourhood using these indicators. In many inner, well off suburbs, residents would probably rate each characteristic highly however, I am sure that in many of the outer suburban areas residents would say their neighbourhood failed in several ways.

So, how would Perth rate in terms of overall community satisfaction and happiness?

Suburban Perth, in most ways, emulates the American approach to city planning where huge tracts of single, mass produced houses spread across the land punctuated only occasionally by monster shopping centres accessible only by car.

Ask yourself, does this type of urban monotony satisfy the needs people have for connectedness, cultural expression, development of personal relationships or meaningful participation.

Many will argue that this type of environment promotes anonymity and exclusion. To connect further than your immediate neighbours is not easy.

If you live in a well balanced, happy family home surrounded by similar people all employed and relatively well educated then life in our suburbs is probably reasonably good. If not, then our suburban structure could make your life a lonely misery.

One of the areas of our urban ecosystem that appears well out of balance is the city centre. More than 60,000 people work in the CBD yet only about 400 of those workers live in the CBD. So in terms of urban self sufficiency, where people live, work and play within a cohesive neighbourhood, central Perth fails badly.

People who do live in the CBD are mainly those who can afford expensive apartments. There are few, if any, new housing opportunities in the CBD for our senior citizens or for people who really need to live in the city. There are almost no opportunities for young people on low incomes to live in central Perth. Central Perth is fast becoming an enclave for the wealthy.

Cultural offering was a high ranking community desire in the Place and Happiness survey. Sociologists, historians and other observers of human behaviour often regard the obvious and outward expression of culture as a major defining trait of cultural development.

Western Australians naturally want to signify that they are a cultured society so the way we do this is to build things, such as bigger theatre venues. The assumption here is that big venues equates to more culture. This is the same mentality demonstrated in the gold rush days where opera houses were built as a signal of civility.

Culture comes from the people, not buildings. The real need, as demonstrated all over the world, is to invest in the people who provide cultural offerings. It is always easy to build things because there is an instant, tangible and visible result. It is very difficult to take a long-term view and invest in society because the results are neither certain nor immediately visible.

The way forward for Perth is for the community to insist that all future planning is done with input from a broader professional base including people trained in the social sciences, our artists, and our residents. The Australian Institute of Urban Studies, at which Linley Lutton will be one of the speakers, is holding a forum in October to seek opinions on suitable urban research topics required to help guide Perth's future growth.