

# **No longer an hour too far away: Reflections on the impacts of the 'sea-change' phenomenon on a coastal city.**

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## **Abstract:**

After a decade of rapid change, the sea change phenomenon is now well established on the eastern Australian coast where its impacts have been an ongoing focus for all tiers of government. However, in January 2006, a report to the National Sea Change Taskforce called for 'more detailed research within specific communities'<sup>1</sup> in recognition of the diverse and contextual 'place based' nature of the phenomenon.

In Western Australia, while the wave of change has yet to be fully experienced, there are signs that the lessons learned in the eastern seaboard have yet to be absorbed by governments and policy makers.

This paper reflects on impacts to date, and future signposts focussing on the City of Albany – an important regional centre some 4.5 hours south of Perth – that is currently experiencing the phenomenon and its impacts. Albany once considered itself 'an hour too far away' – to be affected. In fact the rapid growth and infrastructure and development demands are placing not only the fragile environment under stress, but putting the very notion of 'Albany' and whose community it is, under question.

This paper highlights some of the intensely localised impacts and their relationship to a sense of place and sense of belonging. The research project is part of a larger 5 year international study – *Sustaining Gondwana* - currently being undertaken within Curtin University.

## **Introduction**

The transition to lifestyle decision making about home ownership has now become a recognised phenomenon. Called 'sea-change' it has entered into the Australian consciousness and has become inextricably linked to the ageing of the baby boomer cohort. On the eastern sea-board, the phenomenon is well established, with some communities now calling a halt to over development and legislating for limited or no-growth.

In Western Australia, the sea-change focus has tended to be on the larger centres of Mandurah and Bunbury/Busselton. This paper turns the lens on another, small town, where increasingly 'sea-change' is on the agenda, but the impacts and consequences for future planning are yet to be fully realised. In particular, the transition from an essential rural place to one that is urbanised and therefore adopting other values, is explored. The paper begins by highlighting some of the emerging issues for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Gurrán, N., Swauires, C. and Blakely, E.J. (2006) *Meeting the Sea Change Challenge: Best Practice Models of Local and Regional Planning for Sea Change Communities*. Report No 2 for the National Sea Change Taskforce. January 2006. Planning Research Centre: University of Sydney. p. vii.

### **An emerging 'lifestyle' city?**

Over the past two decades Australia has experienced a transition unprecedented since the 'move to the suburbs' post WWII. This has become known colloquially as the sea-change phenomenon (SCP) – with the stress always on the word 'phenomenon' – although its common usage is now making the true meaning of that word, as something remarkable, somewhat redundant.

What SCP has come to stand for is essentially a transition from village, settlement, town to full city status and the resultant pressures associated with this. Such demand driven change brings with it both positive and negative challenges for local and regional governments and governance. It also challenges the notion of place and sense of belonging, as the values associated with these places are confronted by change and by the development associated with growth in land development and housing.

In some cases, such growth is seasonal and its impact is now a well researched issue in North America in relation to the winter resorts. In coastal towns in Australia – for example, in Victor Harbor – where the seasonal population grows from 12,000 to 40,000 in summer months<sup>i</sup> - the challenge becomes one of managing finite resources for ratepayers while enabling the economic benefits from the visitors.

This paper suggests that not only are the assumptions associated with land planning and development challenged, but the values held by these communities prior to the SCP, which appeared fixed and agreed to, are now becoming fluid. This can be highlighted by the transition of values from those essentially agrarian, to those more urbanised. As Botterill (2007) explains, such agrarianism is bound up in Australian nationalism. It has two characteristics: the first, that 'agricultural pursuits are inherently worthwhile and wholesome' and the second, which links it to a Jeffersonian ideal, that it has moral superiority. In other words, agrarian values and philosophies reject the city as a place with social problems and moral laxities. These are the changes to the environment, physical, social and cultural through development and redevelopment of the landscape. Greider & Garkovich suggest these are essentially

'... symbolic environments created by human acts of conferring meaning to nature and the environment, of giving the environment definition and form from a particular angle of vision and through a special filter of values and beliefs. Every landscape is a symbolic environment' (1994, p. 1.)

