

Community and Public Sector Union

Beth Vincent-Pietsch ♦ Deputy Secretary

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Australia's faunal extinction crisis

As the primary union representing Commonwealth Department of Environment and Energy employees and Northern Territory Public Service, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is committed to providing a strong voice for our members in key public policy and political debates.

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Senate inquiry into faunal extinction crisis.

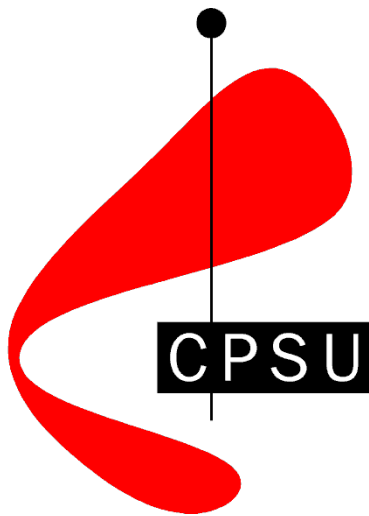
The CPSU is happy to provide information on the matters raised in this submission and supplementary information on other relevant issues.

For further information, please contact Osmond Chiu, Policy and Research Officer, via email at osmond.chiu@cpsu.org.au or on 0424 159 463.

Yours sincerely

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Community and Public Sector
Union (PSU Group)

Australia's Faunal Extinction Crisis

August 2018

Introduction

Australia is facing a faunal extinction crisis. According to the 2016 Australia State of the Environment report, *“the outlook for Australian biodiversity is generally poor, given the current overall poor status, deteriorating trends and increasing pressures”*.¹ Australia's current investment in biodiversity management is not keeping pace with the scale and magnitude of current pressures on biodiversity and conservative management.²

Overall, there are 511 faunae on the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act List of Threatened Fauna.³ Australia also leads the world on mammal extinctions, with 27 confirmed extinctions since European settlement.⁴ In many cases, the follow-on impacts of extinction events are poorly understood, however, it is known that losing species out of ecosystems can have wide ranging ramifications for ecosystem function.

Despite this, there is a lack of effective monitoring and long-term reporting on biodiversity. It has been raised in every jurisdictional report, and multiple other reports and papers as a major impediment to understanding the state and trends of Australian biodiversity.⁵

Resources for managing and limiting the impact of key pressures mostly appear inadequate to arrest the declining status of many species. New approaches and major reinvestments will be required across long timeframes to reverse deteriorating trends and prevent the accelerating decline in many species.⁶ This makes the role the Commonwealth plays in protecting biodiversity and conservation even more important.

What CPSU members thought of the Government's performance

CPSU members were surveyed about the Commonwealth Government's performance in areas regarding faunal extinction. Staff generally thought the Government's performance was poor or very poor. The results were that:

- Nine in ten (91.3%) thought the Government was doing poorly or very poorly in fulfilling international and domestic obligations in conserving threatened fauna;
- Nearly nine in ten (87.0%) believed the adequacy of Commonwealth environment laws was poor or very poor;

¹ Jackson WJ, Argent RM, Bax NJ, Clark GF, Coleman S, Cresswell ID, Emmerson KM, Evans K, Hibberd MF, Johnston EL, Keywood MD, Klekociuk A, Mackay R, Metcalfe D, Murphy H, Rankin A, Smith DC & Wienecke B (2017). Australia state of the environment 2016: independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Energy, Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://soe.environment.gov.au>

² Jackson WJ, Argent RM, Bax NJ, Clark GF, Coleman S, Cresswell ID, Emmerson KM, Evans K, Hibberd MF, Johnston EL, Keywood MD, Klekociuk A, Mackay R, Metcalfe D, Murphy H, Rankin A, Smith DC & Wienecke B (2017). Australia state of the environment 2016: independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Energy, Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://soe.environment.gov.au>

³ Department of Environment and Energy (2018). Species Profile and Threats Database. Retrieved from <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=fauna>

⁴ Department of Environment and Energy (2018). Species Profile and Threats Database. Retrieved from <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=fauna>

⁵ Jackson WJ, Argent RM, Bax NJ, Clark GF, Coleman S, Cresswell ID, Emmerson KM, Evans K, Hibberd MF, Johnston EL, Keywood MD, Klekociuk A, Mackay R, Metcalfe D, Murphy H, Rankin A, Smith DC & Wienecke B (2017). Australia state of the environment 2016: independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Energy, Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://soe.environment.gov.au>

