RMCG

FEBRUARY 2026

Land Acquisition 2018/19 – 2022/23 Evaluation

Final Report

Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water

Certified B Corporation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we work throughout Australia and recognise their enduring connection to the land, waters, and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present, and acknowledge emerging leaders. Furthermore, we express our gratitude for the knowledge and insights that Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples contribute to our collective work in Australia.

We extend our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We acknowledge that Australia was founded on the genocide and dispossession of First Nations peoples and affirm that sovereignty was never ceded in this country. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, striving towards self-determination, equitable outcomes, and an equal voice for Australia's First Peoples.

Executive Summary

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND EVALUATION APPROACH

Since 2000, the New South Wales (NSW) Environmental Trust (the Trust) has invested in land acquisition to expand the state's national park system and establish a comprehensive, adequate, and representative (CAR) protected area network, aligned with State and Federal conservation strategies. Following a positive independent evaluation of earlier investments, the Trust committed $51.09 million from 2018–19 to 2022–23 to accelerate reserve expansion and strengthen protection of priority koala habitat through voluntary acquisition of private and leasehold land. Guided by the objectives of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, the National Parks Establishment Plan (2008), and the National Parks System Directions Statement (2017), the Project targeted under-represented ecosystems, endangered ecological communities, and high-value habitat areas. The Project was completed in late 2023, and this independent evaluation assesses the Project's performance, examining effectiveness, impact, appropriateness, efficiency and legacy as well as identifying lessons and opportunities to support continuous improvement across the Trust's projects.

KEY FINDINGS

Effectiveness

- The Project exceeded its targets for both hectares and properties acquired and reserved, fully expending its $51.09M budget (see Figure 1-1).
- The majority of Project milestones and targets were met. The small number that were partially achieved were accounted for with transparent and reasonable explanations and did not compromise the achievement of the ultimate outcome.
- Adaptive management enabled continued delivery despite external challenges such as COVID-19, the Black Summer bushfires, and political shifts.
- Ongoing challenges include incorporating systematic input from Traditional Owners, improving transparency in property prioritisation, and addressing community misconceptions in regional areas.

Impact

- The Project contributed directly to the state's CAR reserve system, adding six new parks and reserves across 12 bioregions, including underrepresented western NSW ecosystems.
- Koala habitat protection was a notable achievement, with 6,100 hectares secured across seven Areas of Regional Koala Significance (ARKS).
- Several acquisitions delivered clear benefits for threatened species and ecosystems.
- A number of acquisitions supported Aboriginal cultural outcomes and co-management, and Traditional Owner interviewees valued the Project highly.
- Whilst social, economic, and public policy benefits were realised through acquisitions, they were often considered secondary to conservation outcomes.

Appropriateness

- Project planning and governance were well-structured, aligned with legislation and policy, and the budget was considered appropriate to the Project's scale.
- Most recommendations from the 2018 evaluation were implemented, although some (e.g. outcome evaluation, interim guidelines) were only partially addressed.

- Prioritisation frameworks for both statewide and koala habitat acquisitions were applied consistently with strong technical input, however lacked geographic balance and the integration of cultural, social, and climate change considerations could be improved.
- Governance provided structure and accountability, with opportunities to strengthen transparency at higher levels of decision making.
- Stakeholder engagement was generally effective, supported by tailored approaches and strong communication tools, though some landholder engagement strategies generated administrative burden.
- Risks relating to staffing, ministerial processes, external events, and budget timing were managed adaptively, with flexibility enabling timely action on high-value properties.

Efficiency

- Using independent valuations to ensure the acquisitions reflect market prices enabled the Project to demonstrate that it has been cost-effective with respect to avoiding overpaying for land.
- The number of valuations required should be based on the risk that comes with the specific acquisition (rather than always requiring three).
- Assessing the value for money that the Project has delivered is more difficult. While there is data collected that could be used for this purpose, it is not collated or presented in a way that supports this type of analysis.

Legacy

- Market valuation requirements and frequent ministerial changes affected efficiency and approval timelines, indicating a need for more flexible future processes.
- Koala-focused acquisitions were supported by dedicated restoration funding, enabling degraded but strategic properties to deliver long-term conservation value.
- Most statewide acquisitions lacked dedicated management resourcing, with many new reserves coming online without operational funding or staffing.
- Staff continuity was a major strength, fostering expertise and commitment on future projects, though some noted challenges with workload and communication.
- Public ownership alone does not guarantee biodiversity outcomes; sustaining results requires aligning acquisition and management resourcing.

