

Australia's report card on biodiversity

“What we are doing now to biodiversity is like burning Renaissance masterpieces to cook dinner.”

Professor EO Wilson,
Scientist and writer

Biodiversity is the web of life – the thin skin of living things, including us, which inhabits the surface of planet Earth. Biodiversity includes humans, animals, plants, fungi and microbes - from dugongs to daisies, toadstools to termites. This variety of life has evolved over hundreds of millions of years. We don't know how many species live on Earth – scientists have described about 1.8 million. But that's just a drop in the ocean compared to the estimated 10 to 100 million which probably exist.

More than a meteor

Yet what has taken millions of years to evolve is now being destroyed at a breathtaking rate. Professor Harry Recher, Edith Cowan University, estimated we could be losing eight species an hour, or

70,000 a year world-wide. That's a faster rate of extinction than at any time since the dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. Yet plants and animals today are not dying out because of a maverick meteorite. Rather, it is the actions of our own species, clearing natural habitats, spreading pest plants and animals, and dumping pollutants into the rivers, oceans and atmosphere.

A group of independent Australian experts recently identified biodiversity loss as “perhaps the most serious environmental problem in Australia today” and “a cause for national concern”. They said species in all major groups of plants and animals are at risk (*Australia: State of the Environment 1996*).

Losses

Since European settlement in Australia, 10 out of 144 species of marsupials have become extinct with unknown numbers of invertebrates and lower order creatures. We have lost three species of emu - the King Island, Kangaroo Island and mainland Tasmanian emus are all extinct.

Today, more than 100 mammal species are endangered, vulnerable or potentially vulnerable. Forty per cent of Australia's forests are gone, including 75 per cent of our rainforests, leaving many forest ecosystems also endangered.

Biodiversity is our living heritage, providing us with food, clothing, housing, clean air and water, inspiration and spiritual renewal. It's an integral part of our lives, and it's easy to see that protecting biodiversity today will pay off for the future health of human society, our economy and all life on earth. Yet how can we benefit from it without destroying it? As we look around we know that biodiversity is under threat, yet often it seems there is little any individual can do. We can become frustrated and feel helpless that the problem is just too big to tackle.

This book describes the benefits which biodiversity brings to every part of our lives. The middle four pages provide some quick and simple things which all of us – even city dwellers – can do to help protect biodiversity for ourselves and for our children. For those interested in finding out more there are extra references at the back of the booklet.

