

# *THREATENED ECOSYSTEMS NETWORK*

.....WORKING TO STOP EXTINCTIONS!

## SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THREATENED SPECIES LAW IN AUSTRALIA.

The main point we would like to make is that the focus of environmental concern is frequently misdirected. There is no doubt that progress has been made in dealing with pollution both in the air and in our waterways. Unfortunately similar progress has not been made in other areas. We tend to focus on "cuddly" creatures and pristine ecosystems because they are "nice" rather than because of environmental consequences. Unless we save the species on which our "cuddly" creatures depend they cannot survive. The Regional Forest Agreements have done much to save our "old-growth" forests. Unfortunately the same protection is not afforded to our rainforests and grassy ecosystems where most of our threatened biodiversity occurs.

Since the arrival of Europeans some ecosystems have been wiped out or almost so. Pristine ecosystems are that way because they have not suffered any real threat in the last 200 years or so. If there is no serious threat why then are they so heavily protected? It is a fact that ecosystems not on fertile land are under little or no destructive pressures. Wilderness areas are usually not rich in biodiversity. The extensive clearing of fertile land has been the main threat to our terrestrial environment so that ecosystems indigenous to fertile land have suffered the most destruction. It is fairly obvious that the species in these ecosystems are the ones most likely to suffer the greatest rate of extinction and the scientific evidence supports this.

It is frequently argued that the cost of protecting and restoring our most threatened ecosystems is prohibitive. Because it makes us feel good we are committed to provide environmental funding and it is usually directed to those areas that give "the most bang for the buck". What constitutes the "most bang" is usually an appearance thing (such as the size of an area, how beautiful it looks, or how pristine it is) rather than any scientific criteria like the number of species whose progress to extinction has been halted or reversed. Degraded ecosystems by their very nature do not win beauty contests. Even professionals prefer to deal with more pristine ecosystems.

In 2003 the Howard Government announced proposed environmental spending of \$4.1 billion. Of this \$1.4 billion was targeted to Salinity and Water Quality leaving \$2.7 billion. There seems to be little evidence to show any significant amount of this was spent on threatened species and ecosystems and preventing species decline into extinction. Much of the available funding for threatened species and ecosystems was not taken up by the States. Was it misdirected? The track record of more recent governments appears to be little better. As a consequence, we would suggest, much of environmental funding is spent, perhaps needlessly, on species and ecosystems **that are not classified as threatened**, rather than giving priority to threatened species and ecosystems. **The only way to objectively assess this premise would be to have an inquiry into where the available environmental funding is**

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**spent and a proper evaluation of the environmental outcomes based on scientific criteria.**

Much time and money is spent on making our parks, reserves and other public (and private) areas look "pretty", which is nice. However **cosmetic environmentalism** is unlikely to prevent species decline into extinction. How can we argue for additional funding when the existing funding is not achieving results. Given that environmental funding may be inadequate and that the inherent difficulty in obtaining additional funding persists, a short-term solution could be to reallocate existing funding to the most needy areas. If, as occurs currently, we direct funding away from those habitats in the most need, they, and the species dependent on them, are likely to become extinct. Does this matter? We really don't know. Gambling with these outcomes is like gambling with global warming with outcomes no less catastrophic.

It must be accepted that the protection of "cuddly" creatures and pristine ecosystems will have popular support. Those experts advising governments while being aware of this must surely recognize that attention must be directed to those areas of greatest need. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case if we look at the legislation and expected changes to the legislation.

We are concerned not only by the recent Victorian Auditor-General's report but also the comments from the Australian government in their letter (copy attached) dated 8 August 2012 when they state "The Committee elected not to include any Key Threatened Process nominations on the 2012 Proposed Priority Assessment List. The Committee noted that the department is currently undertaking a broader review of its policy approach to threats, including the use of statutory tools such as Key Threatened Process listings and Threat Abatement Plans ". The committee has not been using these powers recently and the above comment is of concern.

It is generally accepted by the scientific community internationally that the correct approach to saving the environment is to save threatened ecosystems and this in turn will ensure the survival of threatened species. The comments in the above letter would seem to indicate that this approach is now being abandoned. It would seem that there is likely to be less protection of threatened species and ecosystems while massive amounts of scarce funds continue to be spent in less needy areas.