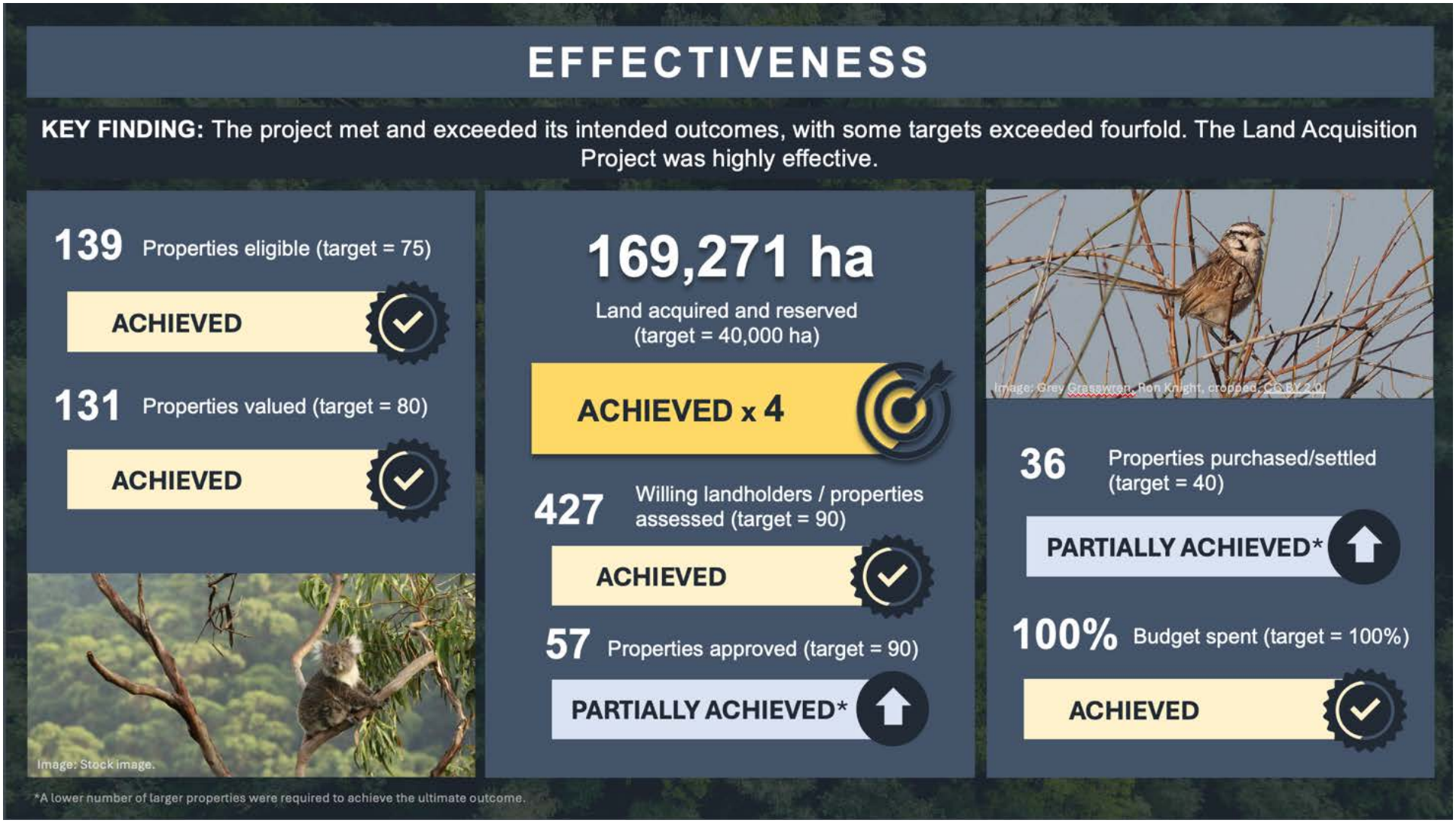

Figure 1-1: Summary of effectiveness data

RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 1-1 outlines the recommendations based on evaluation findings.

