

Senate submission: The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Submission from:

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Dear Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding this topic.

David Blair

I work for the ANU as a forest ecologist, studying all aspects of Mountain Ash forest ecology including impacts of harvesting across the Central Highlands region. I have been a member of the State Government's Leadbeater's Possum recovery team and have significant dealings with State Government departments and community groups on a wide variety of forest related issues. I have also worked in Local Government on weed management and native vegetation protection and privately as an environmental consultant.

As a forest ecologist who has an intimate knowledge of forest health and who sees the 'coal face' of biodiversity decline and ecosystem stress on a daily basis, I am extremely worried about the future of our natural environmental systems from a range of impacts.

Government policy and legislation usually give the right platitudes when written, but on the ground resourcing and implementation is critically deficient and underfunded. Current government decision making for strong environmental protection also seems to be absent in Victoria at present.

Government action at all levels on Threatened species is extremely poor, dangerously slow, ad hoc and rarely other than reactionary. There does not appear to be any systematic review process to list Threatened species, nor to write the required Action Statements. There appears to be no consequences if these actions are not done.

Usually it takes dedicated individuals (either in government departments, but just as often from the community) to lobby for inclusion and action. Even when Action Statements are written, their implementation seems to be minimal and ad hoc at best.

Leadbeater's Possum, the State faunal emblem is a species that the project I work on has been studying for 30 years. However despite its prominence and the excellent state of knowledge for this species, the "current" Action Statement is unchanged since 1995, despite updates being required, and a major bushfire in 2009 removing half the population. Despite having the information and guidance needed to produce a new Action Statement for this species, not to mention the need with rapid population decline, the release of an updated

Action Statement almost appears to be deliberately impeded. This had significant ramifications in the recent Supreme Court case of MyEnvironment v VicForests over logging of Leadbeater's habitat in Toolangi State Forest (I collected evidence for this case).

Because Action Statements are not written by lawyers, there are often inconsistencies even within the AS, let alone between the AS and other legislation such as the Forest Management Plans. This was a major issue in this court case where the expert scientific evidence and knowledge the AS actions were set up to implement, contradicted those in the FMP (crucial definitional differences or even just vague language of "hollow bearing trees" which determines what is and is not "habitat" for the species). The determination followed what was the commercial imperative, rather than what the select few experts in this field recommended was how the definitions should be interpreted. This incorrect interpretation now affects all future habitat assessment done prior to logging. The basis of the number of trees per hectare before protection is granted, is also significantly out of date, having been set up 20+ years ago when things were not nearly so critical for the protection of the critical resource – hollow bearing trees in this case).

The speed of implantation is painfully slow, and for some species can lead to local extinction, or as we saw in the case of the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, to total extinction due to a lack of emergency response time when situations change dramatically over relatively short periods of time (though long enough time if politicians/decision makers were actively looking or interested).

Management of species needs to be considered from an individual species as well as broader environment context. Some issues affect wide cohorts of species (such as loss of large old trees, invasive species, timber harvesting/clearing, climate change, water entitlements) while some species have very specific threats that need mitigation. Given we have so few species with adequate recovery plans, it makes it difficult to gain a full overview to what practical solutions could be put in place that would assist the greatest number of species.

Having dealt intimately with invasive plant species (weeds) and the State Government revision of the Catchment And Land Protection (Noxious Weed) Act, I am aware of many problems with government departments dealing with environmental issues. The revision took over 5 years, something I felt should have been achievable in 1 or 2. The process was unduly restricted to a very limited number of species. The desire to limit the number of species being nominated was due to the expense of providing a full assessment (the person doing the assessments in DSE told me this was \$10,000 per species) rather than there only being limited need for additional species. The expense per species I find extraordinary given the expertise for weed knowledge in certain individuals in both state and local government and non-government circles (including weed control contractors) is excellent, but the wider community knowledge and that of local government officers seemed to be almost completely ignored. It was simply a matter of pulling that info together. There was also a strong reluctance to have the CaLP Act used to assist Local government and community groups (who do the bulk of weed control in bushland areas on public land), rather it was very deliberately set up to assist State Government programs which focus on detection and eradication of far less common weed species.

A key threat to Leadbeater's Possum that is not being managed well is native forest timber harvesting. The industry contends that it is well regulated and harvests sustainably, cutting only a small percentage of the available forest estate each year. However the audits of VicForests operations are very minimal, poorly reported (last major reporting that provided any real detail was 2009) and do not appear to be sustainable in either an economic, biodiversity or sustained yield basis. Recent extensions of timber harvesting licences to 20 years is quite amazing given the sawlog resource in the Ash forests of Victoria appears to have about 15 years left before there is nothing remaining, with no substantial resource coming on line after that period for 20-30 years. Despite Black Saturday burning a very substantial proportion of the Ash resource, no adjustment to the "sustainable yield" was made – and it was in need of revision prior to the fires. Government does not seem to look outside the current paradigm to weigh up the various "values" of the forest – carbon storage, water yields, biodiversity, tourism, aesthetical amenity... all these increase substantially the older forests become, so when we harvest a forest, we should add the opportunity cost of these values to the cost of harvesting. Our research from ANU have studied most of these aspects. Our studies also showed older forests burn at lower severity and are less fire prone, and additional value for areas like Marysville.

For many species we need further information, monitoring and studies (and the funding to do it), but even for those very well studied species, such as Leadbeater's Possum, we have more than enough knowledge to understand fully what is needed to save this species. It is political priorities that will send Leadbeater's extinct, not a lack of information.

The easy, short term fixes such as breeding programs are often funded and highlighted, when the longer term, politically difficult decisions on saving habitat and reducing harvest volumes in the forests where the animals live is also a problem that deflects attention from the real need for species like Leadbeater's possum.

Regards,
David Blair