

SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY



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Introduction

This submission is aimed at addressing ‘Australia’s Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2020 Consultation Draft’ with a particular emphasis on the role of Indigenous people and their knowledge in the management of Australia’s dwindling biodiversity.

There are many laudable aspects in Australia’s Biodiversity Conservation Strategy (ABCS) draft, perhaps especially with regard to the involvement of Indigenous people. It is likewise applauded and of key interest to NAILSMA and collaborators that the action based strategy for biodiversity monitoring as described in Case Study 11 under Measuring Success is seen as a benchmark for good practice. Much of what is argued below is about adding a sense of realism of the context for biodiversity and environmental management in north Australia. A more nuanced view of the northern context than is portrayed in the Strategy draft raises issues of implementation and efficacy that are not clearly dealt with. If the measures in this Strategy (with notable improvements on DEST 1996) are to succeed in delivering the prescribed results in the long term the issues we raise here about practical application, capacity and effective strategic on-ground support for example, will need we believe, further consideration.

Generally speaking, the draft lacks acknowledgement of the existing and emerging network of Indigenous land and sea management groups, particularly in northern Australia that have historical as well as a future role to manage vast tracts of lands that contain high levels of biodiversity. In saying this, the strategy also fails to acknowledge any policy prescriptions that may be put forth to allow Indigenous people to continue to manage their lands using their knowledge.

Central to the success of Indigenous engagement in managing Australia’s biodiversity is the need to acknowledge and resource adequately the commitment made by Australia to the Convention on Biological Diversity, particularly Articles 8(j) and 10(c) that refer to the need to resource and support the in-situ conservation of Indigenous Knowledge or what is internationally referred to as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). It is NAILMSA’s belief that without a long developed knowledge set, Australia’s biodiversity at the time of colonisation would have been lesser than what it was. Therefore the important role that Indigenous Australians play is globally significant, whilst contributing to other important government strategies, such as ‘Close the Gap’ initiative.

We also believe that a lack of recognition and understanding of the relationship between Indigenous people and biodiversity is a gap that is currently ill informed, and will ultimately lead to the destruction of biodiversity. The inherent role that Indigenous people have played in maintaining biodiversity, particularly in the tropical north is underestimated. Any new attempts to manage biodiversity without engaging Indigenous people will have disastrous consequences for both people and country. Internationally, this relationship is defined as bio-cultural diversity and one that links the role of ancient Indigenous knowledge, including linguistics with that of biodiversity.

Finally, NAILSMA supports the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources. The management of Australia’s biodiversity must include the sustainable use of these

resources, as has been the case for millennia. We have shown through our efforts to develop cross-jurisdictional management of Marine Turtles and Dugong in northern Australia that sustainable use, along with best practice collaboration and knowledge (both scientific and Indigenous) contributes to partnerships that are essential to the long-term maintenance and sustainable use of such resources. These methods of collaborations across vast tracts of lands by empowering and mobilising Indigenous people, is the only way in which biodiversity can be managed in such a way so as not to impact on the Native Title rights of Indigenous people, engage with the community and contribute to meeting the nations obligations (CBD).

NAILSMA

NAILSMA is an alliance of the Kimberley Land Council, the Northern Land Council, the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation and Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation. It was founded to support Indigenous land and sea management with regionally appropriate research and resources to care for country, through a collaboration of local Indigenous knowledge's and scientific knowledge. NAILSMA's project foci have been turtle and dugong management, water policy and management, fire abatement and land management in the carbon economy, the health and transmission of Indigenous knowledge's and enterprise development. It has collaborated on various other topics to raise awareness of Indigenous people and management practices such as examining the nexus between human health and that of the lands in which people inhabit.

An imperative for NAILSMA is to support and improve the capacity of Indigenous people to sustain livelihoods and prosper on their traditional lands. Much of our work involves long term investment in practical partnerships that foster innovation to deliver desired environmental and livelihood outcomes.