Table 1-1: Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
Continued investment	
Given the effectiveness, impact, appropriateness and value for money of this Project, the Trust should continue to invest in this project as a way to fulfil its statutory objective to fund the acquisition of land for the national parks estate.	Ongoing investment will ensure that the Trust continues to deliver strong conservation outcomes and value for money, while fulfilling its statutory object. By maintaining this Project as the primary mechanism for land acquisition, the Trust secures enduring biodiversity, cultural and community benefits, builds on established expertise, and leverages efficiencies from an already proven and effective framework.
Prioritisation and strategic direction	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should update and formally approve the strategic documents that shape assessment and decision-making for the Land Acquisition Project. These include the: ▪ Draft NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017) ▪ NPWS Interim Reserve Establishment Guidelines (2021).	Formally updating and approving the strategic documents will provide a clear, authoritative framework for assessment and decision-making, ensuring consistency, transparency, and accountability in the Land Acquisition Project. It will strengthen governance, reduce ambiguity for staff and stakeholders, and support more efficient and defensible land acquisition decisions aligned with statutory, ecological, and strategic priorities.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure the statewide objectives are clearly reflected in the prioritisation process, including alignment with conservation goals, geographic spread, and assessment of Project performance as a whole.	Keeps acquisitions strategically focused, ensures balanced geographic coverage, strengthens accountability for the Project's overall impact and ensures transparent tradeoffs.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should set a clear threshold for the proportion of funds directed towards acquisitions that make a significant contribution to CAR (e.g. 75%).	Ensures accountability to the statewide objectives, guaranteeing the majority of investment drives measurable gains in comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness, while still leaving room for opportunistic and innovative acquisitions.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should continue prioritising underrepresented western bioregions and large landscape purchases that make a substantial contribution to the CAR reserve system.	Delivers the highest conservation leverage per dollar and fills the largest gaps in the reserve network.
Improving evidence base	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should build consistent rigorous assessment of social, cultural and economic values into the acquisition process and ensure these are documented alongside environmental metrics.	Embeds these values into decision-making, ensuring they are systematically considered and preserved even as institutional knowledge evolves.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should improve the consistency and quality of assessment documentation for all acquisitions, ensuring social, cultural, economic, and environmental values are clearly recorded and accessible.	Strengthens the evidence base for decision-making, reduces variability between assessments, and reduces reliance on individual staff experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
Koala prioritisation framework	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should document and publish lessons from the koala land acquisition prioritisation framework as a replicable model for other threatened species programs.	Builds a practical blueprint for evidence-based, species-focused land acquisition.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure future prioritisation frameworks integrate climate change scenarios to anticipate shifting habitat resilience and future suitability.	Strengthens long-term conservation outcomes by aligning acquisitions with projected habitat changes and emerging ecological risks.
Financial management and budgeting	
The Trust should retain budget flexibility across years (within the overall Project timeframe) to allow opportunistic acquisitions. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should Balance this with clear forward planning to avoid early depletion of funds.	Keeps the Project responsive to high-value opportunities while avoiding front-loading of funds.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should formalise guidance for managing cross-financial year deposits and settlements, so that financial reporting pressures don't discourage unique but viable purchase arrangements.	Preserves the ability to complete complex purchases across financial years.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should limit mandatory multiple valuations to large or high-risk purchases. For lower value or low-risk acquisitions, accept a single independent valuation plus internal review.	Reduces cost, vendor confusion and delays in regional markets while retaining strong probity on high-value purchases.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should develop a consistent value-for-money framework for acquisitions. Use existing quantitative and qualitative data to systematically assess the contribution of each acquisition relative to its cost.	Improves transparency and consistency in assessing acquisitions and supports efficient use of public funds and stronger decision-making.
Governance and oversight	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should streamline approval pathways for routine and time-sensitive acquisitions by pre-agreed fast track routes, while preserving independent checks for high-value or politically sensitive purchases.	Speeds delivery without sacrificing accountability.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should institutionalise protections against political interference. Establish independent oversight or audit triggers for acquisitions where ministerial interest or external lobbying is apparent.	Maintains staff confidence, protects integrity of decisions and reduces reputational risk.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should make reserve category decisions accountable. Require that reserve category recommendations be justified against legislated conservation and cultural heritage objectives and published in decision records.	Prevents inappropriate downgrades that permit extractive activities and aligns designations with cultural and conservation outcomes.
Stakeholder engagement and communications	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should improve information flow within and between delivery teams across all stages of decision-making.	Increases efficiency, alignment, and consistency in engagement with stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should adopt consistent, evidence-based messaging to the public that addresses misconceptions, highlights ecological and cultural values, and emphasises economic and tourism benefits of new reserves. Ensure transparency about the acquisition pipeline (e.g., % of properties assessed vs acquired) while maintaining confidentiality where required.	Builds public trust, counters misinformation, and strengthens social licence for future acquisitions.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should resource community engagement as a specific, funded activity alongside land acquisition. Prioritise proactive outreach, relationship-building, and targeted engagement campaigns to attract suitable properties for acquisition.	Encourages genuine landholder interest, strengthens relationships, and ensures engagement efforts are consistent, strategic, and sustainable.
Strengthen cultural integration	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should create a structured, representative Native Title and Traditional Owner input pathway into prioritisation and acquisition. Formalise regional committees with elected representatives and clear confidentiality protocols so input can occur early without jeopardising negotiations.	Embeds Indigenous priorities in decisions and reduces reliance on ad hoc personal relationships.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should recognise and value cultural outcomes as core benefits of reservation.	Ensures cultural values are fully integrated into decision-making, supporting a holistic and equitable approach to conservation.
Post acquisition management and sustainability	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should require that every acquisition that forms a new reserve is accompanied by an explicit establishment and first three-year management budget. Allocate that funding directly to the area manager at the time of purchase. A practical minimum is the equivalent of 10 percent of the purchase price or a defined per-hectare establishment figure to be endorsed by NPWS executive.	Ensures new reserves are fully resourced from day one, enabling timely implementation of pest, weed, and infrastructure management.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should secure dedicated funding streams for ongoing management of acquisitions, ensuring budgets scale with the growth of the reserve estate.	Maintains ecological and cultural values over time and supports effective long-term management planning.
Quantifying impacts of reservations	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should conduct retrospective review to evaluate the environmental, cultural, social and economic outcomes of land acquisition over the last 20 years.	Provides authoritative evidence of long-term impact, informs future target setting and legitimises strategic adjustments to acquisition and management practice.

1 Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1.1 THE NSW ENVIRONMENTAL TRUST

The Trust is an independent statutory body established under the *Environmental Trust Act 1998*. Its main responsibility is to make and supervise the expenditure of grants across a diverse range of programs, including Major Projects, Contestable Grants, and various NSW Government initiatives. The Trust is supported by NSW Environment and Heritage within the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Trust programs are administered by department staff who are generalist program administrators.

Projects funded under the Major Projects Program are designed to tackle large-scale and/or complex environmental issues. The Trust identifies and designs these projects through consultation with key stakeholders. The goal is to maximise environmental outcomes in NSW by investing in projects that are high priority, cost-effective, collaborative, and designed in consultation with subject matter experts. The Trust is required to establish committees of subject experts to make recommendations about applications for the grants it administers. These Technical Review Committees (TRCs), provide independent oversight for grants applications and have a role in ensuring good governance, supporting project outcomes and confirming the feasibility of project deliverables.

1.1.2 PROJECT BACKGROUND

Protecting land through the national park system is widely recognised as a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation. In NSW the development of a protected area network that is comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) has been a long-term objective under both State and Federal conservation strategies. These include *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2030*[1] and *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009–2030*[2]. In January 2018, national parks in NSW covered 8.9% of the state (comprising 7.1 million hectares within 872 reserves)[3] – still only about halfway towards reaching the size and diversity required to satisfy a CAR reserve system and well below levels seen in other states and territories.

Funding the acquisition of land for national parks is an object under the *Environmental Trust Act 1998.* To accelerate reserve expansion, the Trust has invested in land acquisition projects since 2000. In 2018, following an independent evaluation of land acquisition projects between 2000 and 2016 that found the program delivered value for money and addressed a clear public good, the Trust approved a new $51.09 million Land Acquisition Project for the period 2018–19 to 2022–3 (hereafter referred to as the Project). This included the integration of two earlier projects and additional funding to support both statewide conservation and dedicated protection of priority koala habitat. The funding was awarded under the Major Projects Program ongoing funding stream.