A useful theoretical framework here includes consideration of a transition from an essential *Gemeinschaft* environment to that with largely *Gesellschaft* characteristics, or what I have termed elsewhere as *neo-Gemeinschaft* – that is a demand for place within a *non*-associated kinship/blood affective relationship with the community (Stehlik, 2006). However, this paper does not take a stand on the question of morality (rural = good/ urban = bad) but takes the point made by Gruenewald (2003) that as social scientists, we should be aware of the 'connection between cities and the ecological contexts in which all human, and non-human, communities are rooted' (5). Gruenewald argues that our critical pedagogy needs to include place. This paper highlights that, in the case of the City of Albany, this current dramatic infrastructure transition of SCP mirrors the symbolic transition being experienced by its residents.

## **From agrarianism to urbanisation**

The south-west region of Western Australia is well known nationally and internationally as the West's playground. However the south *coast* region, while well known in Western Australia, has remained less so internationally, although there is now evidence that this is changing. The land development around the City of Albany highlights some of the changes associated with becoming a place that is now no longer 'one hour too far away' from Perth.

Albany is one of the oldest areas of human settlement in Australia, with Aboriginal habitation dating to 40,000 years and European settlement from 1826. This region is located among some of the world's most endangered flora and fauna and is recognised as one of the 25 world biodiversity 'hot spots'. Its landscape is hilly and undulating, very different to the rest of the Western Australia's flat, sandy plain with outcrops of granite rock and beautiful pristine beaches and national parks. Albany prided itself in being the 'capital' of the state, with the deep water Princess Royal Harbour maintaining the lifeline between Australian and Europe and the post and telegraph services connecting it to the eastern states. With the dredging of Fremantle Port in the late 1890s, came the transition to Perth as the agreed and resource supported capital – a matter of continued controversy in Albany even 100 years later. Albany is some 400 kms. south east of Perth, easily accessible through road and air, with a population at just over 32,000 (ABS, 2006). It continues to be the major service centre for the state's second largest agricultural production region – cropping, livestock, timber plantations, viticulture and horticulture.

Historically, Albany was also the site of the departure of the Australian army to Gallipoli in 1914 and subsequently lays claim, with pride, to being the first Australian community to celebrate Anzac Day in 1916. This link between its place in the national consciousness and its centre as a rural service town were inextricably linked to its identity and sense of self, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Botterill (2007) suggests that this rural mythology is now largely one that is exploited by organisations such as the NFF and the RSL, the lived experience of Albany's residents is that they continue to be surrounded by symbols of both ruralism and nationalism. Now the SCP is challenging these once immutable values, and is impacting on its sense of belonging and relationship to place and symbolic landscape that such values cherish.

## **Seeking place**

Increasingly, Albany has become a desirable retirement location and pre-retirement location. While it has previously had steady growth due to its location as a rural service centre, and its retirement status for local farming families, it is now seen as 'clean and green' and away from the over developed areas of Bunbury, Mandurah and Margaret River. It has become a popular destination for eco-tourism and property prices have had exponential growth in the past 2 years.

The local government area, the City of Albany, was created as the result of an amalgamation about a decade ago between the township of Albany and its rural hinterland. Under the inexorable pressures associated with SCP, the local government struggles to balance the growth of the urban settlement with the increasing diminution of the smaller villages in its rural hinterland. As is all too familiar, this sponge effect

attracts resources into the urbanising 'centre', while the diminution of services to 'periphery' regularly continues with the closing down of a number of police stations in the hinterland being announced at the time of writing.<sup>ii</sup> This strikes at the heart of the agrarian identity, as the message implies that rural centres are of lesser value.

Two major trends in population growth in the City of Albany can be observed, both of which have direct impact on the transition from agrarian values to urbanised ones and both of which are directly linked to environment, lifestyle and location. The 'one hour too far away' that was previously seen as a liability and a barrier to growth, is now seen as a positive asset.

