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Facebook: Mary River turtle project – Tiari Landcare

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### **Submission to Senate enquiry: Australia's faunal extinction crisis**

Since 1999 Tiari Landcare has achieved international recognition as the lead organisation in the conservation and research of the Mary River turtle, *Elusor macrurus*. Despite its large size, i.e. up to 8kg, its native habitat was unknown until its discovery by John Cann in 1990.

Tiari Landcare's commitment to threatened species recovery has remained consistent over many years notwithstanding changes to Governments, funding, priorities and staffing.

Without the dedication of our community group, knowledge and conservation of a threatened species would be minimal. Our responses to the Terms of Reference are based on the experiences of our community group who has been working with threatened species within the Mary River in south-east Queensland for almost 20 years.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Adrian Ross

President  
Tiari & District Landcare Group

9<sup>th</sup> August 2018

## Responses to Terms of Reference

Australia's faunal extinction crisis, including:

a) the ongoing decline in the population and conservation status of Australia's nearly 500 threatened fauna species;

- **Mary River turtle**, *Elusor macrurus* (endangered): In the Lower Mary River, a three-year survey from 2015-2017 did not detect any evidence of population recovery since the 1960's (Connell, M personal communication 2018).
- **Mary River Cod**, *Maccullochella peelii mariensis* (endangered): a population assessment is required to determine if the conservation efforts have had any impact on improving the population trajectory.
- **Queensland lungfish**, *Neoceratodus forsteri*, (vulnerable): a population assessment is required to detect any improvement in population trajectory, however, immature continue to not be captured (Kind 2011 The Natural History of the Australian Lungfish, *Neoceratodus forsteri* (Krefft, 1870).
- **Koala**, *Phascolarctos cinereus*, (vulnerable Qld & NSW): the population in Tiaro is believed to now be locally extinct. This has occurred since 2004 Tiaro Landcare survey when they were readily observed in the region (Koala Habitat Linkage Tiaro to Maryborough 2004 Tiaro & District Landcare Group; Schulz, A personal communication 2017).
- **White-throated snapping turtle**, *Elseya albagula* (critically endangered): a population assessment is required to determine population trends. However due to its recent listing as critically endangered, it is unlikely that the population would have changed (Limpus 2008 Freshwater turtles of the Mary River).

b) the wider ecological impact of faunal extinction;

- Unknown what the implications are of the koala extinction in Tiaro region as there has been no study or data collections.
- Unknown what the impacts on the condition of the ecosystem which has resulted from population declines of all the threatened aquatic species in the Mary River.

c) the international and domestic obligations of the Commonwealth Government in conserving threatened fauna;

- The Commonwealth has lagged behind international groups to assist with recovery of the species. Tiaro Landcare's Mary River turtle project was honoured in May 2018 by the Crown Prince at a ceremony in the United Arab Emirates.
- The Commonwealth is encouraged to retain and increase its obligation to ensure consistency and longevity in the listing and funding of threatened species, e.g. the white-throated snapping turtle is listed as critically endangered by the Commonwealth and not listed by the Queensland government.

d) the adequacy of Commonwealth environment laws, including but not limited to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, in providing sufficient protections for threatened fauna and against key threatening processes;

- The proposed Traveston Dam assessment by the Commonwealth demonstrates that the EPBC legislation can be effective in protecting a threatened species from the impacts of major infrastructure. This has been vindicated by recent research which found the Mary River turtle was most abundant in this reach. It is critical that the EPBC Act is not diluted in the future, so that if a listed species was threatened by infrastructure, the Commonwealth assessment would be the same.
- The Act is ineffective at management of key threatening process such as mortality and/or injury sustained from human activities.

e) the adequacy and effectiveness of protections for critical habitat for threatened fauna under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999;

- Currently inadequate and ineffective to protect aquatic species. The definition of critical habitat for aquatic species needs to be redefined to improve its relevance to aquatic species critical habitat.

f) the adequacy of the management and extent of the National Reserve System, stewardship arrangements, covenants and connectivity through wildlife corridors in conserving threatened fauna;

- Inadequate. Neither the terrestrial nor aquatic habitat of the two threatened turtles is within any Reserve or protected, or covenanted area.
- Organisations such as Water Authorities that are controlled by the State, should be required to implement stewardship arrangements for threatened species.
- Implementation of stewardship arrangements by private landholders would be highly achievable and beneficial as a means to encourage restoration and protection of terrestrial habitat.

g) the use of traditional knowledge and management for threatened species recovery and other outcomes as well as opportunities to expand the use of traditional knowledge and management for conservation;

h) the adequacy of existing funding streams for implementing threatened species recovery plans and preventing threatened fauna loss in general;

- Inadequate. There is no support even for a voluntary group to implement effective recovery actions. As a consequence, to fund conservation and research programs, Tiaro Landcare has had to:
  - sell chocolate turtles to raise much needed funds.
  - sought and received international funding.
  - recovery actions is reliant on the goodwill and personal commitment of individuals.
- Improved communication of existing funding streams is required.
- The proceeds of the partial sale of Telstra was allocated to a Perpetual fund with the interest to be allocated to fund research and conservation. A dedicated funding stream similar to the Future Fund is needed for threatened species status, recovery and adaptive management.
  - Grants process either through a national Threatened Species body or Regional bodies
  - A long-term funding stream is required for species such as the Mary River turtle that can live up to 100 years, as short-term actions are ineffective.
- Include threatened species status assessment and monitoring as a funding stream within the Australian Research Council linkage grant system e.g. TLC MRT research. This has the multiplier effect for the Commonwealth's investment as it builds interest in threatened species by an increasing the number of individuals involved.

i) the adequacy of existing monitoring practices in relation to the threatened fauna assessment and adaptive management responses;

- Completely inadequate as none has occurred for any of the threatened aquatic species within the Mary River with the exception of the Mary River turtle.
  - The Mary River turtle is the only species in the Mary River that has had any current monitoring. This has only occurred because of the dedication of Tiaro Landcare and support from a University, supported by the sale of chocolate turtles.
- The distribution of all the threatened aquatic species from the Mary remains unknown. Most major creeks which include suitable habitat and are likely to support a population, have never been surveyed.
- Recommend prioritising the monitoring of ecosystems such as the Mary River which include multiple threatened species that can be simultaneously monitored. It is likely that all the species would face similar threats.
- Long-term monitoring is required for long-lived species (up to 100 years) such as turtles and lungfish as it can take decades for trends to become evident.

j) the adequacy of existing assessment processes for identifying threatened fauna conservation status;

- Inadequate as it relies on the resources of enthusiastic public members to initiate, gathering adequate scientific data to make a nomination.
- Recommend the Commonwealth provide support for Regional Bodies in facilitating the making of a nomination.

k) the adequacy of existing compliance mechanisms for enforcing Commonwealth environment law; and

- Inadequate based on the experience of our members. Compliance agencies only investigate after a complaint has been made and because of the time lapse between the complaint and its investigation - which can be months – the investigation becomes futile due to the time lag between damage and the investigation. The process becomes a waste of resources as prosecutions are rarely successful and the damage is not remedied.
- Recommend a uniform code across Commonwealth, State and local governments with regard to compliance investigations of threatened species and their habitat. If there was consistency, investigations could be streamlined and more responsive to complaints.

l) any related matters.

- Threatened Species strategy produced by the Commonwealth's Threatened Species Unit does not include any reptiles, amphibians or aquatic species.
- In areas that are recognised as significant habitat for known threatened species, there should be areas set aside for the protection and recovery of these species so that they are not negatively impacted by changing ownership of property.