Facing the Gorgon: Sustainability assessment and policy learning in Western Australia

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institute.

Jennifer Margaret Pope
March 2007
**Gorgon [ɡôr’ɡan]:**

In Greek mythology, one of the three monstrous sisters, Stheno, Eurale and Medusa; daughters of Ceto and Phorcus. Their hair was a cluster of writhing snakes, and their faces were so hideous that all who saw them were turned to stone\(^1\).

Middle English, from Latin *Gorg, Gorgon-*; from Greek, from *gorgos*, terrible\(^2\).

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Abstract

Sustainability assessment is emerging as a form of impact assessment with the concept of sustainability at its heart. This thesis contributes to the process of theory-building for sustainability assessment through an exploration of the development of this policy tool within the Western Australian context. Through an analysis of the sustainability assessments of the Gorgon gas development on Barrow Island and the South West Yarragadee water supply development, and a process of personal reflection, I explore the potential of sustainability assessment to contribute to a more sustainable society by facilitating learning.

While the focus of traditional forms of impact assessment has typically been ‘exterior’ forms of knowledge and learning relating to the potential impacts of a proposal, or to process methodologies and governance arrangements, in this thesis I argue that sustainability assessment processes should also facilitate ‘interior’ forms of learning that excavate and challenge underpinning assumptions about the organisation of society, including shared discourses and storylines, as well as personal views and beliefs.

To achieve this aim, I maintain that sustainability assessment should be a proactive process that is integrated with the proposal development, framed by an open question and guided by a ‘sustainability decision-making protocol’ that operationalises sustainability for the decision at hand. It should be guided by a structured process framework that assures attention is given to issues that might otherwise be neglected. Each step of the process framework should represent a space for inclusive deliberation, with the concept of sustainability itself acting as a catalyst for learning and reflexivity.

Located within the institutions of modern industrial society, deliberative sustainability assessment processes can contribute to the emergence of an 'integral sustainability' that embraces and reconnects the interior and exterior, collective and individual dimensions of policy-making and of society in general. The influence of sustainability assessment can thus extend beyond the immediate decision at hand to contribute to a momentum for societal change towards a more sustainable future.
Publications

Sections of this dissertation have already been presented as conference papers, published as peer-reviewed journal articles or prepared as government reports. They are:


Subsequently published as:


Subsequently published as:


Subsequently published as:


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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CALM</td>
<td>Department of Conservation and Land Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCWA</td>
<td>Conservation Council of Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRG</td>
<td>Community Reference Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoE</td>
<td>Department of Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoIR</td>
<td>Department of Industry and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPC</td>
<td>Department of the Premier and Cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPI</td>
<td>Department of Planning and Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTF</td>
<td>Department of Treasury and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIA</td>
<td>Environmental impact assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>Environmental Protection Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPBC</td>
<td>Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (Act)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESE</td>
<td>Environmental, social and economic</td>
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<tr>
<td>IAIA</td>
<td>International Association for Impact Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWSS</td>
<td>Integrated Water Supply Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>JV</td>
<td>Joint venture</td>
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<tr>
<td>GTL</td>
<td>Gas to liquids</td>
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<tr>
<td>LNG</td>
<td>Liquefied natural gas</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>Net conservation benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEPA</td>
<td>National Environmental Policy Act (United States)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-government organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OMP</td>
<td>Office of Major Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Policy, plan or programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>Strategic environmental assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIAC</td>
<td>Standing Inter-agency Committee of CEOs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPU</td>
<td>Sustainability Policy Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWY</td>
<td>South West Yarragadee</td>
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<tr>
<td>TBL</td>
<td>Triple bottom line</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRC</td>
<td>Waters and Rivers Commission</td>
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