

***Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy
2010-2020***

***A submission from the Mallee Catchment Management Authority in
response to the Consultation draft***

May 2009

INTRODUCTION

The Mallee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion about the development of a national strategy for conserving Australia's biodiversity.

As a regional natural resource management body we recognize the critical importance of a national approach and look forward to the publication of the final strategy.

We support the broad themes of the Consultation draft including the priorities, threats and principles for conserving biodiversity enunciated in it. Further, we agree that immediate actions in the next two years are needed to ensure progress over the next ten.

3.2.1 Priority for change 1: Building ecosystem resilience

In the process of developing its program logic the Mallee CMA has identified desired long term improvements in the state of Mallee assets. They include:

Improvement in landscape function across Mallee landscapes

No further loss in extent and quality of remnant vegetation

Viable populations of targeted species

Our on ground work programs are supporting the achievement of these.

Action 1.1.2 Regional Catchment Strategies (RCS) are key documents for informing, integrating and prioritising catchment scale activities of various organisations and people. It is important that they continue to be developed and implemented as the primary regional strategy for achieving improved natural resource assets. The application of a nationally consistent approach to environmental risk analysis, target setting, monitoring, evaluation and reporting to the development and reporting of these strategies would provide major benefits at the local, regional, state and national scale.

Action 1.1.3 Connectivity is essential in both aquatic and terrestrial environments and under future climate change scenarios will be essential in providing movement between critical refuges.

Because the Mallee landscape is highly fragmented, apart from the major National Parks, there is a critical need to increase understanding of the condition and value of links and remnants in the Mallee, and especially considering the potential impacts of climate change. Answers to questions such as:

“What is the appropriate balance of effort for conservation benefit between managing and growing the core areas of existing larger remnants, and constructing strategic corridors by thickening the established vegetation along roads?”

are not straightforward. Further research is required to guide actions leading to more effective restoration. The Mallee CMA is currently working with partner agencies to formulate optimum approaches for this purpose.

It is clear that vegetation on roadsides and unused roads represents an important resource for linking Mallee remnant vegetation. Management of roadside vegetation

can be improved through better regional working partnerships with agencies and local government.

Regional strategies should consider explicitly the planning documents relating to native vegetation of these agencies. Land use zoning and vegetation protection overlays need to be updated and reviewed and should provide effective protection of vegetation across all tenures.

The condition of remnant vegetation is critically important in building and supporting ecological connectivity. It is imperative that remaining vegetation is managed effectively to provide and improve nodes of connected habitat within the landscape configuration. This importance is heightened within the context of climate change given the existing knowledge gaps and significant time lag associated with re-generating habitat from cleared land and the predicted temporal rates of climate change.

Overall it is suggested that the value of remnant vegetation on private land and roadsides should receive greater acknowledgement and consideration within the document.

Action 1.1.4 Public land in the Mallee is a critical reservoir for biodiversity and provides important social and recreational values. The management of public land needs to be adequately resourced, both to maintain requisite biodiversity levels and to set an example of government management to private landholders.

Public lands within the Mallee are crucial for biodiversity and landscape connectivity. Therefore the condition of public lands need to be enhanced and at the least secured from further decline. To halt the decline of public lands in the Mallee, there needs to be a significant increase in resources utilised in an adaptive management framework.

Management of public land needs to set the benchmark and provide examples of best management practice for both landholders and community.

3.2.2 Priority for change 2: Mainstreaming biodiversity

Action 2.1.1 & Action 2.1.2 Mallee environments have long been misunderstood and unappreciated, and even today a European perspective often colours people's perceptions of them. To understand and appreciate the concept of biodiversity and the values it delivers is yet a greater challenge for the community.

Nevertheless, there has been significant change in the understanding, appreciation and behaviour towards the environment in the Mallee in recent decades. This can be increased through information and education initiatives that target different community groups.

Government should support and fund the development of curricula for ecology studies in primary and secondary schools. Such courses could consider regional and local species, and environmental issues. This would increase children's awareness of the environment and help generate interest to make appropriate career choices. The educational package on Mallee fowl recently trialled successfully in a select number of Victorian and South Australian primary schools is an example.

The Mallee Environmental Management Action Planning program has been very successful in informing, educating and increasing interest of landholders in Mallee ecology and sustainability issues. It can serve as an exemplar for similar programs targeting adults.

Ecotourism not only provides economic benefits to local communities but has also proven to be an effective educational tool. Although ecotourism is promoted on a tri-State basis in the Mallee, and has been successful, there is massive potential within the Victorian Mallee and floodplain environments to take this endeavour to another level. Closer cooperation between local government and other authorities, relevant environmental agencies and the private sector would support this.

Action 2.3.1 Mallee CMA surveys and feedback from community members of advisory committees confirm that the major constraints to individuals investing in the environment are lack of time and labour, with financial constraints often a secondary factor. This is particularly pertinent in the Mallee where a declining population base limits availability of labour.

Volunteerism is further hindered by red tape and bureaucratic process. We need to provide information and support to build capacity in committees and help them through issues such as occupational health and safety (OH&S) compliance, reporting procedures, and financial management of community projects.

Action 2.3.2 Shifting demographics in the Mallee make the task of involving the community in catchment planning more challenging. While Landcare, for example, has traditionally made an important contribution to the discussion of biodiversity and sustainability issues, new ways to involve the community need to be developed. Simply extending the dialogue to a broader range of community will not necessarily provide a solution.

