



Submission to the Environment and Communications References Committee's inquiry into Australia's Faunal Extinction Crisis:

## **An argument for a more central role for communities in solving the extinction crisis**

The Friends of the Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby (the Friends) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been working since 1995 to save the iconic Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby *Petrogale penicillata* (BTRW). It is widely accepted that the southern-most NSW population of this endangered species would have met with extinction without the tireless work of Friends volunteers and the engagement of the Kangaroo Valley community.

We believe that, quite rightly, much of the emphasis on dealing with the extinction crisis focuses on the protected land and on the wonderful work done by government agencies. This is clearly critical as we need a substantial pool of protected habitat throughout Australia.

Our work at the Friends has centred on a second track, focusing on mixed and private land. In this kind of conservation engaging with the community and building a pride and local ownership in our biodiversity is pivotal. We submit that this track is also critical to preventing the extinction crisis. And we argue that this track is poorly defined, has no adequate institutional framework to support it and is poorly funded. We argue that the cost of this is a cycle of public apathy, temporary investment and frustration. Australia will not solve the extinction crisis without solving this.

### **Why is this Important?**

#### **1. Wildlife is not confined to protective areas**

Clearly a lot of endangered wildlife doesn't sit happily within a sanctuary and of course, much of the richest land was the first to be cultivated and is not available for reserves. As land usage changes there is an opportunity to rethink the way we manage mixed land for wildlife.

#### **2. People are critical to making conservation work on mixed or private land**

But in our experience succeeding on mixed or private land requires a huge focus on people as well as wildlife. For example;

*Private land requires deep commitment from landowners to allow conservationists access and to change land management practices. In the Valley, for example, we have persuaded many to have agreed to 1080 baits to be used on their land and quite a number to put their land under conservation agreements.*

This submission on several terms of reference, but particularly;

(a) the ongoing decline in the population and conservation status of Australia's nearly threatened fauna and flora species;

(f) the adequacy of the management and extent of the National Reserve System, stewardship arrangements, covenants and connectivity through wildlife corridors in conserving threatened fauna;

(h) the adequacy of existing funding streams for implementing threatened species recovery plans and preventing threatened fauna loss in general;

*Locals see day by day and hour by hour what is going on. They can direct work to the most critical sites. They can flag problems. They can be eyes on the ground. It was the observations of a landowner watching the decline of the BTRW in the valley that led to all the conservation work.*

### **3. Winning hearts and minds is critical**

You can't legislate or regulate some changes in attitude. And yet solving the extinction crisis will require a change of mindset. Examples we see include;

- *At its most obvious some changes in behaviour such as, responsible pet ownership, can only be achieved by active engagement with the community.*
- *Influencing locals to move from seeing wildlife as a nuisance (e.g. wombats burrow damage, kangaroos as a danger on the roads) to a valuable asset, given, for example its value as a drawcard in a tourist destination like the Valley.*

### **4. Integration locally leads to better results**

We find it can be easy for conservation to operate at two levels. At a central agency level (eg National Parks, SoS and so on) and through individuals with a passion locally. This leaves a gap with central agencies drawing up effective species level plans, but often no integrated cross species strategy locally. Without this initiatives tend to be created by individuals passionate about a particular species or issue, which leads to stop start activity. A region like Kangaroo Valley could benefit hugely from a habitat level plan that looks at the whole.

### **5. The importance of community ownership is well documented and researched**

These are not new ideas. Researchers have been writing about community led conservation for many years and the evidence base is strong.

*"There are limits to the numbers and total area of protected areas (PAs) that can be established. At the same time, there is a need to move from the notion of human-free "islands" of conservation to one in which humans co-exist with the natural world. Community-based conservation is part of this effort to restore stewardship traditions and build new ones"<sup>12</sup>*

## **What should be done?**

We have three recommendations...

