

Private Submission- Impact of Government Conservation Controls Imposed on Landholders

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Introduction

Before I provide some detailed comments, the main issue I see in getting long term good results in conservation on both public and private land is the poor understanding of ecological and ecosystem processes by politicians, landholders, and the community. We approach many of the conservation, land management and degradation issues on a piecemeal and highly fragmented and disjointed basis. It is part of the limited modern technological and political approach to solving many of the major ecological problems in rural and agricultural and urban landscapes. This reflects the philosophy of the human species operating outside natural ecological frameworks. Much of our present land management practices are presently ecologically unsustainable, requiring huge external physical inputs, and often operating well beyond the capacity of our inherited natural capital. Hence we see ongoing declines in biodiversity, degradation, and loss of ecological productivity, even on well managed land. Further decline is inevitable in many parts of the highly modified parts of the rural landscapes in regional Australia.

There is no holistic approach to understand how best to conserve ecosystems and species within a landscape matrix. The conservation mechanisms and incentives on private landholders are often imposed without reference to a holistic approach to managing landscapes. A focus on endangered species sometimes supplants the longer term management of other integral parts of ecosystems, such as:

- maintenance of habitat, soil processes, and retention of keystone species, or

- soil and canopy invertebrates, and plants which provide the food and resources for other dependent species.

Australian private landholders have yet to learn respect for their land, and to learn how to manage the land to support not only their preferred activities, but also to conserve other key elements of biodiversity and maintenance of natural ecological processes. Conservation controls have been traditionally imposed because we do not have a deep respect for our native landscapes and our native plants and animals. These bureaucratic controls are often resisted or ignored as landholders reject the idea of external influence over how they manage the land. A distinct lack of a conservation land ethic is a major barrier to achieving long term conservation goals.

Another major factor in the piecemeal approach to private land management is the lack of monetary incentives and mechanisms to assist private landholders achieving conservation goals across the whole of Australia. We do not have a National system of incentives linked to taxation reform. The present taxation agenda has overlooked how we as a Nation could have changed land use and land management practices to minimise further losses to biodiversity and degradation of ecological processes within ecosystems

A second major factor has been the poorly coordinated and directed disbursement of funds under the Natural Heritage Trust Scheme. Most of the landholder projects were not scientifically based with linked scientific projects to monitor key ecological processes and outcomes. The Natural Heritage Trust has proven to be a missed opportunity in community conservation because of the preference to target community based projects, and not fund scientific projects of merit to develop worthwhile long term conservation outcomes. The Natural Heritage Trust could have supported worthwhile mechanisms and incentives on private land to conserve large patches of land in highly threatened ecosystems. Some of these have now disappeared because private landholders could not see the values of retaining them.

Lastly there needs to be a long term funding approach that spans government elections. A bipartisan political approach is needed to ensure that the whimsical nature of short term political funding is removed from

the allocation of funding. We need a new set of ecological principles and indicators in setting the funding priorities on a bioregional basis.

1. Impact of Conservation Measures Imposed by Governments

These measures have often been introduced in a piecemeal process too late to achieve any long term benefit to ecosystems or species. Private landholders often have a major distrust towards these new initiatives. Too often legislation has been brought in without any significant follow-up funds to reimburse landholders affected by the new legislation.

We need a better involvement of the community, interest groups, and private landholders in developing policies and planning instruments which will achieve the desired on-ground outcomes. Some of the current consultation processes put in place, using bureaucratic committees involving representatives of key stakeholders often become removed from the real on-ground work needed. These bureaucratic processes have often become an end in themselves, with little on ground funding being applied in most cases. This often leads to a weak trickle down effect to actual on-ground measures.

On-ground impact of present conservation measures are not being adequately monitored so we have not idea of the present success or otherwise of projects. Project success is often not measured in ecological terms.

2. International Developments in Ameliorating the Costs of Conservation

This section I have omitted because of the time constraint self imposed to prepare this submission.

3 & 4. Mechanisms to establish private and public good components of conservation & How to equitably share the costs associated with conservation among all members of the community

These two terms of reference are grouped together as it is difficult to separate them in putting a submission together.

There needs to be a five tiered approach to achieving worthwhile long term conservation goals on both public and private land:

- a new land ethic
- whole of landscape approaches to managing ecosystems and species
- taxation reform
- equity and fairness in applying mechanisms and incentives
- range of matching mechanisms and values to be conserved

The idea of a new land ethic needs to be promoted which views man working within natural ecological constraints. The Federal and State Governments need also to operate within this new land ethic so that private landholders can see government, community, and private individuals operating within the same framework. There needs to be an agreed set of ecological and social principles which allows a strategic, targeted, and integrated approach to managing and conserving ecosystems and species.

We need new landscape management approaches to managing ecosystems and species, which permits information and approaches to be integrated at local, landscape, and regional scales. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is a significant tool to assist in the integration of landscape information to support planning and implementation of conservation projects.

Taxation reform is required to enable private landholders to offset their costs of biodiversity conservation. These costs are inadequately compensated, if at all in most cases.

Unfortunately in many parts of Australia land clearing and degradation has gone past the ecologically sustainable limits required to maintain viable ecosystems and populations of species. We are talking about less than 1% of the original area in good ecological condition. In most landscapes, scientists like myself are recommending between 50 and 70% of the natural area retained to conserve the full range of biodiversity and to maintain ecosystem and ecological processes.

Weed invasion and transformation of native ecosystems to agriculture has meant that restoration of landscapes to a standard required to conserve a minimum set of ecosystems and species are going to be cost prohibitive. To apply funding incentives and land reform on an equitable basis requires a Nationally agreed approach, similar to some of the principles espoused in the National Forestry Policy Statement.

A range of mechanisms need to be developed that permit flexibility in applying the necessary support and extension to private landholders to conserve ecosystems and species in perpetuity. The following table shows some of these potential mechanisms. Each of the mechanisms shown in the attached table require a systematic approach to be applied bioregionally, across the full range of bioregions within Australia.

Mechanism

Possible Application

Uses / Values to be Protected

Fixed Term Contracts

Commercial Agriculture

Viability of agriculture questionable

Holding mechanism

Not to be used for threatened ecosystems and species

Contract in Perpetuity

Land holders managing primarily for aesthetic or nature conservation

High conservation value remnants

Rare and Threatened ecosystems and species

Can complement reserves on public land if strategically placed

Voluntary Acquisition

Where

Suitable for highest priority remnants and habitat for targeted species

Partnership agreements including land and water management plans

Management of Threatening Processes

Reduce threatening processes on private land

- feral animal or weed management
- restoration of landscapes

Extension, facilitation, and building of local community capacity to take on private land conservation

Future scenario analysis of productivity and biodiversity gains or losses

Mainly to build awareness of potential biodiversity losses in relation to current and future land management regimes

Planning Incentives

Landscape Management encouraging whole of landscape approach

Ecosystem and Adaptive management

Better land management practices may evolve in a spirit of co-operation

Requires systematic monitoring of various land management options

I apologise that I have been unable to provide more detail in some sections. If you require further assistance or clarification, I may be contacted at my e-mail address or on business number: (02) 6230 6887