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EDITORIAL

## An overview of thriving through transformation

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The articles published in this special issue come from the blind peer review and refinement of papers presented to the biennial conference of the Australia New Zealand Society for Ecological Economics (ANZSEE) held at the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale, New South Wales (NSW), Australia on 19-23 October 2015. All papers jointly contribute to helping transform the human existence toward one that is socially, culturally, environmentally, ecologically, economically and politically sustainable. Transforming our human existence to meet these multiple dimensions of 'true' sustainability is a difficult task, balancing potentially competing interests and, inevitably, involving trade-offs between these dimensions.

As current President of ANZSEE and Chair of the organising committee of the 2015 biennial conference of the same name as this special issue, I am pleased to provide an overview of the conference and discuss the articles presented in this issue.

## INTRODUCTION

At the foundation of transforming human existence to one that is socially, culturally, environmentally, ecologically, economically and politically sustainable is the concept of efficiency; that is, where there are gains in a number of dimensions of sustainability without trade-offs in others. Such efficiency forms the foundation for the principle of Sustainable Economic Development promoted in 1972 by the Club Rome.<sup>1</sup> Today the concept of efficiency is as important as it was in 1972 when considering how to reach our 'transformation goals'. Indeed, the need to transform has carried over into many facets of life, as evidenced by various events such as with the global nomination of the Pope, Herman Daly and the Club of Rome for a Nobel Peace Prize in Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> to the locality of Armidale (NSW, Australia)<sup>3</sup> having the hottest year on record when the supply of air cooling capital was uncharacteristically surpassed by demand.<sup>4</sup>

Transformation entails changing from one state to another or several sequential states. An underlying philosophy of the conference and the papers contained in this special issue is for the need to take action by 'walking the talk' as well as 'talking the talk'; that is, to take action to change current human behaviour. Understanding, measuring and describing change is inherent in economic analysis, as is the concept of efficiency. Both concepts are critical to the study of biology and ecology and are indeed important in a range of other disciplines. Our conference was, therefore, designed to connect the intellectual to the practical and the applied, and attempted to 'walk the talk' by including the following initiatives:

- Workshops on integrating Aboriginal knowledge systems with those from the pure and social sciences brought academics from across the disciplines of Art, Humanities, Education, Economics, Park Management, Northern Institute, Health and many other disciplines.
- Field trips exposed participants to: Australia's Gondwana World Heritage rainforests; the local Aboriginal Keeping Place; New England Regional Art and Printing Museums' Community Garden; and a UNE linguist's backyard, which was a homegrown food bowl for his family and the broader Armidale community.<sup>5</sup>
- Delegates received stainless steel water bottles embossed with the ANZSEE logo rather than plastic bottles to ensure reduced landfill, waste and embodied energy.
- Conference transport was by bus and bicycle to further reduce the ecological footprint of our conference.

All conference talks were recorded and are available at (<https://capture.une.edu.au/ess/portal/section/1d7d7b8b-8301-4a5d-aa8e-d912d45922ef>). Also available is a parallel series of refereed conference papers, which should be read in conjunction with the articles presented here (see <http://anzsee.org/2015conferencepapers/>). The recordings include a virtual collaborative event with Griffith University, where we joined with leading global evolutionary economists to discuss and debate the alternative paths to sustainable transformative states ([www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-business-school/departments/department-accounting-finance-economics/news-and-events/managing-the-transition-to-a-stable-economy](http://www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-business-school/departments/department-accounting-finance-economics/news-and-events/managing-the-transition-to-a-stable-economy)). The conference web page, at <http://anzsee.org>, is designed to provide readers with more ideas of how to make transformative changes.

<sup>1</sup> Donella H Meadows, Dennis L Meadows, Jorgen Randers and William Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report on the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Universe Books, 1972), <[www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf](http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> *Nobel Peace Prize for Sustainable Development* (2015) Nobel Peace Prize Themed for Sustainable Development <<http://np4sd.org>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Hottest Year on Record Since 1891* (2017) The Weather at Armidale NSW <[www.weatherarmidale.com](http://www.weatherarmidale.com)>.

<sup>4</sup> Jacinta Tutty, 'Queensland Heat Wave Sparks Fan Shortage', *Courier Mail* (online), 13 January 2017 <[www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/queensland-heatwave-sparks-fan-shortage/news-story/c1e8e8e3a51a8d33f0cce169f856df8d?from=htc\\_rss](http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/queensland-heatwave-sparks-fan-shortage/news-story/c1e8e8e3a51a8d33f0cce169f856df8d?from=htc_rss)>.