NAILSMA's efforts to date have been focussed on the land and seas of northern Australia. It's footprint is significant to this response for a number of reasons: the Indigenous estate is estimated to be around 20% of Australia's land mass, the great majority of which is in very remote regions and much of it in the north; much of it is relatively intact ecologically, containing substantial high conservation priority areas; it contains a high proportion of Indigenous to non-Indigenous people with a range of legislated rights mechanisms in relation to customary lands; the Indigenous estate includes a broad spread of small remote homelands/out stations; its Indigenous peoples maintain a relatively high degree of customary, land based management and ritual activity; and the people of this tropical savanna region engage, often innovatively, in customary, market and State economies to sustain chosen livelihoods on a platform of assumed Indigenous and legislated rights.

The methods employed through NAILSMA collaborations are action-based and participatory (see NAILSMA biodiversity and social benchmarking proposal in appendix), aimed at environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes that are more regionally sustainable than those delivered from narrowly targeted 'top down' approaches.

Comments on particular Priorities for Change:

Priority for change 2. Mainstreaming biodiversity

- Objective 2.2.1 underplays an important point about policy and legislative consistency. The treatment of this issue underestimates what is a major challenge and potential threat to the effective implementation of the Strategy in northern Australia. Government policy and legislation between tiers, between States and within regions is often uncomplimentary if not contradictory in the treatment of Indigenous Australians and their livelihoods. This National Biodiversity Strategy has sought to recognise and further the roles of Indigenous people. Support for ranger programs through CFOC, WOC and IPAs for example are consistent with the intent of this Strategy but are contradicted by the impact of the NT Intervention, potentially by the recent NT Government draft policy on Outstations and by the last NT Education Department policy shift away from bilingual education. One hand supports the connection between living and working on country and the other discourages this along with the retention and transmission of IEK through customary and market economic activity. These and other uncomplimentary policy settings are echoed throughout regions where Indigenous involvement in biodiversity conservation is occurring and increasingly relied upon. Clearly these are not issues resolvable through ABCS. However, recognition of systemic discontinuities should be recognised and naturally trigger practical concern for implementation and the need for strategic planning across institutions and at the level of local research and Indigenous engagement.

Priority for change 4. Getting Results

- Whilst Objective 4.1.3 does strongly suggest the need for private sector investment in biodiversity, it remains unclear in the Strategy as to the nature of such investment and how it may be attracted in a market economy.
- A notable change from DEST 1996 is the apparent shift from a ‘sustainable use’ philosophy for wildlife management to one of conservation and protection. Simplistically this can have perverse outcomes whereby, for example, Aboriginal people who are prevented from engaging in commercial use of wildlife activities might turn their floodplains over to pastoralism with its inherent biodiversity impacts and devaluing of wildlife. Whereas a ‘utilisation’ philosophy puts a value on wildlife and inherently creates incentives for the maintenance and management of wildlife. DEST 1996 stated that, in accordance with the World Conservation Union's resolution on sustainable use, there should be a focus on the development of wildlife utilisation programs that create economic and other incentives for the retention, rehabilitation, maintenance and management of natural habitats. The new draft strategy seems to avoid this issue, not recognising the high rate of both customary wildlife utilisation and increasing potential for sound, environmentally sustainable engagement in the market economy using land based assets. Given for example, the proportionately large Indigenous estate and limited employment prospects across the north, this is a strategically significant issue.
- Despite current support programs under DEHA there is no commitment in this strategy for infrastructure and other mainstream service development to remote areas supporting for example, current Indigenous and collaborative biodiversity conservation and land management efforts.
- It is significant to note here that NAILSMA and its partners and collaborators are working across state, shire and other jurisdictions in all their project areas.

In terms of implementation ABCS should acknowledge, factor in and seek support for existing cross jurisdictional biodiversity management platforms as this.