The Project operated across NSW, targeting private freehold and leasehold land for voluntary acquisition. All acquisitions had to align with the objectives of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*, the NSW National Parks Establishment Plan (2008), and the NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017). Strategic priorities included underrepresented ecosystems, endangered ecological communities, and high-value habitat areas.

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1 Commonwealth of Australia (2010) – *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2030*
2 Commonwealth of Australia (2010) – *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-2030*
3 NSW Environment Protection Authority (2018) – *NSW State of the Environment 2018*

Acquisition decisions were made using a bespoke prioritisation framework, which considered a range of ecological, cultural, social, and economic criteria to ensure value for money and alignment with government conservation commitments. For koala habitat, a specific prioritisation framework guided investments using the best available science, spatial data, and expert input to identify high-impact opportunities that improve habitat resilience and connectivity. Further detail on these assessment frameworks and decision-making processes is provided in Section 3.3.4.

Through the Project, the Trust aimed to secure long-term biodiversity outcomes and support the expansion of a world-class protected area network that reflected the aspirations of the people of NSW – who overwhelmingly support the importance of national parks[4].

The Project was completed in late 2023, and this evaluation will support both accountability and continuous improvement across the Trust's projects.

1.2 EVALUATION PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this independent evaluation is to systematically and transparently assess the overall performance and value of the Land Acquisition Project (2018–19 to 2022–23) by:

- Determining to what degree the Project met or exceeded its intended outcomes and deliverables
- Identifying any lessons learned, including but not limited to lessons around governance, financial management, project planning and design, and the delivery of intended outcomes
- Identifying opportunities for improvement to existing or future land acquisition and koala habitat projects.

In line with *NSW Treasury Evaluation Guidelines*[5], the evaluation adopted a structured, outcomes-based approach, guided by key evaluation questions (KEQs). These KEQs are grouped into themes – effectiveness, impact, appropriateness, efficiency, and legacy (further information provided in Section 2).

[4] National Parks Association of NSW (2022) – *2457 NPAC Polling V2*
[5] NSW Treasury (2023) – *Evaluation Guidelines – TPG22-22*

2 Evaluation method

2.1 EVALUATION THEMES

This evaluation was guided by five evaluation themes (Table 2-1). Coverage of all five themes ensured a thorough and balanced approach to data collection, analysis and reporting. Under each theme there is a set of KEQs. Multiple lines of evidence, including both qualitative and quantitative data, was gathered to address these questions. This allowed for a comprehensive narrative and provided key insights to assess the Project's success against intended outcomes.

Table 2-1: Evaluation themes

THEME	DEFINITION
Appropriateness	**Appropriateness** was examined by assessing the extent to which the project design and delivery methods, in particular governance and planning, were appropriate for: ▪ Delivering outcomes ▪ Meeting contractual obligations ▪ Measuring, reporting and communicating project outcomes ▪ Engaging stakeholders ▪ Managing risk.
Effectiveness	**Effectiveness** was examined by assessing the extent to which the actions and associated targets, as set out in the project documentation, have been delivered.
Efficiency	**Efficiency** was examined by assessing how the chosen delivery approaches, such as governance and process rules, have ensured the project has been delivered efficiently and cost-effectively.
Impact	**Impact** was examined by assessing progress towards intended long-term outcomes. Under this theme, we looked for positive or negative, direct or indirect, and intended or unintended outcomes. For this Project, the contribution towards a CAR reserve system for NSW was a key impact which was evaluated in this theme.
Legacy	**Legacy** was examined by assessing the extent to which the results of the project will be secure over the long-term. This included identifying the measures taken to ensure the longevity of changes.

2.2 PROGRAM LOGIC

A program logic to guide Project implementation was developed in 2018 as part of the Business Plan[6]. It outlines key activities and their intended outcomes, illustrating the expected cause-and-effect relationships and corresponding key assumptions (Figure 2-1).

The program logic also underpinned this evaluation, particularly the assessment of the effectiveness and impact of the Project. Data or evidence was mapped to each level of the logic to build a comprehensive picture of Project progress. The underlying assumptions documented as part of the program logic development phase were also examined as a part of the impact theme.

[6] National Parks and Wildlife Service NSW & NSW Environmental Trust (2018). *Major projects grant: Project snapshot – Business Plan.*

Ultimate outcome	**The area of land reserved in the NSW National Parks estate, or working towards reservation, has increased** Key assumption: Reservation and management as national park estate will maintain or improve status of natural values and help deliver international, national and state biodiversity/environmental goals	
Intermediate outcome	**The area of land purchased that meets the NSW State Government's strategic direction for building the reserve system has increased** Key assumption: Reserves are the cornerstone of conservation effort to protect terrestrial biodiversity and deliver a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system and associated social and economic benefits (ecosystem services)	
Immediate outcome	**The number of landholders willing to sell land to NPWS that meets the NSW State Government's strategic direction for building the reserve system has increased or been maintained** Key assumption: The acquisition priorities identified in the National Parks Establishment Plan / Directions Statement delivers conservation results for Government	
Activities	**Suitable land for acquisition is identified and prioritised** Key assumption: Sufficient suitable land is available for acquisition and the acquisition prioritisation process is scientifically robust	**Approved land is purchased** Key assumption: Purchase negotiations with vendors are successful

Figure 2-1: Land Acquisition program logic

2.3 DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHODS

This section provides an overview of the approach used to gather and analyse evidence for the evaluation.

