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Submission to Senate Inquiry regarding the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia.

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As individuals we have a keen practical interest in environmental protection and biodiversity conservation, with more than 30 years experience both professionally and on our own property. We provided input to 2009 independent review of the EPBC Act as individuals and feel that the points raised in that submission (#41) are still relevant to this current inquiry in 2012.

We would like to offer specific additional comments arising from our personal experience with biodiversity conservation on private land in Queensland through our Nature Refuge agreement with the State of Queensland, and on our knowledge of National Park, state forest and privatized plantation forest estate which adjoins our property.

Management of key threats to listed species and ecological communities

The key threats to the listed species (several) and the major listed ecological community on our property (Lowland rainforest of subtropical Australia) and adjacent National Park and forestry land arise from a spectrum of invasive exotic weeds (notably cats claw creeper) and vertebrate pests (pigs, cats, dogs, foxes, deer). Management of these pests is a continuous task and a very significant management cost, on behalf of private landholders, Queensland National Parks Service and HQ Plantations (the private operators of what was once state plantation forests). Over the last 3 years funding for research and development into control of these pests has been wound back by both the State and Federal governments, while the populations and area invaded by these species continues to increase exponentially. For example, there does not seem to be any clear future pathway for funding the actions outlined in the various National strategies for listed WONS weeds. The size of this management task is expanding, yet the funding and practical logistic commitment from government to manage these threats seems to be waning, leaving a much greater proportion of the task up to private landholders and volunteers.

Development and implementation of recovery plans

From the point of view of a participant in the development of recovery plans, as a recovery team member and as a member of technical advisory groups, the process seems to be inordinately slow and unduly reliant on the goodwill and altruism of the individuals who contribute to the process. Because the work of being on a recovery team is generally unfunded in its own right, it is often given a low priority by participating institutions, and this in turn leads to the frustratingly slow progress that seems to mark the development of these plans.

Once a plan is finally adopted, funding the recovery actions outlined in the plan seems to be a completely ad-hoc affair, and we feel that a specific fund earmarked for implementing actions outlined in recovery plans should be set aside within federal environmental funding arrangements. Although the money made available in such a fund is unlikely to ever be sufficient in total, at least there would be one clearly defined place to apply to when a worthy opportunity for implementing a recovery action arises and requires funding.

Management of critical habitat across all land tenures

In our local area, the resources available for managing critical habitat seem to have declined dramatically in the last 3 years. The Queensland Nature Refuge programme has been significantly wound back, and technical support from State Government staff to assist those private landholders who contribute to the National Reserve system by managing gazetted Nature Refuges on private land is now virtually non-existent. In addition, the Nature Refuge agreement is not binding on the State, and (in itself) offers little protection against impacts from mining exploration or extraction on declared Nature Refuges. Mining tenure seems to have preferential treatment.

The extensive area of forest to the west of us comprises a mosaic of national park, managed native forestry (State forest) and plantation forestry. In the past, the whole area was managed as one unit, with economic yield from the State-run commercial forestry operations cross-subsidizing the maintenance of access roads, fire control, weed and pest control. This helped preserve the high biodiversity areas deliberately reserved within the forestry area and provided a very large patch of connected habitat for threatened species which was managed in an integrated, wholistic manner.

The sale of Queensland's state forestry operations to HQPlantations now means that this cross-subsidy of management costs no longer occurs. The areas outside HQPlantations operations are now left with virtually no financial base for ongoing weed, fire and feral animal control - all of which threaten significant federally listed threatened species and ecological communities. The workload on remaining State Government staff, coping with ludicrously inadequate budgets and insufficient staff resources is such that the situation poses a very significant threat to listed Matters of National Environmental Significance in this area.

Regulatory and funding arrangements at all levels of government

In our local area, direct funding from State and Local government for implementing recovery actions for local threatened species and ecological communities over the last 3 years has been insignificant. Technical and scientific support from individual State government staff contributing to species recovery planning has been excellent, but this is largely the result of personal commitments from those individuals. The capacity (staff expertise on the ground) for enforcement of regulations within Local, State or Federal environmental law which relate to listed threatened species and ecological communities has seriously declined over the last 3 years. In our opinion, this decline in capacity is correlated with a decline in political will for the enforcement of such regulations.

The historical record of state and territory governments on these matters;

It is clear to us that State Governments quite often have a large and clearly stated vested interest in projects which pose significant risks to threatened species and ecological communities listed under federal legislation. Examples that we have detailed knowledge of are the Traveston Crossing Dam and Paradise Dam projects. In situations of such clear conflict of interest, it is essential that the final approval decision for these projects is made by an independent party (the federal minister or an independent commissioner) and not by the State Government operating simultaneously in the role of proponent and assessor.

Related matter - data collected during environmental impact studies

One of the common knowledge gaps surrounding many threatened species is good information regarding local population sizes and distribution. Collecting this information can be time consuming, labour-intensive and expensive. Proponents of projects which need to be assessed under State and Federal law for impacts on federally listed species spend large sums of money conducting species surveys as part of the EIS procedure required for assessing the project. It is highly inefficient that this information is not automatically collated as part of the assessment procedure and these population and distribution data stored in the SPRAT database for helping assess the overall status of these species.