

Please find below the submission from the Goulburn Field Naturalist Society.

We apologise if this is a little late, but we sincerely hope that it can still be considered.

SUBMISSION TO
THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE
ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE
INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC GOOD CONSERVATION

What is meant by public good conservation?

We support the definition of 'public good conservation' proposed by the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra, the umbrella organisation to which we belong, i.e. that 'public good conservation refers to activities undertaken by private and leasehold land users that firstly protects habitats of high conservation value and minimises negative on-site and off-site effects of land management on other habitats and resources.

Your definition of 'public good conservation' refers to 'conservation activities undertaken by private land users which bring environmental benefits to the community at large'. The emphasis in this document appears to be on the retention and restoration of native vegetation. However, other issues should be seen as important e.g. introduction of measures to reduce water extraction from our rivers, measures to restore water quality, measures to reduce salinity etc. These are touched on in this first issue for discussion.

(I) Land clearing restrictions

South Australia's Native Vegetation Heritage Agreements seem to have been a real success story, although only after some tracts of land were cleared precipitately prior to the implementation of the legislation. In the grazing lands of the South East there are wonderful ancient red gums dotting much of the landscape. Apparently these trees are protected. However it

seems that where vineyards are being planted, these trees can be removed providing some new ones are planted elsewhere. A forestry company planting bluegums on a large scale removed without authority some of these old red gums which contained nesting sites for the rare red-tailed black cockatoos. What is of particular concern is that the present trees have a limited lifespan. They are nearly all old because the younger ones have been removed in past clearing. Fencing off of the land around old trees often results in the close regrowth of saplings but apparently this form of natural regeneration is not practised widely. Some shelter belt plantings include red gum.

Even if more are planted now, it will probably take 100 - 200 years before they begin to develop the appropriate nesting hollows that so many of our native species need to survive. Whether they will survive in the small remnants of vegetation left seems problematic, but at least more should be being done now to try to rectify the situation.

The situation re compensation for retaining native vegetation on private and leasehold lands in states like NSW and Queensland is more difficult to achieve than in South Australia, without Commonwealth assistance, because of the much greater areas involved. Under these circumstances we were most disappointed in the Commonwealth Government's refusal to assist the Queensland Government in funding compensation for private land owners to retain their native vegetation. In the meantime, no doubt, the massive rate of clearing of these lands is continuing apace. While this may bring short term profits, the long term damage to the environment in terms of depletion of soil resources, salinity, destruction of biodiversity and addition to greenhouse gases make this clearing a highly damaging and unsustainable process. Nor is the damage done readily reversible. Even where it can be reversed over the long term, costs are likely to be many times the benefits received from short term cropping or grazing.

In NSW, the State Government has tried to tackle the problem of the clearing of marginal lands etc. Learning from what happened in South Australia, it introduced, without notice, a temporary ban on the further clearing of native vegetation. This caused a great furore. Subsequently it developed the Native Vegetation legislation with the aim of setting up Regional Committees to assess the local situation and decide policies appropriate for local areas, given certain guidelines. We understand that the National Farmers Federation did not get the controlling interest on these committees that they had been lead to expect by some government officials or government members. As a result, instead of co-operating with a very worthwhile process to solve some of our major problems they very

effectively opposed it. We know of at least one local region where the setting up of a Regional Committee was abandoned because the NFF refused to co-operate. Nor has the Government been prepared to stand by its legislation and invoke penalties for deliberate flouting of the law in the clearing of even extremely rare types of remnant vegetation.

In the meantime the Government put aside \$15 million for a program of Native Vegetation Regeneration. This program, operated by the Department of Land and Water Conservation, has the potential to raise awareness and encourage co-operation, but there is often no long term commitment required of landowners to manage the lands for conservation purposes.

In parts of rural Australia where there is very little native vegetation left, the emphasis has often been on planting windbreaks for stock using tree species only.

The recent trend has been to encourage more understorey species to be included.

The emphasis here has been on species of wattle both because they provide many benefits and because of their ease of establishment. Recent research has shown that blocks of mixed woodland vegetation placed at intervals not too distant apart provide better habitat for animals, especially small woodland birds.

What has been a success in NSW has been the system of Voluntary Conservation Agreements between landowners and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. These are agreements for conservation of native vegetation in perpetuity, with the agreement being recorded on the title of the land. The main problem is that this program has not been adequately funded and this has restricted its potential expansion.