The success of the Mallee Environmental Management Action Planning program can serve as an example of an innovative way of informing and educating different community groups and enhancing their ability to participate in catchment planning. Creative approaches to harnessing technology can enhance these efforts.

Action 2.3.3 Currently there is a lack of knowledge surrounding the carbon sequestration rates of Victoria's mallee species. This poses a serious threat to gaining and maximising biodiversity benefits from any future carbon plantings in the Mallee. This knowledge exists for Western Australian mallee species, which could see them being utilised over local species.

There will need to be some financial incentive for landholders to opt for more costly and logistically problematic biodiverse carbon plantings over monoculture plantations.

3.2.3 Priority for change 3: Knowledge for all

Action 3.1.1 The Mallee CMA strongly supports this Action in that recent investment in the development and implementation of a Program Logic approach to monitoring, evaluation and reporting has identified several areas where undertaking foundational research activities would better inform planning for on ground actions. The potential impact of climate change on the ecology of the Mallee is an example. It has however been difficult in recent years to obtain funding which supports research activities rather than on ground works.

Regionally conducted research completed in the early stage of a funding cycle can deliver invaluable information which directs effective on ground works. Accordingly, we believe that a review of the philosophy behind and practical implications of, the current approach to determining the funding balance between research and on ground works would be timely.

3.2.4 Priority for change 4: Getting results

Action 4.1.2 The Mallee CMA believes that the implementation of a national priority based approach to investment which is based on scientific evidence would be a major outcome, provided that the significant advances in delivering this approach at the regional level are acknowledged. Moreover, it is essential that the community continues to have the opportunity to influence decisions regarding local priorities.

Action 4.1.3 We need to further develop processes that encourage corporate and philanthropic investment in biodiversity health in catchments. To encourage private sector investment the strategy will need to develop mechanisms allowing the sector to leverage its investment in natural assets and set standards for best practice.

Action 4.3.2 The Mallee CMA believes that the review and reform of biodiversity related legislation and regulations across all sectors would be a major outcome. Examples of current issues within the Mallee are detailed below and whilst largely relating to State legislation, this Action would enable higher levels of consistency and integration.

The Mallee CMA has contributed a submission to the Victorian Government's White Paper on *Land and biodiversity at a time of climate change* and expects that reform legislation to improve biodiversity conservation outcomes will also flow from this process.

Illegal clearing of native vegetation, exemptions for the clearing of native vegetation, and the current system's use of predictions rather than measurements for offsets are problems that should be addressed.

Authority to control wildlife should be available for species that have an impact on biodiversity alone, where no economic loss can be demonstrated. Examples of such species include Noisy and Yellow-throated Miners, where culling could be considered a temporary measure whilst longer term control options are carried out (in this case enhancing the lower and mid-story vegetation).

While Trust for Nature continues to generate impressive numbers of conservation covenants in the Mallee, the process to secure a conservation covenant on a piece of land is lengthy and this carries an opportunity cost. The relevant legislation and regulation should be reviewed in order to streamline the process and accelerate the rate of uptake of covenants.

The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act and The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act should be reviewed to make the process of listing species and changing conservation status more efficient. In particular it may be appropriate to review the listing of species which were once uncommon and on the edge of their range but are now in greater numbers.

The listing of species which have a limited distribution in Victoria but are abundant in adjacent areas of New South Wales or South Australia needs to be reviewed in light of the limited resources available for conservation.

The listing process for both weeds and threatened species needs to be far more timely to ensure that resources are available to control newly emerged threats.

Action 4.4.2 Market-based instruments such as Eco Tender and Bush Tender have proved to be very valuable tools for large scale restoration in other catchments and the Mallee has recently initiated a round of Bush Tender which is to date delivering significant outcomes in regards to achieving net gain in native vegetation. Financial incentives have also been a major and effective component of the Mallee CMA's efforts in achieving improved condition of native vegetation.

A major limitation in the delivery of such programs is the lack of an agreed definition of minimum standards for stewardship and duty of care which applies equally to public and private landholders.

3.2.5 Priority for change 5: Involving Indigenous peoples

The Mallee CMA supports the Actions identified under this priority and is currently delivering against them via the employment of two Indigenous Coordinators. Training and employment of Indigenous labour from local communities to undertake NRM activities is also occurring as part of the drought relief Mallee Emergency Employment Program funded by the Victorian Government. We have plans to provide NRM workshops for Indigenous groups within the next twelve months and to continue to employ Indigenous work crews.

3.2.6 Priority for change 6: Measuring success.

The Mallee CMA believes that effective change to the state of biodiversity cannot occur without appropriate means to monitor and measure. For this reason we have implemented a monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) process for all our on ground activities. We are committed to improving this process through, for example, development of a knowledge base and this is well underway.

Action 6.1.1 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting should employ a consistent set of core indicators that are reported on at both the state and national scale. The Mallee CMA strongly supports this Action, provided that advances in delivering against this approach at the regional level are considered at the development stage.

Action 6.4.1 It is essential that measurements at this scale can be directly applied to indicators developed by Action 6.1.1 to overcome the historical problems regional bodies have encountered in reporting against achievements.

Additionally, community groups often require coordination of activities and support to store field data. The national Mallee fowl initiative is an excellent example of how provision of funding has led to a development of a successful national monitoring framework for a community group. The strategy should support such approaches.

CONCLUSION

This submission is our contribution to the national discussion required to confirm Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2020. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute further as required.