⁶ Jackson WJ, Argent RM, Bax NJ, Clark GF, Coleman S, Cresswell ID, Emmerson KM, Evans K, Hibberd MF, Johnston EL, Keywood MD, Klekociuk A, Mackay R, Metcalfe D, Murphy H, Rankin A, Smith DC & Wienecke B (2017). Australia state of the environment 2016: independent report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Energy, Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra. Retrieved from <https://soe.environment.gov.au>

- Nearly nine in ten (87.0%) believed that the adequacy and effectiveness of protections for critical habitats for threatened fauna were very poor or poor;
- Over four in five (82.6%) thought that adequacy of the management and extent of the National Reserve System, stewardship arrangements, covenants and connectivity through wildlife corridors were poor or very poor;
- Over three quarters (77.3%) thought the Government was doing poorly or very poorly when it came to prioritising the protection of fauna and their habitat to prevent extinction;
- Nearly three quarters (73.9%) thought the Government was doing very poorly when it came to the adequacy of existing monitoring practices in relation to the threatened fauna assessment and adaptive management responses;
- Over two thirds (68.2%) thought the Government was doing very poorly when it came to the adequacy of existing environment law protection; and
- Over two thirds (65.2%) believed the Government's use of traditional knowledge and management for threatened species recovery and other outcomes was poor or very poor.

The impact of funding pressures

It is of little surprise that Departmental staff felt the Government was not doing enough. Funding cuts have affected the Department's ability to support programs that protect critical habitats for threatened fauna and enforce environmental regulations.

Staff were informed in May 2018 that there would be a loss of 60 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff from the Biodiversity and Conservation Division in 2018-19, nearly a third of the Division's approximately 200 FTE staff, because of a 25 per cent cut in the Division's budget.⁷ These cuts were explained as being due to budgeted programs coming to a conclusion, implying there were no new programs or ongoing commitments by the Government to meet the resourcing gap.

Staff are deeply concerned that Australia's international obligations to monitor endangered species will be affected. Systemic knowledge is required and the loss of a handful of staff will result in a significant loss of corporate knowledge. Furthermore, the impact of the average staffing level cap means that the number of staff with the specialised training and knowledge cannot be broadened.

These cuts are occurring despite growing pressures on our environment. As one member explained, *"More than 1,700 species of animals and plants are listed by the Australian Government as being at risk of extinction, yet Government deems it fit to reduce the number of staff in the threatened species section of the Department of Environment and Energy. About 85% of the country's plants, 84% of its mammals and 45% of its birds are found nowhere else, yet the federal Government does nothing to stop the incessant clear felling in Queensland. Marine Protected Areas have become "Marine Parks" where bottom trawling is allowed. The list goes on..."*

⁷ Michael Slezak (2018, 4 May) Rare Australian species could slip into extinction as jobs axed at environment department. ABC News Online. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-04/environment-department-to-lose-60-jobs-key-to-threatened-species/9722560>

These cuts are not a one-off occurrence but rather have compounded previous cuts over many years. Portfolio Budget Statements indicate a decline in program expenses for the Conservation of Australia's Heritage and Environment from \$47.740m in 2014-15 to \$41.038 in 2017-18. It is projected to decline even further over the forward estimates to a low of \$35.745m in 2021-22.⁸ Similarly, program expenses for environmental regulation in 2021-22 is projected to decline by a quarter from 2015-16.⁹ As one member explained:

There has been significant defunding and reduction in staffing of the Biodiversity and Conservation Division within the Department of the Environment and Energy. The programs have shrunk, for example, Landcare, while continuing, has less money over a longer period of time and the sections responsible for listing advice, policy and program delivery have reducing resources.

Table 1: Program Expenses - Conservation of Australia's Heritage and Environment¹⁰

Year	2014-15 Estimated Actual	2015-16 Estimated Actual	2016-17 Estimated Actual	2017-18 Estimated Actual	2018-19 Budget	2019-20 Forward estimate	2020-21 Forward estimate	2021-22 Forward estimate	2014-15 to 2021-22
Expenses (\$'000)	47,740	43,236	42,604	41,038	37,509	36,324	35,961	35,742	
Change (\$'000)		-4,504	-632	-1,566	-3,529	-1,185	-363	-219	-5,806
Change %		-9.4%	-1.5%	-3.7%	-8.6%	-3.2%	-1.0%	-0.6%	-14.0%

Table 2: Program Expenses - Environmental Regulation

Year	2014-15 Estimated Actual	2015-16 Estimated Actual	2016-17 Estimated Actual	2017-18 Estimated Actual	2018-19 Budget	2019-20 Forward estimate	2020-21 Forward estimate	2021-22 Forward estimate	2014-15 to 2021-22
Expenses (\$'000)	65,618	43,236	53,117	51,193	50,208	51,588	53,394	49,447	
Change (\$'000)		-22,382	9,881	-1,924	-985	1,380	1,806	-3,947	-16,171
Change %		-34.1%	22.9%	-3.6%	-1.9%	2.7%	3.5%	-7.4%	-24.6%

It has led to a situation where staff have witnessed or experienced reduced work on faunal extinction because of pressures from existing funding streams. Comments from staff include:

There has been a decrease in National Heritage Trust funding to manage habitats and threatened species, and in staffing to develop policy and programs for threatened species, including Threatened Species, Biodiversity Conservation, Parks, etc.

