

Inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities protection in Australia

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(a) management of key threats to listed species and ecological communities;

The number of biological surveys conducted since the mid to late 2000s has dramatically declined in Victoria¹. This is information that is critical to any assessment of the conservation status and distribution of a species and ecological communities. Without such work the listing of species, determination of population trends and threatening processes can not be timely. Further adaptive management strategies required in managing complex systems is hampered by not having adequate information of existing and historical actions.

Once a process is listed as a key threat and a threat abatement plan has been written this is not a guarantee that the actions will be implemented. The Endangered Species Scientific Subcommittee on listing *Circovirus* as a threatening process noted that 'the preparation and implementation of a nationally co-ordinated threat abatement plan is a feasible, effective and efficient way to abate the process'². However twelve years after its adoption, the five major objects of the threat abatement plan for psittacine beak and feather disease affecting endangered psittacine species have not been met.

Management of key threatening processes like Land clearance that are not suitable for a threat abatement plan may rely on state and territory legislation to meet abate this threat. This seems unlikely to be effective as noted in 2001 that 'Land clearing continues at different rates, despite apparently tight legislative mechanisms'³

(d) regulatory and funding arrangements at all levels of government;

The level of funding for threatened species and ecological communities, like for environmental concerns in general is inadequate.

1. A discussion paper on the Victoria Environment⁴ quotes the Australian Bureau of Statistics that calculated Australian governments, industry and households to protect the environment, would need in 2009 to exceed \$13 billion per year. Current programs aligned to major natural resources at an ecosystem level are set at \$2.4 billion over five years. This is only 3.7% of the estimated need.
2. The Australian National Audit Office suggests that there is little to suggest that regionally distributed investment in landscapes has been sufficient to deliver the desired demonstrable outcomes or that, overall, current investment programs will deliver their targeted outcomes within a reasonable time frame.
3. The Australian Auditor General concluded that the resources allocated to the EPBC Act limit achievement of its objectives given the scale of the prescribed tasks required by the

legislation and the technical requirements for assessing, protecting and conserving over a thousand individual species and hundreds of ecological communities⁵.

Current Victorian legislation with the primary objective 'to guarantee that all taxa of Victoria's flora and fauna can survive, flourish and retain potential for evolutionary development in the wild', the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act has resulted in an increase in the number of threatened species in Victoria increased between 2002 and 2007⁵.

Strong environmental regulation is required to reduce the impact on Australia's biodiversity by changes in land use, land clearance, invasive flora and fauna and other threatening processes. The privileged position of business in policy development means that development and utilisation of environmental assets should only be considered when the impacts of specific applications are low and measurements of Australian Biodiversity are stable over the medium term.

There should be a large long term investment in the conservation of Australia's biodiversity. This may require significant economic reform or another mechanism to fund the activities required to address previous underinvestment.

(f) the historical record of state and territory governments on these matters; and

In August 2009 I was present with a team of biologists searching for the last Christmas Island Pipistrelle when it was highly likely it went extinct. After nine years of population monitoring the last animal was no longer detected after the 26 August 2009. The Federal government and decision makers were aware of this imminent extinction in reports submitted in the preceding two years. The decline of this species was also documented in the two decades prior to that.

An ecosystems approach to conservation on Christmas Island had been decided on prior to the extinction.⁶ A decision was made not to attempt a captive breeding program until the "last moment". By the time the team of biologists arrived on Christmas Island only one bat was left.

If a purely ecosystems approach is taken in the future will any individual species warrant specific actions to conserve it? Given the interrelatedness of all species in an ecosystem the choice we should make should be to increase funding to allow specific conservation actions for a range of threatened species and threatened communities rather than use economic rationalism and ecological triage to address ecosystem resilience alone.

1. http://www.ces.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/124514/4-0_StateofEnvironment-Section.pdf
2. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. 2009. *Threatened species and communities: Psittacine Circoviral (Beak and Feather) Disease Australia*.
<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/ktp/pcd.html>

3. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. 2010. *State of the Environment 2001*.
<http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2001/publications/report/biodiversity.html>
4. Martin, P., and Werren, K. 2009 Discussion paper: An industry plan for the Victorian Environment? Published by the Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne.
5. Victorian Government, Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria (2008), p276 http://www.ces.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/124514/4-0_StateofEnvironment-Section.pdf
6. Victorian Government, Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria (2008), p136 http://www.ces.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/124514/4-0_StateofEnvironment-Section.pdf
7. Garret AM MP, The Hon P. Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. 2009 Opening address - 10th International Congress of Ecology. Brisbane.