



## Q&A with Gillian Sparkes

We sit down with the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria to seek her insight on the incentives and process of aligning with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

**Position:** In your view, what are drivers that should motivate a government agency in the efforts to align metrics and outputs with the indicators in the Sustainable Development Goals?

**GS:** The driver for me as Commissioner to adopt the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to broaden the focus of environmental reporting to better address economic, social and environmental considerations. My role is to provide independent and objective scientific reporting to inform policy and decision makers, scientists and the wider community on Victoria's natural environment. That is a wide audience and that is why the indicators in the SDGs are so useful. The SDGs provide an internationally agreed framework that can help us tell a broader story about our progress towards ecologically sustainable development. Beyond reporting on the condition of our natural assets, the SDGs help to describe the benefits of a healthy environment to our economy and

community and to have more informed conversations and debate about multiple outcomes. For the first time at a sub-national level, all 170 State of the Environment (SoE) report indicators have been aligned to the SDGs, setting up the SDGs as the framework for the next Victorian State of Environment report due in 2023. We are very proud of this progress.

The drivers for rethinking SoE reporting in Victoria are grounded in public accountability, transparency and the notion of data democracy. Better independent science reporting on the state of the environment and the benefits we derive from a healthy environment is good for our democracy and the environment. If we can standardise our reporting frameworks using the internationally agreed SDGs, we are then "comparing apples with apples" within and across jurisdictions. Standardising reporting is the Holy Grail for government agencies because when we understand and can more readily compare outcomes, we can better leverage our effort for greater collective impact. What works at the state level can readily be scaled to develop a national approach. Implementing the SDGs makes sense. It is the framework for sustainable development and we have recommended to the Victorian Government in the Victorian SoE 2018 report that it is the right operating framework for environmental reporting in Victoria.

As well as alignment of metrics, the reforms we are working on are also about identifying the gaps – which metrics and outputs are missing, so that we know what we need to know when we need to know it. That's why our Recommendations, Challenges and SDG Targets for Future Reporting from the 2018 SoE include better investment in, and use of, digital platforms, data analytics, citizen science, environmental economic accounting and advocate for a shift in how we monitor and protect Victoria's natural assets. Investment by governments in these capabilities and workforce skills is critical.

**Position:** What do you see as the key challenges in undertaking such a process?

**GS:** We live in a digital age so it's all about real-time data and harnessing the power of the Internet of Things and disruptive digital technologies. The SDG framework is very strong at the goal level and target level but the indicators are less applicable at a state scale, so it is up to agencies at the national and subnational scale, in consultation with our communities, to identify the indicators that matter at a local scale and that we should report on. We have started to address this in our work and, through a seven-step reform process, we now have mapped our scientific baseline of 170 environmental indicators for Victoria to 52 SDG targets. This is the beginning and there's much more work to do but the shift is happening and the science baselines are now set through our 2018 reporting cycle. There's still much work to do to determine the socio-economic indicators for Victoria and what we take forward into the SoE 2023 report. The shift in environmental reporting by my Office since 2014 has included establishing a set of state-wide environmental indicators as well as aligning Victoria's environmental reporting across agencies and with international frameworks, and a shift to more diverse and accessible reporting products for the community and more useful scientific baselines for policy makers. We have worked closely with our reference group which included members from 14 diverse organisations including Environment Victoria, the Municipal Association of Victoria, Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation, Victorian Farmers Federation, and the Wilderness Society. In addition, an Expert Review Panel with members from BOM, CSIRO, 15 leading academics as well as independent experts provided invaluable input and advice to our science program. To prioritise the socio-economic indicators, we held a workshop with more than 120

environmental stakeholders from all walks of life where we mapped and prioritised in real time 29 socio-economic indicators for Victoria. It has been a genuinely collaborative and consultative process to find out what matters for Victoria.

As Commissioner I report on the information I can get which may not always be as comprehensive as I would like, so the expansion of our reporting program necessarily means an increased focus on developing new baseline, scientific databases so that we can continue to improve the science available for our reports. The outcome for all Victorians is better access to better information, that means more informed policy and more useful reporting on the environment, more often. That's got to be a good thing.

**Position:** From your experience, can you describe any specific challenges in the Australian context, with regard to environment-focused SDGs indicators?