2.3.1 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The Project evaluation relied on two distinct but complementary data collection methods to gather quantitative and qualitative data as evidence against the KEQs. An overview of these methods is shown in Figure 2-2.

Figure 2-2: Evaluation data collection methods

The desktop review was undertaken first to consolidate existing knowledge, identify information gaps and highlight areas needing further inquiry, which then informed the stakeholder consultation process. This review drew on a range of documents, reports, publications and monitoring data provided by the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). Building on this foundation, 21 one-on-one interviews were conducted online with key project staff across a range of roles and governance levels in both the Trust (Trust Administration staff) and NPWS, in addition to a number of Traditional Owners, to capture a range of perspectives. Notably, significant changes were made to the planned stakeholder consultation approach – these are outlined in Section 2.4 of this report.

2.3.2 DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

A systematic analysis of evaluation data was undertaken and involved the following five steps: data preparation, quantitative data analysis, qualitative data analysis, validation and reporting. A summary of these steps is shown in Figure 2-3.

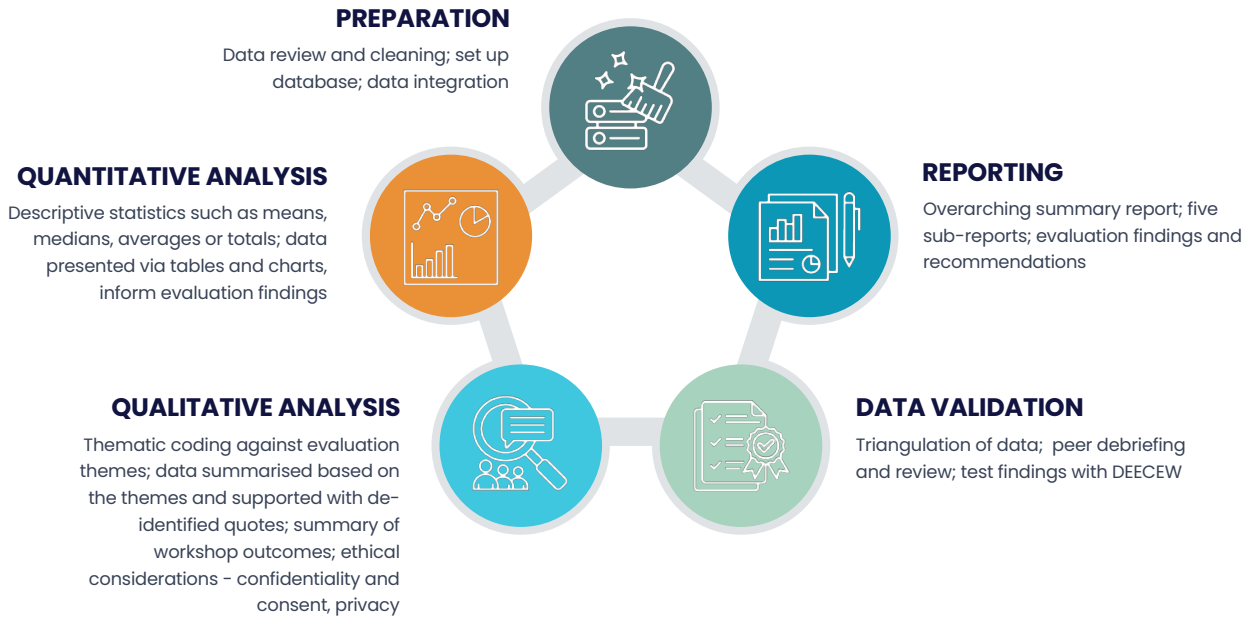

Figure 2-3: Data analysis and reporting steps

2.4 LIMITATIONS

Every effort has been made to ensure this evaluation was as rigorous as possible within the budget available. However, we do note the following considerations and limitations with the approach for this evaluation:

- **Methods to collect evidence –** The evaluation drew on documentation provided by DCCEEW, together with findings from the 21 one-on-one stakeholder interviews. Data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods where possible. The approach taken to qualitative data analysis was based on a thematic analysis (within the time and budget allowed). Whilst all efforts were made to remain objective, qualitative analysis is always inherently subjective to some extent. The results should not be generalised beyond this Project.
- **Exclusion of external stakeholders** – With the exception of several Traditional Owners who participated in interviews, the perspectives of external stakeholders on project delivery and outcomes were not captured in the analysis. Due to privacy restrictions relating to personal information, grant recipients (vendors) and other external stakeholders were not included in the consultation process. Consequently, the planned online survey was not undertaken and external stakeholders were not invited to participate in interviews.
- **Representation of interview participants –** Internal stakeholders who participated in the interviews were selected by DCCEEW rather than through a random sampling process, which may have influenced the representativeness of views captured.
- **Sample size –** While every effort was made to consult with as many applicable stakeholders as possible through the interview process, limited access to external stakeholders during the consultation process led to a reduced sample size. The final sample comprised 21 stakeholders, compared with the original plan to capture input from up to 75 stakeholders (25 through interviews and up to 50 via an online survey).

3 Evaluation findings

3.1 EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of the Project was assessed by examining the extent to which the project activities were implemented as intended and whether they achieved the stated immediate and intermediate outcomes. This included analysis of project performance, delivery challenges, and the influence of external factors on implementation. The following key evaluation questions guided this assessment:

Effectiveness

- To what extent were the project's activities implemented as intended? If not, why, and what was the impact?
- To what extent were the intended outputs delivered?
- What issues or external factors affected performance?