<sup>5</sup> We enjoyed homemade baked apple pies (made from homegrown apples) in our cross-cultural workshop because of the generosity of the Bruderhof people from Danthonia in the New England region; they joined with us in discussing taking transformation action at Dr Nash's homegrown and cooked vegetarian lunch and garden tour (the meal accompanied with freshly baked bread made by the famous 'Nick' of the Gold Fish Bowl). Simply sharing good food with good people can nourish and connect the souls of people for an indefinite period of time.

The success of conference activities achieved is reason to celebrate, as is our success in filling four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarships for attendance at the conference. While four scholarships may not sound like many, such an achievement is a significant first-time milestone in the society's and UNE's history, and a positive reflection of what is a promising future for cultural understanding and respect in our local to global regions.

One of the key themes of the conference was to consider issues of importance to sustainable rural, regional and remote areas. There was a range of events, including talks, workshops and field trips that supported 'local to global' research and initiatives, including improving soil and pasture health, delivering enduring community value from mining, and enhancing indigenous wellbeing. Improving the wellbeing of rural, regional and remote areas is a part of UNE's strategic goals, and the conference helped provide impact for researchers' findings in these areas as well as promoting the profile of UNE to a global audience through the international linkages offered by ANZSEE and its parent institution, the International Society for Ecological Economics ([www.isecoeco.org](http://www.isecoeco.org)).

I would like to formally thank the fantastic organising committee for delivering the conference, and our sponsors (see Table 1) who helped support the conference; without their support, the success of the conference would not have been possible, including the production of research outputs such as those discussed in the articles contained in this special issue. It was only through the strong, hard work of a connected 'local' but also 'afar' team (eg, in Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide and New Zealand) that we could deliver such a successful conference.

**Table 1: Sponsors of the Biennial 2015 ANZSEE Conference**

Sponsor	Type
Commonwealth Science and Industry Research Organisation and UNE School of Environmental and Rural Science	Silver
NSW Government, Local Land Services, Northern Tablelands	Bronze
Ninti One Ltd: Innovation for Remote Australia and UNE VC's Office	Indigenous Participation
UNE School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences	HDR attendance
UNE Institute for Rural Futures, UniSA, UNE Life, Sustainable Living Armidale (Armidale Road to Paris), The Goldfish Bowl, Bruderhof, Armidale Community Garden	In-kind and cost-recovery
UNE Smart Farm: Sustainable Manageable Accessible Technologies, UNE Business School and Dr Nash and his family	Hosts and In-kind

Source: <https://anzsee.org/sponsors/>

## Overview of the articles

The four articles (see Table 2 for a summary) in this special issue should be viewed within the context of the conference described above. The articles are not presented in order of priority or quality, rather in what may appear to be a 'natural flow' of topics.

**Table 2: Articles contained in this special issue**

No.	Transformation title	Location	Author(s)
1	Enduring Community Value from Mining: Measuring the Employment Impacts of Mine Closure for Remote Communities and Considering Issues for Transformation	Northern Territory, South Australia, Australia	Blackwell, McFarlane & Fischer
2	Sustainable Remote Australian Transport for Living on Country and Going Out Bush	Australia	Spandonide
3	Ecological Economics of North American Integration: The Reshaping of the Economic Landscape in the Santiago River Basin	Mexico, North America	Peniche Camps
4	Australian Local Government Sustainability and Transformation: Structural Reform and the Fit For Future (F4F) Reform Initiative in New South Wales - Forced Council Mergers	New South Wales, Australia	Tiley

In article 1, Blackwell, McFarlane and Fischer ‘track and map’ mining expenditure and the fallout from anticipated mine closure *ex ante* at Jabiru in the Northern Territory (NT) and Leigh Creek in South Australia (SA).<sup>6</sup> The authors model job and employment income losses for a number of scenarios, including best, worst and most likely cases. The results show, as would be expected, that with mine closure, the economic viability of these towns is brought into question. Less expected is that jobs are lost in not only the mining sector but also across the entire range of industries within the inherently vulnerable economic profile of these settlements. Also, the spatial impacts are surprising and the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is significant. However, the closure of the main economic activity in these remote towns pushes all stakeholders, especially local people, towards the urgent need for transformation to futures beyond mining, and a number of institutional reforms including, for example, democratically elected local representation and government that can deliver and implement transformation in the ‘unincorporated’ areas.