**GS:** The SDGs are the framework that has a global consensus and can help the federal government progress and report on a sustainable development agenda. The framework is very well thought through and has consensus from nations and from communities around the world. It doesn't matter whether you are in Africa or Australia, the framework is enabling and powerful. It is one story. It is the blueprint. We are adopting the SDGs for environmental reporting at the state scale, but the framework has broader application. The SDGs can be translated at the national scale. The hardest bit is agreeing the indicators and getting the data. In Victoria, we have started the transition by mapping 170 environmental indicators to 52 SDG targets in the SoE 2018 report but that's just the beginning. Putting the SDGs under the microscope to determine which are the most relevant to environmental reporting in Victoria is a crucial step in achieving meaningful, high quality and transparent environmental reporting. Ultimately, these indicators will inform our community, influence policy and help develop strategies for sustainable development.

**Position:** What is the current status of SDG harmonisation for the Commissioner's office, could you summarise the process to date?

**GS:** I like to say that we are rewiring the system, aligning Victoria with international environmental reporting frameworks. It is a long journey of reform and I think we have come a lot further than we anticipated when we started in 2014. As I said, there has been a seven step process: 1. Mapping: map existing environmental indicators against all 169 SDG targets.

2. Segmentation: assessed all 169 SDG targets against 3 key criteria. The target must – (i) demonstrate the benefits of ecosystem services or the impact of society on ecosystem services; (ii) be relevant to Victoria; and (iii) have available data for reporting. Criterion (iii) didn't exclude a target but assisted our classification of it.
3. Testing: stress testing with government and policy experts.
4. Data discovery: one-on-one discussions with stakeholders and potential data custodians (government and NGOs).
5. Sense checking: consulting external environmental NGOs and experts.
6. Prioritising: live polling with 120 environmental thought leaders from across the State.
7. Reporting: in the Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report

Through the process, we have aligned 170 indicators with 52 targets. Part II for the SoE Summary Report outlines this process in more detail. The Victorian Government has 12 months to respond to the 20 Recommendations, Challenges and SDG Targets for Future Reporting in the SoE 2018 report. The scientific assessments, policy context and challenges, combined with an analysis of global mega trends affecting Victoria's environment over the next decade, provided the evidence base and strategic context for developing the report's 20 recommendations.

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**Position:** What kinds of opportunities exist for geospatial analytics providers in facilitating this transition in partnership with government agencies?

**GS:** The advent of big data, analytics and the Internet of Things (IoT) are game changers for how we work. Government must be a player, participant and exploiter of the opportunities created by this technological revolution. DELWP and the University of Melbourne's Centre for Spatial Data Infrastructures and Land Administration (CSDILA) have announced a digital twin project, creating a digital representation of Fisherman's Bend in 4D. This partnership is a sign of the times and a tipping point for geospatial services in Victoria. Digital twins are a big deal. Great for decision-making and planning, understanding assets, risk mitigation and

ultimately a tool to help create resilient communities, precincts and cities. Forbes magazine said last year that digital twins should be every CEO's "best friend". The better we can harness the power of the IoT, spatial and analytics, the better the data we are going to have.

**Position:** What would you see as the 'low hanging fruit' in terms of immediate need, and mid- and longer-term opportunities that might flow on from those?

**GS:** The SoE 2018 reports on 35 biodiversity indicators including trout cod populations, vertebrate groups (including reptiles) and deer populations. More than three quarters of biodiversity indicators are trending negatively so in terms of an immediate need, the SoE's 20 Recommendations, Challenges and SDG Targets for Future Reporting recommends a Chief Biodiversity Scientist for Victoria, to fast track investment and coordination in biodiversity science and research and support the government's biodiversity plan. There are also opportunities to think more laterally about water and air environmental reporting. The BOM and a range of Victorian water agencies have excellent, high quality data.

The SoE's Recommendation 1 reflects a clear opportunity to develop contemporary cultural indicators to inform future environmental reporting. These indicators would reflect the priorities of Traditional Owners, have practical and cost-effective data-collection methods, be meaningful, and demonstrate change within a five-year reporting period. The mid- to long-term opportunities that would result in bringing Indigenous science methodologies into Victoria's evidence-based scientific environmental reporting. Across all themes, the challenge is to extend data collection beyond traditional data custodians.

**Position:** What are the current priorities for the Commissioner's office in the next two years?

**GS:** We are continuing to explain and advocate for the 20 Recommendations in the 2018 SoE report. Government has 12 months to respond. We are also very focused on developing the Framework for the 2023 SoE report, developing indicators for new reports that we have been tasked by Government with, expanding our SDG work locally in Victoria and internationally, continuing to highlight the biodiversity emergency that is happening globally, and supporting Victoria's response and lots more. There is much work to be done. ■