

The Effectiveness of Threatened Species and Ecological Communities Protection in Australia

Submission by Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) to the Inquiry by the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee

8 January 2013

This submission addresses paragraphs (a), (b), (d) and (e) of the terms of reference (*management of key threats, recovery of species, listing process and regulatory/funding arrangements*) and also paragraph (g) (*any other related matter*).

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Summary

- 1. We recommend that the Committee note the increasing role of the private (philanthropic) sector in delivering measurable outcomes for threatened species in Australia and the need to ensure policies and programs include incentives (rather than disincentives) for further private investment.**
- 2. We recommend that the Committee make an explicit finding that the existing suite of Government programs and legislation is not adequate to deliver effective conservation for Australia's threatened species.**
- 3. We recommend that the Committee make an explicit finding that Government initiatives must:**
 - provide greater support for projects which deliver targeted and practical on-ground land management integrated with good science; and**
 - require projects to have a clear objective (population target) and ongoing accountability for performance against that target (through measuring and reporting changes in population).**
- 4. We recommend that the Committee propose the establishment of a new Threatened Species Fund which provides funding, on a competitive basis, for projects which deliver a measurable increase in the population of one or more threatened species.**
- 5. We recommend the reinstatement of a requirement to keep the lists of threatened species and ecological communities up to date.**

Australian Wildlife Conservancy

- Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) is an independent, private (non-profit) organisation. Our mission is the effective conservation of all Australian animal species and the habitats in which they live. To achieve this mission, our actions are focused on:
 - Establishing a network of sanctuaries which protect wildlife and ecosystems.
 - Implementing practical, on-ground conservation programs including fire management, feral animal control and the translocation of threatened species.
 - Conducting scientific research that will help address the key threats to native wildlife.
 - Public education.
- AWC currently owns/manages 23 properties covering 3 million hectares around Australia. We manage more land for conservation than any other non-government conservation organisation in Australia.
- AWC protects more animal species than any other non-government organisation and, in particular, more threatened species. Around 83% of all native bird species, and 67% of all native mammal species, are represented on the AWC estate.
- We protect 72 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians which are listed as threatened under the EPBC Act. To illustrate the significance of AWC's role as a steward of EPBC Act-listed species, please see attachment A (extract from our recent *Wildlife Matters* publication) which provides an update on selected threatened mammal species protected by AWC. For example:
 - AWC protects an estimated 80% of the remaining world population of the Bridled Nailtail Wallaby.
 - AWC protects around 33% of the remaining world population of the Numbat.
 - AWC protects around 33% of the remaining world population of the Burrowing Bettong.
- A distinguishing feature of the AWC business model is a strong emphasis on the delivery of practical, on-ground land management that is informed by, and tightly integrated with, our science program:
 - Around 80% of our staff are based in the field.
 - AWC employs over 20 field ecologists (of which at least 12 have PhDs).
- The scale of our on-ground land management is illustrated by the following:
 - AWC has established the two largest feral herbivore-free areas on mainland Australia: 100,000 hectares at Wongalara (in the Top End) and 50,000 hectares at Mornington (central Kimberley).

- AWC manages more fox and cat-free land on mainland Australia than any other organisation.
- AWC implements the largest private fire management program in Australia. We deliver prescribed burning across 4 million hectares of mixed tenures (including pastoral and indigenous land) in the Kimberley.
- AWC operations are funded primarily by private, charitable contributions (donations by individuals). However, government funding and policies can play an important role in leveraging such private investment.
- **We recommend that the Committee note the increasing role of the private (philanthropic) sector in delivering measurable outcomes for threatened species in Australia and the need to ensure policies and programs include incentives (rather than disincentives) for further private investment.**

Existing Government programs are not adequate to deliver effective conservation for threatened species

- Despite a range of funding programs and legislation etc, Australia's threatened species are continuing to decline:
 - The status of many listed threatened species continues to deteriorate.
 - More and more species are eligible to be listed as threatened.
- Several other submissions have cited relevant evidence for this continued decline in our threatened species (for example, submission 127).
- **We recommend that the Committee make an explicit finding that the existing suite of Government programs and legislation is not adequate to deliver effective conservation for Australia's threatened species.**

What is required to deliver effective conservation for threatened species?

- The strategy for delivering effective conservation for threatened species is relatively straight-forward:
 - Projects should have a clear objective – eg, a target population size – and measure and report against this objective (accountability).
 - Projects should deliver practical and targeted on-ground land management addressing the key threats to survival of the species – eg, fire management and feral animal control.
 - Projects should incorporate regular monitoring of the species population so that land management strategies can be adjusted, as required, on a timely basis.