While the threat from clearing fertile land for farming has subsided somewhat the threat to those remnants of threatened ecosystems that remain is now increasingly coming from urbanization. Large tracts of fertile land are now being set aside for development. Not only is this a threat to ecosystem remnants but also reduces the amount of fertile land available to meet the increasing World demand for food. No one seems too concerned about the pitiful legacy we are leaving to future generations.

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It is regrettable that the experts advising governments are not willing to tackle this problem. We have made several attempts to nominate urbanization as a key threatening process under the EPBC act. Although our nominations have been accepted as meeting the necessary criteria those responsible for their assessment have refused to consider them. We were successful in having "Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain" listed as critically endangered under the EPBC act (see second attachment).

There seems to be a lack of awareness or even apathy about the urgency and the permanency of extinction. Few people seem to understand that the more endangered an item is the more likely it is to become extinct, extinct forever. This is reflected in CMA Regional Catchment Strategies (Terrestrial Biodiversity ). History shows us that relying on political will, public support and the goodwill of those able to make a difference is not enough. Too long has the burden of saving threatened ecosystems been on farmers. What sort of environmental policy is this? Doesn't the rest of the community have any responsibility? Legislative changes are essential if we are to meet our international obligations and leave a worthwhile heritage to our successors. An integrated approach is likely to have better outcomes with proper education programs not just for the general public but also for professionals.

Ray Maino,  
National Coordinator,  
Threatened Ecosystems Network.  
14 December 2012

***"Whatever else Conservation may be achieving, while extinctions are occurring we are not conserving biodiversity."***



Mr Raymond Maino  
Threatened Ecosystems Network

Dear Mr Maino

**Assessment Period Commencing 1 October 2012**

Thank you for your nomination of 'Ecosystem degradation, habitat loss and species decline due to urban, semi-urban, industrial and other similar development (e.g. infrastructure development) and subsequent human occupation affecting nationally critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable species or ecological communities or those likely to become so' (Ecosystem degradation due to development) for inclusion on the list of key threatening processes (KTPs) under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

Your nomination satisfied the information requirements set out in the EPBC Act regulations. The Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) considered all nominations that satisfied the regulations, and prepared a Proposed Priority Assessment List for the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the Minister), the Hon Tony Burke. Based on this advice, a Finalised Priority Assessment List has been established.

Your nomination of 'Ecosystem degradation due to development' has not been included on the Finalised Priority Assessment List for the assessment period commencing 1 October 2012.

The Committee elected not to include any Key Threatening Process nominations on the 2012 Proposed Priority Assessment List. The Committee noted that the department is currently undertaking a broader review of its policy approach to threats, including the use of statutory tools such as Key Threatening Process listings and Threat Abatement Plans.

The EPBC Act provides for all nominations to be considered for prioritisation in two consecutive years. As your nomination for 'Ecosystem degradation due to development' was considered for the 2011 and 2012 Proposed Priority Assessment Lists it is no longer eligible for consideration in the next assessment round. The nomination could be considered again for prioritisation if a new nomination that provides sufficient information is re-submitted in a future call for nominations.

Thank you again for your nomination and interest in conserving Australia's unique biodiversity.

Yours sincerely

Deb Callister  
Assistant Secretary  
Wildlife Branch

 August 2012



## The Hon Peter Garrett AM MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

B09/943

Mr Raymond Maino  
National Coordinator  
Threatened Ecosystem Network  
1 Herberts Lane  
DAIMOND CREEK VIC 3809

Dear Mr Maino

18 JUN 2009

Thank you for your nomination to list the "Victorian Western Basalt Plains Grassy Woodland" as a threatened ecological community under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

I have decided to list the ecological community in the critically endangered category under the EPBC Act, by the name "Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain". Listing will not only provide legislative protection to the ecological community but will also identify it as a priority for Australian Government conservation programs. There will be benefits associated with listing such as fostering habitat for flora and fauna, including listed threatened species, and maintaining vital ecosystem services.

In making my decision, I considered advice provided to me by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) in relation to the eligibility of this ecological community for listing under the EPBC Act. The Committee's listing advice and conservation advice for this ecological community are available on my Department's website at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publiclookupcommunities.pl>.

My Department will prepare an information guide to help stakeholders and the general public understand the reasons for the listing, how to recognise and manage the ecological community, and the implications of EPBC Act listing for landholders.

Yours sincerely

**Peter Garrett**