(ii) Maintaining environmental flows In rivers

In NSW despite efforts, going back many years, by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW to raise the awareness of past governments about the over allocation of water from our inland river systems, they were not listened to and we now have the major predicament of trying to wind back the amount of water being extracted from our rivers. While we can appreciate the economic value of the marketable water rights, the policy has the potential to concentrate control of access to water and the environmental benefits are highly questionable. The value of water rights is now so high that the cost to the government of buying back these rights is probably prohibitive. One of our members frequently works in the Hay district and has watched with dismay the ongoing destruction over a number of years of the native shrub

and grasslands on the Hay Plain (one of the last homes in NSW of the threatened Plains Wanderer), by laser levelling for irrigation. This is water extraction the Murrumbidgee River, already under enormous stress, can do without! We understand that a moratorium has been put on the transfer of further water extraction licences from other river catchments to the Upper Murrumbidgee

which all but ceased flowing around Michelago as a result of water extraction further upstream in the recent drought. This policy should be extended to most of our river systems, but it is like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted and we still have many sleeper and dozer licences which have the potential for being taken up.

The CRC for Freshwater Ecology reporting on the 'Ecological Sustainability of Rivers' concluded that 'the Cap level (set at 1993/94 levels) is set at a level of extractions that contributed to the current level of degradation of the riverine environment, ...[and] there should be no expectation that the Cap, at its current level, will improve the riverine environment'. The 'Review of the Operation of the Cap' for the Murray-Darling Basin Commission proposes a change from this present Cap to establishing sustainable levels of extraction valley by valley and annual river health audits. Unless comprehensive future research proves otherwise, any new levels of extraction should be set below the present Cap levels.

Not only the river flow but the quality of water is of vital importance for restoring our degraded freshwater ecosystems. All environmental causes contributing to the decline in our native freshwater fish populations need further investigation with the aim of restoring as well as we possibly can, our natural aquatic ecosystems.

Research funding is vital and funds to implement recommended remedial action and to monitor its effectiveness, are essential.

(iii) Care of Wetlands

The meeting of our obligations under the Ramsar Convention is essential. We support all efforts to return adequate environmental flows and water quality to inland wetlands and to restore estuarine wetlands with emphasis on the reduction of acid sulphate soil problems.

(iv) Planting to ameliorate and limit the spread of dryland salinity

This is a huge task. Here we would like to support the recent joint proposal for tackling this issue by the National Farmers Federation and the

Australian

Conservation Foundation. If we are not to end up with even larger areas of Australia entirely unproductive, the large sums of money required for remediation simply have to be found by the Commonwealth Government.

(v) Possible measures to limit the impact of land based activities on the Great Barrier Reef

Others will have much more expertise than us on this topic. We do wish to say that we deplore the permission given by the Coalition Government for the Hinchinbrook development to go ahead, with its consequent environmental damage, in such a sensitive area of the Great Barrier Reef. We hope that there is no repetition of this kind of environmental vandalism whether on a small or large scale.

Impacts of conservation measures and their costs

(I) Conservation on privately owned lands

For the individual landowner, both negative and positive impacts may be identified and it largely depends on their individual outlook and philosophy as to how they respond to these impacts. It is good to see attitudes towards conservation issues slowly changing through Landcare and organisations like Greening Australia but the process is far too slow and the attitudes so entrenched that we sometimes despair.

Papers like The Land newspaper tend to reinforce negative attitudes and have a powerful influence on the rural community.

Negative impacts include:

- * Loss of land for production.
- * Cost and effort of fencing for eliminating or regulating grazing.
- * Cost and effort of weed and feral animal control within the conservation area.

Positive impacts include:

- * Satisfaction in contributing to sustainable practices e.g. encouraging biodiversity through restoring natural ecosystems, contributing to salinity control, improving water quality of creeks and rivers, assisting in education for school children, other land owners etc.
- * Having a quiet place to resort to for a family picnic area or to

'commune with nature' for everyday pleasure or when problems arise. (A field worker at a conference once said that many of the older farmers had told him how much they missed the bit of natural bush or creek flat that used to exist on their properties and served as a quiet retreat.)

* Possible concessions such as rate rebates, funding for some management activities e.g. fencing, weed and feral animal control and for restoration of native vegetation.

It should be noted that loss of production is often not great because most of the more productive land has already been cleared. Where highly productive land still has native vegetation on it, it is usually a rare find and probably should attract a higher rate of compensation for foregoing clearing. Currently there is no such compensation available in NSW. We recommend that landholders who forego the opportunity of earning an income from all, or part of their land, by entering into a VCA or its equivalent in perpetuity, should be appropriately compensated by the Commonwealth Government.