The Albany experience needs to be seen in its historical and cultural context as not just a replication of the movement from south to north on the eastern seaboard; that is, of the impact of Victorians moving to Queensland in the late 1990s. One major difference is that because of the demand for lifestyle, amenity, 'clean and green' – newcomers are likely to be *planning* for retirement, rather than actually retired. There is also some evidence of 'vacant' houses, whereby people are purchasing, renting and living elsewhere as a way of ensuring their future planning. The growth in the pre-retirement industry in Albany underlies this point, with a number of villages being developed for the 'over 55's'. The recent census shows that this cohort has grown from 23% of the total population to nearly 28% in the past 5 years. A micro-analysis of who these retirees are has yet to be completed, but it is likely that this will highlight an increasing growth in newcomers to the region rather than the traditional 'farmer retiree' which has largely attributed to the growth in this cohort to date.

Keeping Albany as a farming community with agrarian values and rural sensibilities has been in the interest of those involved in the service industries; in local government and in businesses more broadly. It is the second identified cohort that is directly impacting on these previous assumptions, and thereby changing place.

This cohort is what I have termed 'eco-refugees' (Stehlik, 2007). These are people who have the wealth, mobility, resources and education to 'buy lifestyle'. These are not 'environmental refugees' (those who have been displaced by extreme events, such as the tsunami) but people who can afford to live any where in the world, and who have chosen Albany because it offers safety, security, a clean environment for lifestyle while it also has access to an airport with which to connect with globalised employment opportunities. This growing cohort of newcomers to Albany are building multi-million dollar homes and these are pushing up the cost of housing as a result, impacting on rental values and on the availability of housing for new home buyers.

There are some interesting parallels about wealth buying not only lifestyle, but also privacy, security and safety, from New Zealand's South Island. Here, the City of Queenstown has experienced what one report has called a 'terrorism inspired land boom'<sup>iii</sup>. Property there is now more expensive than Auckland's CBD and real house growth prices have shot up over 144% in the past 12 years, and land prices has risen 400% in the past 20 years. In 2004 alone values increased by 25% and since September 11, 2001 by 70%<sup>iv</sup>. Queenstown is about as far as you can get away from the anxieties of terrorism – it is seen as a 'safe haven' and the once 'tyranny' of distance

is now actually seen as a plus. Tasmania is experiencing something similar. Those who can afford it are seeking their sanctuaries.

In Western Australia, Busselton is also well known as being the home of wealthy North Americans who work in Seattle and commute. In Albany, a small cohort of international millionaires are now buying up land between the city and its near neighbour, Denmark. An important economic outcome of the SCP is that, ironically, many of these communities have now actually become far too expensive to live in, not just in relation to land and housing, but also cost of living. Many coastal centres act as sponges and then become 'donuts' with the centre wealthy and those who serve living around its edges. This is a salutary warning for Albany as the 'sea-changer' lifestyle can become a class issue. The question that is raised is, who can access this new Albany, it is available only to those who can afford it? What impact will this have on the growth of the urban, and the decision making associated with the transition from agrarian to urban values?

### **Towards urbanisation**

A strong demand for more land to be released continues on the outskirts of the town despite the release of 190 hectares at Bayonet Head, north east of the CBD, for almost 2,500 residential lots in November 2006. Large infrastructure projects have commenced, including a marina development on the town's foreshore to Princess Royal Harbour and the Albany Entertainment Centre that will be part of this foreshore development. While such infrastructure projects have been demanded by residents for some time, indeed the planning for a marina has been discussed for over two decades, now that decision making is progressing such development, there is a sense where some residents feel it is 'too much, too soon', and are anxious about perceived lack of consultation.

The marina foreshore development provides a useful case in point. It has created great and continuing controversy in the community, as the 'off again/on again' nature of the development led many to believe it would never happen. It stands as a metaphor for the SCP impact and for the rapid transition to an urbanised sensibility. The arrival of city values and city speed in decision making SCP demands, leaves some residents yearning for a remembered slower, more integrated community, and predicting the loss of what is the 'essential Albany'.

