



CONSERVATION COUNCIL

OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA INC.

Submission from the Conservation Council of WA on:

Australia's biodiversity conservation strategy 2010-2020: consultation draft

We agree that the main threats to our biodiversity are:

1. climate change (resulting in conditions such as prolonged drought)
2. invasive species
3. loss, fragmentation and degradation of habitat
4. unsustainable use of natural resources
5. changes to the aquatic environment and water flows
6. inappropriate fire regimes.

Each of these threats is exacerbated by the ever-increasing human population and our ever-increasing levels of consumption. Until this is acknowledged and steps taken to slow and eventually reverse the growth in population and consumption, attempts to maintain and protect biodiversity in Australia will be largely futile.

The 2006 *Australia State of the Environment* report said:

We can expect future pressures on the environment from population growth and from economic growth. These pressures will continue to increase unless there is some decoupling of growth from non-sustainable consumption of resources, particularly energy, land, water and products dependent on limited natural resources (such as forestry and fisheries). This is a major adaptive challenge.

The 2007 *WA State of the Environment* report identified population and consumption as a Priority 1 issue, second only to climate change. It found that WA's population had grown by 1.7% per year over the past decade - approximately 30% faster than the national average. While it made some general recommendations regarding global population growth and consumption, it made no specific recommendations in relation to the rapid growth in WA's population. This was a major omission.

Recommendation: The strategy must begin with a call for governments to find out what is a sustainable human population for Australia at various levels of consumption and take immediate steps to move towards that number.

While climate change is listed first of the threats to biodiversity, the draft strategy offers no specific actions to address it. We are only told that species and ecosystems should be made resilient to climate change. While measures to increase resilience are appropriate and welcome, they address the symptoms, not the cause.

Recommendation: The strategy must call on governments to take strong and immediate steps to slow and reverse climate change.

In relation to dot point 6, inappropriate fire regimes, fire management in WA is run mainly by foresters who developed prescribed burning to protect timber resources but now manage fire in the natural environment in over one-third of the State. Foresters tend to be fire behaviourists, not fire ecologists, and their fire management is a serious threat to biodiversity in this State.

Recommendation: To protect and maintain biodiversity, fire management should be planned equally by fire ecologists and fire behaviourists and based on best science conducted by independent experts.

We agree with the vision:

1. Biodiversity is essential for our existence.
2. Biodiversity is of value in its own right,
3. Biodiversity is best conserved in its natural state.
4. The state of biodiversity reflects the state of the nation.
5. Natural systems are dynamic but have a finite capacity to respond to changes in their biodiversity.
6. We should apply the precautionary approach to biodiversity conservation.
7. All Australians have a stake in biodiversity and should contribute to its wellbeing.
8. Our efforts to conserve biodiversity must acknowledge and respect the culture, values, innovations, practices and knowledge of Indigenous peoples.
9. Biodiversity should not be further degraded by the actions of the current generation
10. An ecosystem approach to biodiversity conservation should be used to maximise conservation outcomes.

In relation to dot point 9, in WA, despite a pretence to halt clearing of native vegetation, this primary cause of loss of biodiversity continues apace, both legally and illegally, with little effective effort made to limit it.

According to the WA 2007 *State of the Environment* Report,

- Between 1998 and 2004, nearly 900 ha of native vegetation were cleared every year in the Perth metropolitan region. SoE report, p. 132
- In both 2005 and 2006, about 7500 ha of native vegetation were approved for clearing. SoE report, p. 132

The agency charged with issuing clearing permits and monitoring compliance in WA, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), is so under-funded and under-resourced that few permits are rejected and monitoring is virtually non-existent. The 2009-2010 budget further reduces government funding for this agency. Yet at the same time the WA Government has just announced that it will spend hundreds of millions of dollars on polluting coal-fired and gas turbine generating power stations.

In its recent budget the WA State Government significantly reduced funding to the Conservation Council of WA and other non-government conservation organisations while increasing funding for developments that are environmentally disastrous, like coal-fired power stations.

Recommendation: Governments must provide significantly increased funding to agencies responsible for protecting the environment, with money provided to conduct research and implement, monitor and assess actions to protect, maintain and restore biodiversity.

Recommendation: Governments must significantly increase funding to non-government public interest conservation organisations and community groups, which return three to four times the investment in voluntary unpaid work protecting, maintaining and restoring biodiversity.

Recommendation: add to dot point 9:

and immediate steps must be taken to repair the degradation already caused.

We are provided with lists of actions and who should implement them:

- 3.2.1 Priority for change 1: Building ecosystem resilience
- 3.2.2 Priority for change 2: Mainstreaming biodiversity
- 3.2.3 Priority for change 3: Knowledge for all
- 3.2.4 Priority for change 4: Getting results
- 3.2.5 Priority for change 5: Involving Indigenous peoples
- 3.2.6 Priority for change 6: Measuring success

We agree with the priority actions, but they (or similar) have been recommended before. Unfortunately, governments at all levels lack the will to implement them, preferring to fund activities that further degrade and deplete biodiversity (e.g., the new port at Oakajee in WA and the Ord 2 proposal, both of which are supported and funded by the State and Federal Governments).

In relation to Action 2.1.2:

Implement an ongoing national campaign that demonstrates the importance of biodiversity to the sustainability of communities and the quality of our lives,

the ABC should be encouraged to devote programs to biodiversity conservation in Australia. It is more than 10 years since ABC radio had a program dedicated to environmental issues. We are bombarded with stock exchange reports and the price of gold and oil dozens of times a day yet are told little or nothing about the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment or what must be done to halt and reverse the decline.

Recommendation: The ABC and other media should be encouraged to have regular programs on both radio and TV about environmental issues in Australia.

In relation to Action 4.3.2:

Review and reform legislation to improve biodiversity conservation outcomes across all sectors.

WA's most important legislation to protect biodiversity, the *Wildlife Conservation Act*, dates from **1950** and, despite some amendments in the interim, is totally inadequate for the purpose. Promises to update the Act and replace it with a comprehensive Biodiversity Conservation Act remain unfulfilled after a decade of obfuscation and procrastination, and there is little likelihood WA will get this urgently needed legislation in the foreseeable future.

Recommendation: The strategy should recommend that the WA Government prepare and implement best-practice biodiversity protection legislation in the form of a Biodiversity Conservation Act as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation: The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* must be amended and strengthened by increasing community involvement (third party referrals and appeals), transparency (publication of agency advice to the Minister), and repeal of the provision that excludes the operation of the Act in areas covered by Regional Forest Agreements.

1.3 Implementation

For the strategy to succeed, we will need to:

1. secure and enhance critical intact habitats to increase ecosystem resilience
2. restore ecological function to critically degraded landscapes through sustainable practices that manage our soil and water resources
3. increase the cover of native vegetation wherever feasible to enhance ecological connectivity across fragmented landscapes over time
4. build local knowledge and capacity for the long-term stewardship of our environment
5. protect our most endangered species and ecological communities.

In relation to dot point 5, there is constant emphasis on endangered species and ecological communities. Large sums of money are then spent on single species, sometimes with little or no success, while once common species become endangered.

Recommendation: More emphasis should be placed on protecting still common species to prevent their becoming endangered.