### **Recommendation One: Dedicate funds to community led action**

1. Allow 'hot spot' local communities with endangered species living on mixed use land to apply to opt into a scheme.
  - a. Opting in would unlock funding and a specific resource to help co-ordinate and manage community partners
  - b. Local NGOs then bid for the funding to manage all or part of the local conservation strategy
  - c. Access to expertise is available through partnership with bodies such as NPWS/
2. This hot spot strategy could be used to put communities at the forefront of our efforts to reinstate biodiversity.

### **Recommendation Two: Promote long term success**

What we found in Kangaroo Valley was that after a while the community tired of a constant message that the BTRWs were on the edge of extinction. And yet much of the narrative within Australia is about our (admittedly appalling) record on extinctions and how we 'must' do something about it.

We believe that we will only solve the extinction crisis if we are able to give real people agency over the future of our fauna and flora. To create frameworks for action in which people feel proud of what they have built.

To do this we need to assume that the future can be better for our wildlife and that this can be creating with and through people. Practical steps might include;

1. Balanced key performance indicators (KPIs) to reward not just preventing extinctions but re-establishing populations and increasing biodiversity. Ensuring that funding does not always follow the biggest crisis but that successful projects know they can rely on ongoing support.
2. A recognition process to celebrate communities that make a difference. Perhaps communities can apply – like 'town of the year' - for ratings depending on their conservation performance.

### **Recommendation Three**

Communities should be provided assistance to come up with five-year conservation strategies, based on the endangered animals in their back yard. These communities could opt in to such a scheme and be allocated resources to help them as a result.

### **Summary**

We see huge benefits in developing a specific differentiated approach to conserving wildlife in outside of protected areas (the 'second track'). This brings in communities and landowners as powerful partners in the conservation landscape. It also sets up virtuous cycles in which people see tangible local benefits, are willing to invest financially and practically and see more benefits.



To achieve this our strategy to solve the extinction crisis and conserve our wildlife must be as much a people strategy as a wildlife strategy. And each requires a different expertise. To build the people side of the strategy we need to invest in local NGOs to empower them to coordinate and lead local responses.

In this submission we've proffered several suggestions to help make this a reality.

### **More detail on the Friends of the Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby?**

The Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby is an Aussie Rock star. Uniquely adapted to life on steep cliffs and balancing boulder piles, they are charismatic and easy to relate to and the 'little fella's' have been identified as a priority species for protection in the 2021-31 National Threatened Species Strategy Action Plan. The Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby (BTRW) has also been identified as an "Iconic" species in the NSW Saving our Species (SoS) program. The two populations at Kangaroo Valley area are in a priority site for the SoS state-wide BTRW recovery program. The populations in the Shoalhaven are the most southern populations of this iconic species in NSW and their survival relies on a unique partnership between the community, the Saving our Species program, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Crown lands, Water NSW and Local Land Services along with other land management agencies and private landowners.

The Friends of the Brush Tailed Wallaby is the community part of this partnership. We have been running for over twenty-five years and focus on working with landowners, community education, funding and ensuring the conservation work is a genuine community partnership.

The partnership vision is to support a self-sustaining meta-population within the Shoalhaven. As the population declined small relic family groups remained. They require human intervention to sustain them and are vulnerable to natural catastrophes and predation.

We see our work as an early case study for many of the ideas in this submission.

Jerry Connor, President

Friends of the Brush Tailed Wallaby,

<https://www.rockwallaby.org.au/>

- <sup>1</sup> Quote is from Dr Fikret Berkes. Dr Berkes is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba, Canada. Dr. Berkes' work deals with social-ecological resilience, commons, co-management, and local and traditional ecological knowledge. His eleven books include *Advanced Introduction to Community-based Conservation* (Edward Elgar, 2021) and *Sacred Ecology* (4th edition, Routledge, 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> There are many articles on this subject. See for example Horwich, R. H., & Lyon, J. (2007). *Community conservation: Practitioners' answer to critics*. *ORYX*, 41(3), 376–385. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003060530700101>. Berkes, F. (2004, June). *Rethinking community-based conservation*. *Conservation Biology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2004.00077.x>