A content analysis of *The Albany Advertiser* over the past 12 months highlights both the interest in urban development and the anxiety by some sectors of the community as to the 'change at all costs' approach they see is dominating decision making processes. A recent editorial page (July 3) highlights this. All the Letters to the Editor are on the waterfront issue. With three letters arguing for a 'go ahead' and the fourth against'. In this way, the waterfront development has become a 'touchstone' in the larger debate about the transition to a city and the perceived rejection of the agrarian subjectivity associated with the 'old Albany'.

### **From agrarian values to urbanised ones**

For Albany, which was at one time also considered 'an hour too far away' this paper argues that SCP is changing the 'texture of places' (Rykwert, 2000) the tangible things that make up a place. Albany, which once defined itself as a 'regional centre for its rural

heartland' is now contemplating its new sense of urbanised self and not all residents are comfortable with this.

A paradigm shift that can be compared to that observed by Tonnies and other 19<sup>th</sup> century commentators in the transition from rural to urban during the Industrial Revolution, is underway (Hunt, 2004). The city is arriving all too rapidly and change is overwhelming for many experiencing it. The fixed nature of agreed morality, accessibility, community and sense of wellbeing and belonging associated with 'country mindedness' (Botterill, 2007) is under challenge in Albany. The new urban values that are being influenced by people who are 'buying place' can be observed in impact of the rapid transition in the city's infrastructure development and emerge in the political debates about the future of governance of place.

The challenge ahead is that the creation of a new Albany subjectivity includes contributions from all those residents – not just those who have recently arrived and are seeking 'place' - but also those who consider themselves 'old timers'. The recent experience from the eastern seaboard is such communities tend to a disparate population – those who serve and those who are being served – those who can afford to live in place, and those who want to, but cannot (Gurran et al, 2006). This can already be observed in some places in Western Australia (such as Margaret River and Mandurah), where the social ecologies of these rapidly growing communities are becoming monocultures. In relation to governance, this dynamic impacts mostly at the local government level. It may mean that people who can not afford to live in Albany may not be able to continue to enjoy the place they love – they may have to move, simply because they have no economic 'buying power'. It may also mean, as has been observed in Albany, that people reject any change, because it threatens their sense of identity, their wellbeing and belongingness.

As sea-changes are becoming increasingly more expensive to manage – so people are turning to other options - the so-called 'tree change'. One example is the community of Dalyellup near Bunbury that has grown at 6.4 per cent over the past 5 years<sup>vi</sup>. Another, less dramatic tree change, but nevertheless important, impact can be observed in the town of Mount Barker, some 90km north from Albany. As this land itself becomes more valuable, people may again be 'moved along' into environments that have available housing, but may have absolutely no familiar connections for them in terms of kinship or friendship ties, the breaking down of *Gemeinschaftlich* characteristics. These new environments may themselves be smaller rural settlements that are not necessarily desirable, but have cheap housing, resulting in the resentment and rejection of these newcomers.

For those with resources who are moving to these communities their demands are becoming the framework by which they are defining their own life style and the infrastructure and services they expect to support it. Evidence to date shows that they will be using their skills and resources to find pathways to their own concept of place and their demands will become increasingly strident and challenged by those residents who seek to maintain the values of an agrarian sense of belonging. Incorporating an understanding of and then balancing these conflicting values, is both challenge and an opportunity for those involved in governance and future planning.

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- <sup>i</sup> The town's sewerage was built when it only had 5,000 residents. (*The Australian*, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 2005, p.7).
- <sup>ii</sup> Six cop shops to close in country WA. *The West Australian*. 6<sup>th</sup> July, 2007. (<http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=145&ContentID=33569>). Downloaded on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2007.
- <sup>iii</sup> ABC TV *Foreign Correspondent*. 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2005 – <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2005/s1462321.htm> accessed 1.2.07)
- <sup>iv</sup> (<http://www.hnzc.co.nz>)
- <sup>v</sup> 'It's time to let the foreshore happen'; Accolades for saying what 'we all think'; Time to move ahead with waterfront' and 'Members worry about treatment' *The Albany Advertiser* 3 July, 2007, p.8.
- <sup>vi</sup> At a pace 'unmatched in regional Australia'. *The West Australian*. 29 December 2005. p13.