The Project successfully delivered its intended outputs and outcomes, with most performance indicators not only met but exceeded, some by up to four times the original targets. Over the five years of implementation, activities were delivered consistently, milestones were achieved, and outcomes aligned strongly with the Government's strategic direction for land acquisition and reserve system expansion (Table 3-1, Table 3-2, Table 3-3 and Table 3-4).

At the activity level, annual property assessments, eligibility checks, valuations, and system updates all exceeded targets, with more than 427 properties assessed and 139 found eligible. While the number of properties approved, negotiated, and purchased fell slightly below annual estimates, these shortfalls did not compromise the ultimate project outcome.

The Land Acquisition Project budget was fully expended as planned, with almost 98% directly supporting land acquisition and all reporting obligations were met.

The immediate and intermediate outcomes demonstrate the broader impact of this work. Landholder willingness to sell suitable properties far exceeded the original target, with 427 properties assessed as a proxy measure. Critically, the area of land acquired reached 169,271 hectares, more than four times the target of 40,000 hectares.

Taken together, these results confirm that the Project has been highly effective in delivering its intended activities and outcomes, securing significant gains for the reserve system, and building a strong foundation for long-term conservation outcomes.

3.1.1 ACTIVITIES

Table 3-1: Summary of performance against Land Acquisition Project activities and associated targets as outlined in the Business Plan

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Collate and assess properties available for purchase	Number of properties assessed annually	20 / year (estimate)	Yes	▪ Properties assessed per year ranged from 23 (2022–23) to 138 (2018–19) ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 427 properties assessed
List the properties suitable for purchase and prioritise	Number of properties eligible for purchase	15 / year (estimate)	Yes	▪ Eligible properties per year ranged from 13 (2022–23) to 38 (2019–20) ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 139 properties eligible for purchase
Approvals to acquire candidate properties – add to cumulative land purchase list	Number of properties approved for purchase	18 / year (estimate)	Yes*	▪ Properties approved for purchase per year ranged from seven (2019–20 and 2022–23) to 19 (2018–19) ▪ A total of 57 properties were approved for purchase throughout the five years ▪ The original target was not met; however, this did not impact the ultimate project outcome (see footnote)
Purchase land	No. properties valued	16 / year (estimate)	Yes	▪ Properties valued per year ranged from 12 (2019–20) to 54 (2020–21) ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 131 properties valued
	No. properties negotiated	15 / year (estimate)	Yes*	▪ Properties negotiated per year ranged from two (2022–23) to 23 (2020–21) ▪ A total of 66 properties were negotiated throughout the five years ▪ The original target was not met; however, this did not impact the ultimate project outcome (see footnote)
	No. properties purchased/settled	10 / year (estimate)	Yes*	▪ Properties purchased per year ranged from three (2022–23) to ten (2019–20) ▪ A total of 36 properties were purchased throughout the five years ▪ The original target was not met; however, this did not impact the ultimate project outcome (see footnote)

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Update Land Information System, Property Database; geographic information system Estate layers	No. properties	20 / year (estimate)	Yes	▪ Properties assessed per year ranged from 23 (2022–23) to 138 (2018–19), which were used to update the database and layers ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 427 properties assessed
Annual reports and final report	Report	5 reports (4 annual and 1 final)	Yes	▪ Comprehensive annual reporting was completed for 2018–19 to 2021–22 and a final report was completed in 2022–23
Independent evaluation by Trust on completion of project	Report	2 reports (2020 and 2023, or as negotiated)	Yes	▪ The first evaluation was completed in 2018 ▪ The second evaluation will be completed in 2025

* The number of properties approved, negotiated and purchased was in some cases lower than the target; however, some very large properties were purchased, contributing significantly towards the ultimate outcome of increasing the area of land reserved. Larger properties were also generally more expensive, consuming more of the project budget. Therefore, these activities have been marked as achieved because of the adaptation towards a lower number of large properties that were required to achieve the ultimate project outcome.

3.1.2 MILESTONES

Table 3-2: Summary of performance against Land Acquisition Project milestones and associated targets as outlined in the Business Plan

MILESTONE	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Approved land is purchased	Budget	100% budget spent	Yes	▪ Financial reporting, progress and final reports state that 100% of project budget was spent, with 97.9% spent directly on acquiring land and 2.1% spent on salaries and on-costs
Identify and prioritise suitable land for acquisition	Number of properties approved for purchase	60 properties	Yes*	▪ The total number of properties approved for purchase was 57, slightly short of the target; however, this did not impact the ultimate project outcome

* The number of properties approved, negotiated and purchased was in some cases lower than the target; however, some very large properties were purchased, contributing significantly towards the ultimate outcome of increasing the area of land reserved. Larger properties were also generally more expensive, consuming more of the project budget. Therefore, these activities have been marked as achieved because of the adaptation towards a lower number of large properties that were required to achieve the ultimate project outcome.

3.1.3 IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

Table 3-3: Summary of performance against Land Acquisition Project immediate outcome and associated targets as outlined in the Business Plan

OUTCOME	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Increase or maintain the number of landholders willing to sell land to NPWS that meets Government's strategic direction for building the reserve system	Number of willing landholders	90 landholders	Yes	▪ The number of properties assessed was used as an indicator for this outcome ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 427 properties assessed
	Number of land purchases that align with the priorities and conservation needs outlined in the National Parks Establishment Plan / Directions Statement	70 properties	Yes	▪ All purchases aligned with the Government's strategic direction for land acquisition and reserve system expansion ▪ While individual acquisitions are well justified, geographic spread is inconsistent, and not all acquisitions contributed to CAR (discussed in more detail in Sections 3.3.4 and 3.3.5)

3.1.4 INTERMEDIATE OUTCOME

Table 3-4: Summary of performance against Land Acquisition Project intermediate outcome and associated target as outlined in the Business Plan

OUTCOME	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Increase in the area of land purchased that meets Government's strategic direction for building the reserve system	Area of land (ha) acquired on an annual basis	8,000 ha / year	Yes	▪ The area of land acquired annually varied from 514 ha (2022–23) to 107,797 ha (2020–21) ▪ The target was exceeded significantly with a five-year total of 169,271 ha – over four times the original target

3.1.5 ISSUES OR EXTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

A number of factors outside of NPWS's control had a significant impact on the project's ability to acquire land and manage budget expenditure.