Priority for change 5. Involving Indigenous peoples

- The Strategy (in Priority 2) calls for school curricula nation-wide to include learning about biodiversity conservation and in similar vein for the broad utilisation, sharing and intergenerational transmission of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (Priority 3). Inclusion in national curricula would presumably include schools for Indigenous kids in areas where IEK is currently practiced. What is not expressed is an understanding of the local Indigenous culture context as critical to the practical use and transmission of IEK. A key element of this context is the local language context. The point here is that unless customary education in local Indigenous languages is supported IEK will disappear over a relatively short time period. The diminution of and overall threat to bilingual education across the north of Australia is for example a serious issue for knowledge sharing and effective collaboration with Indigenous land managers for biodiversity and other management imperatives. It would be short sighted to further denude IEK inputs into biodiversity conservation by ignoring this issue.
- Education curricula in schools for Indigenous kids throughout regions where NRM is or is potentially a viable Indigenous livelihood option should include practical learning about NRM and provide pathways into this and related careers. The Strategy does not elicit a clear vision for the next generation of Indigenous land managers.

Priority for change 6. Measuring success

Objective 6.1. A robust, long-term national monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework is established and linked to state of the environment reporting.

- Objectives 6.1.1 and 6.1.2 are laudable but the listing for “Responsibilities” excludes Indigenous people (i.e. refers only to "all governments and the science sector"). The Strategy should be explicit about significant investment in Indigenous land and sea management capacity. Particularly, Indigenous rangers and their commitment to environmental monitoring should be recognised for their role in ‘6.1.1 building baseline datasets’ and ‘6.1.2 improving information infrastructure’. This role of Indigenous people in monitoring biodiversity is reflected in the commitment to Cyber Tracker/I-Tracker technologies as well as other Indigenous initiatives in research and monitoring.
- As with the above comment on Objectives 6.1.1 and 6.1.2, 6.1.3 does not explicitly include Indigenous people. It is worth making this connection explicit as it respects Indigenous contribution to conservation of biodiversity. It will also be relevant to allocation of resources as demonstrating how a project meets these objectives will eventually be part of the grant application process for government funds.
- An indicative point about the development and support of monitoring methodologies should be made here. Case study 11 (p42) Park Monitoring (Northern Territory Government) rightly lauds what is considered to be an internationally significant methodology for monitoring biodiversity. Although heralded here, this methodology (developed nearly 20 years ago) has received

the bare minimum support. The potential for this monitoring strategy to touch on all 6 of the Priorities for change is perhaps limited only by lack of committed investment and local vision. Monitoring / measuring success, should not just be considered as an isolated component but fundamental to a process which integrates all other five 5 priorities

NAILSMA is developing a biodiversity and social benchmarking strategy for the tropical savannas which, with intended investment, will deliver outcomes against all the Priorities for Change, not as isolated targets but as an integrated set of project based goals. It incorporates action-based research and participatory development methodologies aimed at maximising the collaborations between scientists and Aboriginal land owners for biodiversity and land management without devaluing local aspirations, capacities and livelihood needs.

Summary:

The ABCS draft contains many elements representing the building blocks of a beneficial strategy. It does however not present a convincing picture of how the elements might be brought together to create a practical outcome. We have commented on:

- The understated current and prospective roles of Indigenous land managers given the extent of the Indigenous estate in regions like the tropical savannas
- The lack of appreciation of the bio-cultural diversity and the relationship between humans and biodiversity
- Limited practical understanding of the site/region and language specific nature of much IEK, problems faced for intergenerational transmission and therefore its role in the long term
- Lack of clarity in what incentives there are to attract private investment to biodiversity conservation and the apparent shift from a ‘sustainable use’ philosophy for wildlife management to one of conservation and protection
- Lack of real recognition of government policy discontinuities that may threaten Indigenous involvement and support for the biodiversity strategy
- The lack of recognition of current research and monitoring by Indigenous groups using innovative technologies and methods such as ‘I Tracker’

The draft is not sufficiently clear on its role or on strategy implementation. There are innovative biodiversity conservation and management strategies with substantial investment from government and the private sector that we feel should be drawn upon in the draft ABCS. Perhaps most notably in the north of Australia is the NAILSMA Biodiversity and Social Benchmarking Proposal appended to this response, which includes action based research methodologies and participatory development techniques that seek to ensure integrated, workable and desirable outcomes against all of the prescribed Priorities for Change.

For any further information or feedback please don't hesitate to contact the NAILSMA office.