Natural Resource Management programs have become more targeted at addressing threats to threatened species and focusing on recovery plan actions. However, the quantum of funding available from the Natural Heritage Trust has decreased.

⁸ Department of Environment and Energy (2018). Portfolio Budget Statement 2018-19

⁹ Budgeted Expenses for Outcome 1 in Department of Environment Portfolio Budget Statements (2015-16 to 2018-19)

¹⁰ Budgeted Expenses for Outcome 1 in Department of Environment and Energy Portfolio Budget Statements (2015-16 to 2018-19)

Recovery Planning cannot keep up with the rate of threatened species listings. Species need to be listed to be able to be considered through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) assessment process, however, when there is no recovery plan, it is difficult to know which actions need to be focused on to help the species recover. Recovery Plans are also often not utilised to the extent they should be and are not as practical or up to date due to staffing pressures.

The use of the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool (MERIT) is under threat now the Government is using shared services and delivering grants through the Department of Industry.

Monitoring is often outsourced to research agencies and there is an ongoing balance to determine how much money is invested in on-ground actions and how much is allocated to monitoring and evaluation.

Inadequate resourcing affects compliance under legislation

The reduction of work due to funding pressures affects the ability to enforce compliance under the EPBC Act. While the EPBC Act has teeth, a specific pathway must be followed before its compliance mechanisms can come into effect. A recovery plan must be developed to monitor and respond but due to a lack of resourcing, staff report around a third of recovery plans are not occurring. This means that in many instances, compliance is not occurring:

The breadth of threats to threatened species (climate change, invasive species, land clearing, habitat loss, development) requires significant collaboration and leadership to address them. The Australian Government has certain measures it can use; however, the legislation and policies of the State and Territory Governments can also significantly influence outcomes.

The EPBC Act was developed as an act to manage biodiversity while sustainably developing Australia. It is not set up to protect species in the way people may expect and can result in 'death by 1000 cuts' as the issues cannot be looked at holistically under the legislation, as it is currently written.

Staff did positively commend some current initiatives such as the Threatened Species Commissioner and monitoring but were clear that without additional funding, there was a limit to what could be done:

Targeted approach through the Threatened Species Strategy can help to protect particular species and focus efforts. Lack of funding and staff means that threats to other species are not holistically addressed. There are also no reptile or marine species as the target species.

The Threatened Species Commissioner role has increased the public face of the threatened species crisis and is effective at raising public awareness. This role however, has limited influence and is constrained by funding limitations.

There is a need for long-term monitoring to understand patterns of species populations and distribution, the likely impacts of climate change and other pressures, and the best ways to secure habitat protection across the landscape in the long-term.

Staff also expressed a concern that there appears to a habit by the Government to redefine the scope of work to fit within the funding provided, effectively reducing activity and allowing a claim that it is being compliant. Further, the lack of resources leads to outcomes not being met and is used to claim what is being undertaken is not working as intended, justifying outsourcing decisions.

Recommendations

The current arrangements are clearly not working. Years of budget cuts have resulting in reduced activities, essential corporate knowledge is under threat of being lost, initiatives are in dire need of more resources as without it, current legislation cannot ensure compliance to address growing faunal extinction. There is so much more to do to protect endangered species, but what can be done is being held back because of resource pressures. One member best summed up the situation:

We need to start making real and transparent commitments towards saving all endangered species.

The CPSU recommends that the average staffing cap is lifted, funding cuts to the Department of Environment and Energy are reversed and it is properly funded for biodiversity and conservation work. This must include providing additional and ongoing resources for the prompt, transparent and regular release of data on the state and trends of threatened species, state and impacts on critical habitat of threatened species and outcome-focussed monitoring of species conservation efforts and spending.

The Commonwealth Government must also significantly increase resourcing to biodiversity and conservation programs. This should include:

- significantly increasing resources into recovery plan and threat abatement implementation, including establishing a Recovery Fund with an annual investment of \$200m to implement recovery plans; and
- supporting the strategic expansion of Australia's National Reserve System to protect threatened species habitats, with an annual investment of at least \$170m per year.