- The existing process for recovery plans has failed to ensure the delivery of such active, targeted land management and population monitoring and it has failed to build in accountability for population recovery. Accordingly, the existing recovery planning process has generally failed to improve the status of threatened species. (Evidence for this conclusion is cited in submission 127.)
- **Attachment A** provides evidence of the success that can be achieved through the delivery of active land management integrated with good science. At Scotia Wildlife Sanctuary in western NSW, AWC has been successful in delivering a substantial increase in the population of several nationally threatened species including Greater Bilbies, Bridled Nailtail Wallabies, Numbats, Burrowing Bettongs and Woylies.
 - During the time that these species have increased at Scotia, there has been a significant decline in populations elsewhere.
- We note other examples of successful projects are cited in various submissions (eg, submission 82 cites Gould’s Petrel).
- **We recommend that the Committee make an explicit finding that Government initiatives must:**
 - **provide greater support for projects which deliver targeted and practical on-ground land management integrated with good science; and**
 - **require projects to have a clear objective (population target) and ongoing accountability for performance against that target (through measuring and reporting changes in population).**

A new dedicated funding program for threatened species recovery

- A new, dedicated Commonwealth funding program is required to support projects which have as their primary objective the survival/recovery of threatened species (“new Threatened Species Fund”).
- Available Commonwealth funding is currently directed primarily toward landscape-scale or regional programs, including planning and capacity building.
 - While these programs are intended to deliver important conservation benefits, they are not delivering the targeted support that is required for threatened species conservation.
- A two-pronged approach is needed: there should be dedicated funding for threatened species as well as broader landscape-scale/regional funding programs.
 - We note this is consistent with submission 144 from the Director of National Parks who comments that both ecosystem-wide and species-specific approaches are required.
 - We note also that it flows logically from the COAG Agreement on Commonwealth/State roles and responsibilities on which the EPBC Act was

based, which identifies nationally threatened species as a matter of National Environmental Significance for which the Commonwealth Government has responsibility.

- If additional, new funding is not available for a new Threatened Species Fund, then funds should be diverted from other environment programs/funds.
- However, administration of a new Threatened Species Fund must not merely replicate or adopt approaches/models that have been utilised in the past and have failed. The Fund needs to be:
 - innovative;
 - tied to the delivery of measurable improvements in populations; and
 - reflect the emerging role of non-government organisations, indigenous rangers and other landholders.
- Key elements of a new Threatened Species Fund should include:
 - Funding must be limited to projects which have a specific objective expressed in terms of population target/s – for example, increase the population of Species X by 500 animals.
 - Funding must be allocated on a competitive basis – ie, funding should be directed to those projects that are likely to deliver the highest return (in terms of threatened species populations) for a given level of *public* investment. Evaluating and weighting the likely returns should be carried out in accordance with transparent, science-based guidelines.
 - Funding must be limited to projects which have as their primary focus the delivery of practical land management which addresses key threats (such as feral animal control, fire management, etc).
 - The Fund must have a high degree of accountability. In particular, the provision of funding must be conditional on proponents reporting on the achievement (or otherwise) of their population targets. The Fund should incorporate appropriate financial incentives/disincentives for achieving/failing to meet targets (recognising the inherent uncertainty in threatened species management): for example, extensions of funding might be conditional on satisfactory progress toward population targets.
 - The Fund should actively seek to leverage matching private sector (philanthropic) investment. If an overall matching ratio of 1:1 is achieved, the Commonwealth will effectively double its investment in threatened species conservation.
 - The Fund should be open to government and non-government proponents. The Commonwealth should make funding to State Government proponents conditional on evidence that they have considered whether a partnership with non-government parties will deliver a higher return for the requested level of investment.

- A small group of eminent Australians, who collectively have extensive, senior experience in private sector project management and public administration, should oversee administration of the Fund, reporting directly to the Minister and the public on the ecological “returns” (increases in populations) generated by investments under the Fund.
- By way of illustration, Attachment B contains a description of a project that could be eligible for funding under the new Threatened Species Fund. Subject to raising sufficient private sector funds, AWC is proposing to implement the Mt Gibson Endangered Wildlife Restoration Project in 2013: it will deliver a significant increase in the world population of at least 9 nationally threatened mammals for an up-front investment of around \$2 million – eg, it will increase the Western Barred Bandicoot population by an estimated 20% and the Shark Bay Mouse population by an estimated 33%.
- **We recommend that the Committee propose the establishment of a new Threatened Species Fund which provides funding, on a competitive basis, for projects which deliver a measurable increase in the population of one or more threatened species.**

Other matters

- There is no valid reason why the lists of threatened species and ecological communities cannot be kept up to date.
- The original section 185 of the EPBC Act should be reinstated. That section imposed a statutory obligation on the Minister to “take all reasonably practical steps” to keep the lists up to date.
- The fact that the lists are consistently out of date and do not reflect the latest, widely available scientific knowledge represents an embarrassing failure of public policy and administration.
- **We recommend the reinstatement of a requirement to keep the lists of threatened species and ecological communities up to date.**