



## Ecological communities and the EPBC Act

### A NEW APPROACH TO LISTING ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITIES

#### Introduction

Native bush and grasslands have both commercial and conservation value. Some of the unique plants and animals found in these areas are under threat of extinction and we need to protect them and their habitat.

One of the tools used by the Australian Government to protect native plants and animals and their habitats is the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). Under this legislation plants, animals and ecological communities threatened with extinction are identified and provided protection.

#### What are ecological communities?

Ecological communities are unique and naturally occurring groups of plants and animals. Their presence can be determined by factors

such as soil type, position in the landscape, climate and water availability.

An example of an ecological community is the Swamp Tea Tree Forests of South-East Queensland. This forest contains Swamp Tea Tree thickets under a cover of Eucalypt trees. The Swamp Tea Tree Forests of South-East Queensland grow on poorly drained clay soils on the plains and low hills of the Moreton Basin. The ecological community also provides habitat for animals, including the Koala, the Ornate Burrowing Frog and the Yellow-rumped Thornbill.



Swamp Tea-Tree Forest  
- P. Donatiu, Greening  
Australia Qld

Defining and identifying an ecological community for listing under the EPBC Act is a complex task. Definitions must be scientifically rigorous yet straightforward enough for the general community to use. To improve the clarity of definitions a new approach has been developed that takes into account the impact of degradation and regional variation in widespread ecological communities.

#### Condition Classes

Previous ecological community definitions did not take into account the impact of degradation. A new approach to defining ecological communities has been adopted, that will account for degradation, through the use of condition classes. A condition class describes areas of an ecological community that have a similar conservation value. Condition can be determined by factors such as: numbers and types of native plants and animals present; the level of weed invasion; the size of the area; and distance to the next area of native vegetation.

Significantly degraded (low condition) areas will no longer be part of a listed ecological community. This means the protection provisions of the EPBC Act will be focused on the most valuable elements of Australia's natural environment, while degraded areas, which do not trigger the 'significance test' of the EPBC Act, will be largely excluded.

Landholders wishing to undertake activities that are likely to have a significant impact on an area of land containing a listed ecological community must seek approval from the Australian Government by making a referral under the EPBC Act. This includes activities such as clearing listed woodlands or ploughing listed native grasslands. The process for seeking approval is through a referral. Information about the referral process is available online at: [www.deh.gov.au/epbc/publications/referral.html](http://www.deh.gov.au/epbc/publications/referral.html).

However, listing ecological communities does not prevent land managers from continuing to use their land in the same way they were before the EPBC Act came into effect, provided they have not changed or intensified their activities

While significantly degraded areas of vegetation are no longer part of a listed ecological community, this does not mean they are unimportant. Under the new approach, a second condition class has been identified that represents areas that would respond to rehabilitation efforts. As this class is not part of the listed ecological community, it does not trigger the protection provisions of the EPBC Act, however, landholders may still choose to undertake conservation measures to assist in the recovery of these degraded areas, and may be eligible to apply for funding through the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT).





## Regionalising the Description

The definition of an ecological community can also be regionalised with the definition of the listed ecological community differing slightly for each region. This recognises that ecological communities that occur over large areas can cover a range of climatic zones and soil types, and as a result can display considerable variation in the types of plants and animals found in them. Regionalised definitions under the new approach can capture local variations, making it easier for landholders to match the vegetation occurring on their property with the written description.

### How can I tell if I have a listed ecological community on my property?

When an ecological community is listed under the EPBC Act the following information products become available on the Department's web site:

- listing advice including a definition of the ecological community
- an information sheet including an indicative map and
- conservation advice.

Landholders can use this information to identify the ecological community on their property.

A list of all the ecological communities currently listed under the EPBC Act can be found at: [www.deh.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publiclookupcommunities.pl](http://www.deh.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publiclookupcommunities.pl).

## Summary

An ecological community is a group of plants and animals whose presence is determined by one or more factors such as soil type and climate.

The definition of an ecological community listed under the EPBC Act will now include information on the condition classes that make up the ecological community.

Areas in a degraded condition will not be included as part of a listed ecological community.

Areas of land that contain degraded examples of a listed ecological community may still be rehabilitated and landholders remain eligible to apply for NHT funding to improve the condition of this land.

Landholders wishing to undertake activities that are likely to have a significant impact on an area of land containing a listed ecological community must seek approval from the Australian Government by making a referral under the EPBC Act.

Landholders will not be required to seek approval under the EPBC Act for actions occurring on land containing degraded examples of a listed ecological community.

### For further information:

Visit the EPBC Act web site at:

[www.deh.gov.au/epbc](http://www.deh.gov.au/epbc)

Email: [ciu@deh.gov.au](mailto:ciu@deh.gov.au)

Free-call: 1800 803 772

### CASE STUDY

The Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands and Derived Grasslands is a widespread ecological community that occurs in Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. These woodlands and grasslands provide important habitat for animals, including Swift Parrots, Regent Honeyeaters and Squirrel Gliders. This ecological community has been heavily cleared across its range. In most of the areas that remain, grazing and pasture-improvement have removed many of the native plants that once occurred in the ground layer. This has left only trees and a ground layer dominated by weeds. Grazing has also prevented the regeneration of many tree species, so large areas of healthy, regenerating trees are rare. Consequently, most of the remaining areas in good condition occur as small isolated patches within a cleared or disturbed landscape.

As less than 5 per cent of the original extent of the Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands and Derived Grasslands is left, it has been listed as critically endangered under the EPBC Act. The definition of this listed ecological community includes a description of areas in good condition. To be part of the listed ecological community a patch must have a predominantly native understorey and be either:

- 0.1 hectares or greater in size, and have 12 or more non-grass species in the understorey (including one grazing-sensitive species) or
- 2 hectares or more in size, and have either 20 or more mature trees per hectare or natural regeneration of the trees species present.

Areas that do not meet these requirements are not considered to be in sufficiently good condition to be considered part of the listed ecological community. For more information about the Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands and Derived Grasslands visit: [www.deh.gov.au/box-gum](http://www.deh.gov.au/box-gum).



Box-Gum Grassy Woodland - H. Mills

#### Photography credits

Front (top to bottom):

Natural Temperate Grasslands  
- J. Vranjic, Yellow Box flowers  
- P. Komidar, Superb Parrot  
- G. Dabb, Kangaroo Grass with wasp  
- P. Komidar, Great Artesian Basin discharge spring  
- H. Mills, Giant Bullfrog  
- C. Slatyer.

Above (top to bottom): Mushroom  
- P. Komidar, Regent Honeyeater  
- G. Dabb, Semi-Evergreen Vine Thicket  
- R. Purdie

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