

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

We are bushcare volunteers and keen bushwalkers, and would like to see much more done to protect and assist in the recovery of threatened species and ecological communities in Australia.

Australia has a wealth of natural beauty and a wide diversity of species. Australia has a very high number of endemic species, species that occur nowhere else in the world. For example, over 90% of Australia's vascular plants grow nowhere else on earth.

However, Australia's track record in protecting its native species is not good. This country leads the world in mammal extinctions, and is still losing species, with the Christmas Island pipistrelle becoming extinct in 2009 and many other species endangered, including the iconic numbat and bridled nail-tailed wallaby. The *2011 State of the Environment Report* indicated that population declines are continuing to take place across a wide range of plant, mammal, frog, lizard and bird species (although for many species there is not even enough data to determine population trends, which suggests that investment in monitoring needs to be substantially increased!). Processes that threaten native species, endangered or otherwise, are continuing and in some cases increasing in their negative impact, including land clearing, development, logging (some of it unprofitable and for woodchips), mining and the spread of invasive species. Australia is massively under-investing in biodiversity conservation, with volunteers and not-for-profits doing an enormous proportion of the work and not-for-profits generating a substantial proportion of the resources available in the sector.

We are not endangered species experts but offer the below points for consideration based on our experience and knowledge. We are sure experts in environmental protection, natural resource management, and biodiversity conservation will make more detailed and comprehensive recommendations to this inquiry, and we urge you to consider these with the utmost seriousness; whatever happens, much more resourcing is required.

National Parks

Less than 7% Australia's land mass is protected by national parks (or other areas with similar levels of protection). Given the small population to land mass and the large areas of the continent that are sparsely inhabited, this is an amazingly low level. This can and should be increased, and in a way that gives particular regard to critical habitat for threatened and endangered species. National Parks can and should be better resourced to do this work; they are suffering at present through staff and funding cuts from a number of state governments.

Further, the protection that national parks do provide to biodiversity, including threatened species, is in many cases being deliberately wound back. At present a number of state governments are taking actions that will reduce the ability of national parks to serve as a refuge for native species. These include, in New South Wales (NSW), shooting, grazing, commercial tourism activities, large-scale 'ecological' logging and horse-riding in national parks (in wilderness areas, no less). These activities, even when well-managed, are likely to negatively impact on the environmental integrity of national parks areas, for example by spreading weeds, increasing the dispersion of feral animals through parks, and causing erosion.

The Commonwealth Government should give greater attention to ensuring that national parks retain their full conservation potential, and that this cannot be undermined by changes at the state level.

Management of invasive species

Invasive species are estimated to cost Australia billions of dollars every year. They also threaten many native species including threatened and endangered species. For example, yellow crazy ants are known to have been extremely damaging to local species on Christmas Island, and are likely to do the same in Queensland if not managed. Myrtle rust has spread across the eastern seaboard rapidly and is negatively affective *Myrtaceae* species in many places – some species can be completely killed by myrtle rust, and others find their growth inhibited. Both these invasive species were quickly declared ‘uncontrollable’ and resources removed from eradicating them, although crazy ants for example can arguably be controlled in Queensland with some investment of funds.

And yet biosecurity measures in this country focus predominantly on commercial/agricultural issues. The new Biosecurity Bill unfortunately has not accepted the recommendation of the review of biosecurity to establish an independent biosecurity entity in Australia, and instead proposes that the Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries manage this role.

Biosecurity needs to focus more strongly on the impact of invasive species on native species, particularly but not only threatened and endangered species. More resources need to be dedicated to control of invasive species that pose threats to biodiversity, including threatened species.

Listing and recovery plans for endangered species

The endangered species listing process under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act) is very slow and can take many years. This is way too slow and needs to be sped up significantly. Many more species would likely be listed if the process were faster.

Much, much more resourcing needs to go into the implementation of the *EPBC Act*, for example as regards recovery plans for endangered species: at present many plans are never actioned because of lack of resources. In many cases there is no recovery plan even in existence. It should not be up to individual conservation-minded organisations to prepare plans off their own bat, and to seek to fund them: while they do great work of this sort, it should be core business for the Commonwealth to ensure that these plans are written, and to fund their development and implementation.

The EPBC ACT listing process needs to be streamlined to take months rather than years. Substantial additional funding is needed for recovery plans; the default should be that recovery plans are funded, rather than that they are not.

Commonwealth vs state environmental powers

A recent COAG meeting considered matters relating to the streamlining of ‘green tape’, in such a way that state governments would in future manage all environmental approval processes (except in certain very limited cases). We consider this to be completely inappropriate, and a move that would drastically reduce environmental protections across the country. You only need to look at what state governments have approved in recent times to see that this would be a recipe for disaster:

- grazing, horse-riding, and logging in national parks

- large-scale destructive mining e.g. in Leard State Forest in NSW
- logging of old-growth forest containing some of the last populations of the endangered Leadbeater's Possum in Victoria, despite the fact that old-growth trees are unparalleled storers of carbon and are the only source of nest hollows to many threatened and endangered species
- ongoing logging of koala and swift parrot habitat for wood chips in the far south of NSW
- approving increases in old growth logging in south-west WA, despite the fact that the forests of the south-west are undergoing unprecedented levels of ecological decline due to ongoing reductions in rainfall and other climate changes
- cutting staff numbers in parks and wildlife services and in departments of environment

The Commonwealth should not cede further environmental powers to the states. If there is to be any streamlining, it should be towards consolidating more approvals at the Commonwealth rather than state level, taking into account biodiversity more broadly, not just threatened and endangered species/ecosystems.

Active anticipation and management of longer-term environmental threats

It is important to address risks of extinction for species listed as threatened or endangered. But it is at least as important to invest in broader biodiversity conservation so that fewer species ultimately end up on those lists; by analogy with the health sector, broad biodiversity conservation is like preventative health, whereas threatened species protection/recovery is like hospital, or even intensive care. More resources need to be put into broader biodiversity conservation, including tackling the spread of invasive species, better monitoring of biodiversity and of species across non-listed and listed species, training and resourcing land-users such as farmers to manage their land and water resources in a more environmentally friendly way, and ensuring that short-term extractive land uses (mining and logging) are not conducted to the detriment of biodiversity conservation, as is allowed under for example the current Regional Forest Agreements, which are exempt from the *EPBC Act*, despite the fact that state governments clearly do not afford adequate protection to endangered species.

In conclusion, we would love to see more of our taxpayer dollars spent on conservation activities, rather than on measures such as diesel tax rebates for mining companies, negative gearing/depreciation for investment properties and a regressive superannuation taxation regime that provides tax-free super income to all retirees with no regard to their wealth.

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