The first major disruption was the COVID-19 pandemic, which arose in the Project's second year (2019-2020). It caused widespread uncertainty and logistical constraints, reduced landholder engagement and limited the ability for assessors to travel and access properties. This substantially slowed the assessment and acquisition process.

In the same year, the Black Summer bushfires brought unprecedented bushfires and devastation across the state. With these bushfires came similar logistical constraints and public uncertainty through ongoing emergencies. The bushfires also significantly reduced the availability of high-quality, intact conservation land, particularly koala habitat in coastal regions, which further hindered acquisition efforts.

Another key external challenge came through changes in government leadership, which introduced new policy directions and more complex approval processes. Ministerial approval became mandatory for all acquisitions, before new requirements such as obtaining multiple independent valuations and additional approval steps for high-value properties were put in place, which added time and administrative pressure. While NPWS adapted by streamlining processes and engaging early with stakeholders, these procedural obligations continued to constrain timelines.

Interviewees highlighted that the broader political landscape had a notable influence on the Project. Some reflected positively, noting that strong political support for expanding the public estate enabled the Trust to secure additional funding. However, others felt that political involvement sometimes affected the Project's focus. It was also noted that the political attention led to increased administrative burden, as large quantities of unsuitable properties were submitted for assessment following Ministerial promotion of the Project.

A small number of interviewees raised concerns about consistent application of the internal acquisition guidelines, particularly relating to the processes for identifying and assessing prospective acquisitions. There were no specific examples identified but given the scale of investment and profile in the Project, this highlights the importance of the project governance arrangements in ensuring the process is closely managed, highly transparent and well documented.

While the cumulative impact of external factors created challenges in meeting expenditure targets within planned timeframes, NPWS responded with flexibility and adaptive management, ensuring that commitments were met by project completion.

> *"We had the devastating bushfires of 19/20 and that really did have an impact… because a lot of koala habitat was burnt to the ground. And people weren't in a position to sell anymore – it did change the dynamics of property selection for the koala strategy"* (NPWS staff interviewee)

Challenges for Traditional Owners

Traditional Owners interviewed about the Project highlighted a number of challenges. Several noted that property prioritisation and acquisition processes lacked transparency and provided little opportunity for systematic input. While acquisitions were described as "nothing but good news for [Aboriginal people]," most representatives only learned of them once finalised.

Elected representatives of Native Title groups reported having no knowledge of the prioritisation or acquisition process. They acknowledged the need for confidentiality to avoid jeopardising sales (for example, from potential backlash by agricultural stakeholders) but expressed a strong desire to work with NPWS to establish

a robust and equitable process that both maintains confidentiality and better integrates Traditional Owner interests into the acquisition assessment process.

Interviewees also noted that NPWS consultation often occurred with a small, ad hoc group of individuals rather than community-elected representatives. One proposed solution was a regional committee of Native Title representatives who could engage directly with the acquisition team, ensuring Traditional Owner priorities are consistently embedded. Without such mechanisms, the integration of cultural heritage risks being overly reliant on individual relationships, which may not be sustained over time and may not be representative.

A further concern was that the reserve category assigned to new acquisitions did not always align with Traditional Owners' aspirations. For example, some preferred national park status, yet properties were sometimes designated as state conservation areas. This was seen as problematic because of differences in permitted activities, particularly mining. Several Traditional Owners expressed concern that lobbying by the NSW Minerals Council had influenced decisions to downgrade reserves, undermining protection of cultural and environmental values.

> *"It's a good thing to have more Country gazetted and protected. It's a good thing to have Aboriginal people involved in speaking for landscapes. But I have had no input in what places have been acquired in the area that I am a representative for. How were different people chosen for their input? The process as it currently stands excludes others. I'm unaware of the process and it shouldn't be this way, given my involvement and my role as an elected representative of my people. If* [prioritisation and acquisition decisions] *occur at a high level, that's fine, but if there is an opportunity for local level input, I want Native Title representatives involved."* (Traditional Owner interviewee)

3.1.6 EFFECTIVENESS INSIGHTS

- The Land Acquisition Project exceeded most performance targets, delivering more than four times the area of land originally targeted (169,271 ha vs. 40,000 ha).
- Over five years, 427 properties were assessed and 139 found eligible; 36 properties were purchased, supporting the expansion of NSW's protected area network.
- The project fully expended its budget, with almost 98% directed to land acquisition, and comprehensive reporting and independent evaluations were completed.
- External factors affected project performance, including COVID-19, bushfires, changes in government leadership, and political pressures, yet adaptive management lessened these impacts.
- Challenges remain in integrating systematic input from Traditional Owners and improving transparency in both property prioritisation and governance processes.