It only takes one new owner to come in and clear land, for the long term effort of former owners to conserve areas to be lost forever. Such areas should be shown clearly on the land title and on the property with penalties sufficiently high to be a strong disincentive for clearing. It is also essential that the Government be willing to enforce such penalties!

In NSW, the best means of protecting, in perpetuity, land with high conservation values is to enter into a Voluntary Conservation Agreement (VCA) with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. This Agreement is registered on Title. Advantages include a rate rebate proportional to the area of land covered by the VCA, an initial grant of money to cover some of the management activities and the possibility of further funding in the longer term.

Agreements under the Department of Land and Water Conservation are more often targeted towards restoring native vegetation on properties. They attract short term funding with the possibility of the grant being spread over 2 or 3 years. Agreements where funding provided is over \$10 000 go on title but are not necessarily in perpetuity. They do not attract rate rebates.

We draw the attention of the Committee to the differences in costs of managing land for conservation purposes, depending on whether the property is income producing e.g. used for primary production, or non-income producing.

Among state government charges, land tax may be applicable to the land without primary producer status but the land under primary production is not assessable for land tax. Other state and local government charges which may be levied according to circumstances include leasehold rent (on perpetual leases), enclosure permit (on crown reserve roads), rural land protection board levy and gun licence. All of these are tax deductible for the primary producer but not for rural property owners who might have most of the property covered by a VCA. Other management expenses applicable to management of conservation areas are fencing, weed and feral animal control, vehicle running costs, road grading, insurance etc. Unlike the primary producer where these expenses would be part of the overall operation, none of them are tax deductible for the owner whose VCA might cover most of the property but who has no income from the property. We recommend that management expenses for conservation areas covered by VCAs or similar secure title be tax deductible. These could be subject to the owner meeting their management responsibilities under the Agreement.

There is also the problem of ongoing funding for management. After initial establishment, the largest and most variable expense is likely to be weed control.

Some areas are relatively weed free and will need only occasional further attention.

Other areas are so badly infected that ongoing management will always be onerous, especially when weeds on neighbouring land are not controlled. Weeds like St John's wort, vipers bugloss, saffron thistle, African lovegrass, serrated tussock, all widespread inhabitants of the Southern Tablelands, are some examples which are very difficult to control. Willows can be a big initial expense but, depending on the state of the waterway upstream, may not be a continuing expense. It is recommended that assistance with ongoing funding for management control be on a needs basis with assessment at appropriate intervals.

The expense of setting up such VCAs with private landowners is fairly onerous for the NPWS. Funding problems have restricted the access of interested landowners to negotiations for a VCA. As much of the unconserved biodiversity of Australia is on private lands we ask the Commonwealth Government to assist the States with funding to establish such agreements in perpetuity with private landowners.

In general we support the use of incentives to landholders sufficient to

encourage them to conserve existing areas of native vegetation, to regenerate depauperate areas or even to establish new areas to provide habitat for and enable the movement of native animals, including birds, through the landscape.

(ii) Recommendations to the Commonwealth Government on other ways to * assist conservation.

* Provide tax exempt status for donations of land to organisations like Bush Heritage.

* Provide government support to organisations such as the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers and other groups which provide assistance to landowners in the management of nature conservation areas.

* Introduce penalties for damage to areas set aside for conservation purposes.

* Fund research into conservation issues at a much higher rate than is presently done and further to fund and assess the recommendations arising from such research. The recent news that the CRCs were likely to lose 3.5% of their funding because of the introduction of the GST was deplorable and we hope that the Government has rectified this by now, based as it was on their misunderstanding of the financing arrangements of the CRCs.

Sharing Costs

If we are to reverse the degradation we have caused to our land over the past 200 or so years, the only way is to share the funding between all Australians who can afford it. It is not a problem just for landowners. A pollution tax could provide money for conservation measures as well as providing incentives to reduce pollution. Another appropriate measure would be to reduce the loopholes which allow the very rich companies and individuals to avoid their fair share of taxes. If the Government is not prepared to do this, the introduction of an ongoing Timor-style tax may be the only solution. We are pleased to see that the Government is looking for an equitable system for sharing conservation costs among all Australians but we stress again that Australians with a genuinely low income should be exempted.

Yours sincerely

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"Patience accomplishes its object, while hurry speeds to its ruin. Gulistan
1258"