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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

SPEECH

LAUNCH OF
WWF-AUSTRALIA: *BUILDING NATURE'S SAFETY NET 2008*
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH 2008.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I'm delighted to be here today, to help WWF launch this latest report card on progress in building our National Reserve System.

I want to give special thanks to Yananymul Mununggurr, CEO of Laynhapuy Homelands Association, for coming all the way from Arnhem Land.

Laynhapuy is Australia's 20th Indigenous Protected Area, declared in 2006. It is recognised in WWF's report as one of the top 10 notable new protected areas in the country – and it even takes pride of place on the front cover.

I'd also like to thank Doug Humann, CEO of Bush Heritage Australia, and Charles Livesey from the Tasmanian Land Conservancy for being here today. Bush Heritage's Cravens Peak reserve in Queensland, which was established with help from the Australian Government, and the Tasmanian Land Conservancy's Flat Rock Reserve also made WWF's top 10.

I'm a big supporter of groups like Bush Heritage and WWF, because their work draws attention to some of our most confronting, and potentially calamitous environmental issues.

I'm also a supporter because – as you can see from the ad WWF is launching with Telstra today - their members have the determination and the creativity to go that extra mile. To mobilise action and resources, and get results.

As a group committed to the preservation of our environment, WWF-Australia has been an important watchdog over the past 11 years.

They have consistently highlighted the risks that climate change poses for biodiversity, in an era when the powers of the day turned their backs and ignored the clear warnings and grim reality facing us as Australians and as members of the global community.

The WWF spotlight on the National Reserve System is important and timely.

The National Reserve System and climate change

As WWF say, the National Reserve System truly is nature's safety net in the face of climate change.

It provides refuges for our native plants and animals, where other threats to biodiversity – things like wildfire, feral animals and weeds – can be managed.

This active management takes the pressure off native species, providing a more resilient environment in which to adapt to a changing climate.

When the Hawke-Keating Government established the National Reserve System Cooperative Program in the early 90s, they sparked a partnership approach that is envied around the world.

To see all levels of government plus conservation groups, Indigenous Australians, farmers and community groups band together on conservation issues is something we should all be proud of.

The work that WWF has done to develop this report – collaborating with the States and Territories, and with the Australian government - is an important contribution to debate about the future.

WWF report

Fifteen years after Bob Hawke first championed the idea, Australia has a vibrant and evolving National Reserve System – 9,000 reserves across Australia, covering more than 11 per cent of the continent.

This is great progress but we have more to do.

So far, progress has been driven by incredible investment from our States and Territories and major NGOs, with great support from ordinary Australians and the private sector. But it's been let down by a lack of serious commitment from the previous Australian Government – what WWF refer to as the 'decade of neglect'.

'Decade of neglect'

Let's look at the facts.

Funding for the National Reserve System Program has petered out in recent years to less than \$6 million per year. Compare that to the \$285 million our predecessors spent on Government advertising last financial year alone. That's the grim reality.

It reflects misplaced priorities, and a serious lack of commitment to one of the most important programs we have for helping to ensure the survival of our unique plants and animals.

The Howard Government's under-investment in the reserve system is just another example of the damage inflicted by their scepticism on climate change.

We are not climate change sceptics. We know climate change will be tough on our native plants and animals, and the habitats in which they live.

We are committed to building the resilience of our landscapes in the face of threats from climate change. And the National Reserve System will be one of our most effective and important tools.

Why reserves are important

Our future and our wellbeing as a society are inextricably linked to the integrity and sustainability of our ecosystems.

Looking after our landscapes and our biodiversity isn't a 'nice to have' – it's absolutely essential. After all, without an environment there cannot, logically, be an economy.

The air we breathe, the clean water we drink, the soil that grows our crops – all of these things rely on healthy, functioning ecosystems.

Biodiversity is the fabric that holds our landscape together, and protecting it is a national priority for this government.

The National Reserve System plays a central role in this task - in northern Australia where the landscape is relatively intact, and in southern Australia where it is under all sorts of pressure.

We hear WWF's call for funding, and we understand the urgency of investing in Australia's National Reserve System. And we will be responding directly to this.

I think the new WWF advertisement really hits the mark on the sheer senseless calamity we face if we don't make changes and make them now.

IPA funding

The \$50 million we announced before the election to boost the Indigenous Protected Areas program will take us part of the way there.

This triples the Government's funding for IPAs over the next five years, helping protect some of Australia's most distinctive and remote landscapes and supporting Indigenous communities in caring for their country.

It will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to conserve hundreds of thousands more hectares of environmentally-important land as part of the National Reserve System.

It will also help many more communities take their first steps down the IPA path - developing a plan to manage their land so its plants, animals and cultural values are protected, and seeing if an IPA is the right thing for them.

The IPA program also had its beginnings in the Hawke-Keating Government. But as Laynhapuy and the other IPAs can tell you, their remarkable outcomes are the result of Indigenous communities and ranger groups working on the ground, devoted to the country they love, the country that is part of their very identity.

IPAs are one of the great success stories in Australian conservation, and they have received global recognition for their innovation and achievements.

By helping Indigenous Australians fulfil their aspirations for their own country, it delivers not just great results for the environment, but great results for the community too, with spin-off benefits in health, education and social cohesion.

So yes – the extra funding for Indigenous Protected Areas will take us a long way and we understand that further investment is needed. We share your commitment to conserving biodiversity by accelerating our efforts to build the National Reserve System.

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