In the second article, Spandonide considers how transport occurs in remote Australia, again with some surprising and unexpected evidence that smashes through standard paradigms. Indeed research on the complexities of transport for people in remote locations is ‘paradoxically’ under-done when one considers the inherent difficulties involved: extreme distances, high supply chain costs, and limited access to services and economic participation. The latest accessibility-driven technological innovations in both the digital and the sharing economies are highly topical in transport projects in urban agglomerations, but are still a distant reality for remote Australia. There is a need for researching an appropriateness framework for such technologies because of the strong relevance of the multiple outcomes in terms of wellbeing that some of these innovations provide. What defines a good quality of life can sometimes be very similar and other times greatly differ between remote and urban contexts. Some solutions which require additional thinking in remote locations, for obvious reasons, include affordable, active, more inclusive and less emission-intensive public transport systems supported by virtual networks, sharing vehicles (*vis-à-vis* Uber), recycling equipment, electric vehicles and driverless cars. An essential consideration in devising transformative transport systems for the bush is that remote people have a strong desire to ‘care for country’; this contrasts with the compromise often made in urban environments for road development ‘at all costs’. The range of research for improved transport liveability and social sustainability for remote communities presented by Spandonide is fresh, new and exciting. I implore you to read the article for yourself.

The third article by our colleague, Peniche Camps, takes us across the seas to North America, where he reviews the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA) on a region in Mexico. In order to meet the requirements of the agreement, Peniche Camps indicates that Mexico’s federal and local governments implemented regulations and policies which transformed the industrial structure of the country such that traditional sectors disappeared or were ‘absorbed by foreign capital’. Only a few sectors remained: those that benefited from access to the American market - mainly subcontracting plants or ‘maquiladoras’. Another ill effect identified in the article was the concentration of the urban population and associated urban sprawl. With China’s recent growth, Mexico has undergone another transformation resulting from the Chinese global demand for natural resources, heightened through the integration with the American economy. Focusing on the Santiago River Basin, the article outlines the political economy of this ‘neo-extractivism’ development model, which has transformed in Mexico to integration with the global economy. Water shortages in regions favoured by the integration policies, which support car manufacturing, mean that water needs to be obtained from another, traditionally agricultural food producing region through dam and aqueduct construction. The new water allocation leaves the agricultural region short of water, resulting in the replacement of local food production with imports from other Mexican regions or the US. With China’s growth waning, the loss of extracted natural resources through subsidisation of industrial exports from the integration, and the proceeds from extraction no longer being used to fund social service provision, the sustainability of this development model is uncertain.

The fourth article, by Tiley, returns the reader to where we began, focused on the wellbeing of local people and their democratic local representation and provision of local public services. The article reviews

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<sup>6</sup> The mine has subsequently closed and this research helped inform the SA Government Transitional Policy, directly impacting the wellbeing of these remote people.

the current universal phenomena of ‘forced’ local government amalgamations in NSW, where policy has been based primarily on the economies of scale for the amalgamation of local public services. The article outlines the evolution of recent policy development and reform in NSW, including arguments for and against council amalgamations and the *Fit For the Future* initiative which provided \$1 billion to encourage councils to undergo structural mergers. Tiley points out that many services traditionally provided by state or territory governments have been imposed on local government without necessary resources and financial reform. Despite this, Tiley argues that these reforms are a necessary requirement for the financial sustainability of local governments in NSW, given that many of the council boundaries were established more than a century ago, transport and communication systems have rapidly improved, and community demands on councils continue to grow. The proposed mergers are likely to reduce the number of NSW councils from 152 to 112.

## Concluding remarks

Together, these articles might seem like a disparate collection of papers without common themes, but the threads are apparent within each: the need to consider whether people are in remote or urban Australia; the significance for democratic local representation to help transform places into healthy spaces, with local government transformations being one example of the desire to ensure financial sustainability of the local governance system without compromising democracy and other forms of sustainability; the need to ensure that less well-off places (such as remote Australia) have adequate yet innovative solutions to their transport problems and needs. Similarly at the regional, national and global scales, we see that global trade policies, while benefiting a particular region, may have long lasting detrimental effects on the wellbeing of local people in another region through the attrition of their natural resources. The need to transform to sustainable solutions at the ‘local to global’ scales is critical to ensuring the wellbeing of our globe’s people. Ecological economics is as much about the ecology of our social, cultural and political systems as it is about the ecology of our natural systems and economics.

A final important point to make as part of this special issue is that ANZSEE is a society based on ecological economics which is inherently inclusive of other disciplines. Achieving ANZSEE’s integrating aim is no easy task, and requires members to exert additional effort and persistence to understand one another’s concerns, approaches and thinking; it also involves empathy and empathetic action. For this conference and special issue, the organising committee and others involved in the conference made significant efforts to include other disciplines. This resulted in greater debate, improved understanding, and greater opportunities for transforming the human existence to the fully dimensional sustainability goal outlined above. It is truly incredible what can be achieved by a group of hard-working people who, despite their disparate backgrounds, work together collegiately rather than in silos. I, therefore, hope you enjoy the articles contained within this special issue, learn from the authors’ experiences and journeys, embrace with other disciplines, and gain inspiration and encouragement for your efforts to transform our existence to a more sustainable future - ‘locally to globally’ and by ‘walking the talk’.

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