3.2 IMPACT

The impact of the Project was assessed by examining the extent to which it has contributed to the ultimate outcome. This included evaluating progress toward expanding the NSW National Parks estate, protection of priority koala habitat, and advancement of the CAR reserve system. The assessment also considered broader environmental, cultural, socio-economic, and public policy benefits that have emerged as a result of the Project, as well as any unintended or unexpected consequences and the validation of critical assumptions. The following key evaluation questions guided this assessment:

Impact

- To what extent has the project increased the area of land reserved in the NSW National Parks estate? (ultimate outcome)
- To what extent has the project increased the area priority koala habitat?
- To what extent has the project contributed toward the CAR reserve system?
- Have there been any unexpected or unintended outcomes (positive or negative)?

3.2.1 ULTIMATE OUTCOME

The area of land acquired through the Project reached 169,271 hectares, more than four times the target of 40,000 hectares. This made a direct and significant contribution to the Project's ultimate outcome: an increase in land reserved (or progressing towards reservation). By 2022–23, 160,590 hectares had been formally reserved, again representing four times the original target. Additional areas acquired were in progress towards reservation at the Project's conclusion and were expected to further increase the total area protected in coming years (Table 3-5).

Table 3-5: Summary of performance against Land Acquisition Project ultimate outcome and associated target as outlines in the Business Plan

OUTCOME	PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACHIEVED?	EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT
Increase in the area of land reserved, or working towards reservation	Cumulative area (ha) of land reserved or working towards reservation	40,000 ha	Yes	▪ The area of land reserved by 2022–23 was 160,590 ha – four times the original target ▪ The additional area acquired throughout the project was working towards reservation following 2022–23 and is expected to increase the total area reserved once complete

3.2.2 BENEFITS OF RESERVATION

Environmental benefits

Reservation of land within the NSW National Parks estate has delivered substantial environmental benefits. Most critically, it has secured permanent protection of habitat for a wide range of threatened species. Across the properties acquired, habitat has been safeguarded for 63 fauna species (12 endangered and 51 vulnerable) and 15 flora species (1 critically endangered, 11 endangered and 3 vulnerable species). Of these, 28 fauna species (3 critically endangered) and 10 flora species (1 critically endangered) are nationally listed threatened species. This includes iconic and lesser-known species, with reservations helping to reduce exposure to pressures such as land clearing, development and other threats.

The Project has also contributed to improved landscape connectivity in several areas, particularly through new additions to Guula Ngurra, Yuraygir, Capertee, Oxley Wild Rivers, Maria and Bongil Bongil National Parks. This connectivity supports wildlife movement between habitat patches, which in turn supports species and ecological communities in adapting to pressures such as climate change, shifting ranges, and habitat contraction.

Several acquisitions have contributed to the protection of wetlands and bird habitats of international significance. Acquisitions included land to expand Cudgen Nature Reserve and Everlasting Swamp, and to create a new Narriearra Caryapundy Swamp National Park, with the latter protecting more than 70,000 hectares now recognised as a Ramsar-listed site. Inland wetlands reserved include freshwater and groundwater-dependent ecosystems that provide critical breeding habitat for threatened and migratory bird species. Reservations also contributed to the conservation of globally significant bird habitats, securing more than 103,000 hectares within five recognised Important Bird Areas[7]: the Australian Alps, Hastings-Macleay, Greater Blue Mountains, Capertee Valley, and Bulloo Floodplain. By protecting these areas, the Project has reduced risks of habitat loss and fragmentation in key ecological landscapes while adding important wetland and avian diversity to the reserve system.

Beyond specific species and habitats, reservations have strengthened the protection of wilderness and world heritage areas, including extensions to the Kosciuszko and Macleay Gorges wilderness areas, the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia. These additions help safeguard natural values while buffering existing reserves against external pressures.

Importantly, the Project has reduced immediate threats by removing properties from potential development and intensive land uses that had the potential to degrade and fragmentation habitat. Interviews with reserve managers in western NSW also highlighted the visible improvements following reservation, with the removal of stock leading to rapid vegetation recovery and improved land condition. More broadly, the collective expansion of the reserve system has the potential to support climate resilience, through carbon sequestration and by connecting landscapes that provide refugia for plant and animal species under changing conditions.

> *"There are two things we're doing that are driving those conservation benefits. The first is removing the major stress on those environments, which is the presence of stock. Then, coupling that with the ramping up of pest management and weed control. These are definitely resulting in conservation benefits being seen within a small number of years."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

Cultural benefits

Interviews with Traditional Owners confirmed that the Project is highly valued for protecting both cultural heritage and environmental values. Reservation was described as "aligning with [their] ethos of protecting cultural landscapes", while also creating opportunities to improve access to Country to reconnect with significant sites from which Aboriginal people had been excluded for generations. In some cases, reservation enabled cultural practices to be re-established, with multiple generations gathering on Country to share knowledge and strengthen connections. For example, Guula Ngurra National Park, which includes the meeting point of the Wingecarribee and Wollondilly rivers, supports reconnection to Country through its role in local Creation Stories.

NPWS staff observed that the Project's contribution to improving Aboriginal peoples' access to Country may have been undervalued, noting that such access can deliver broad benefits, including measurable

[7] Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are areas recognised by BirdLife International as being globally significant for the conservation of bird populations based on internationally standardised criteria.

improvements in health and wellbeing. Reservation also enhances care for Country, with new management plans typically removing stock, controlling feral animals and weeds, and reducing erosion, thereby protecting both cultural and environmental values.

In some cases, reservation has created pathways for co-management, enabling Traditional Owners to influence decisions about public access and cultural protection. Traditional Owners emphasised the importance of strong, respectful relationships with NPWS staff. Trust built through these relationships was seen as critical to ensuring their priorities and perspectives were embedded in acquisition and management decisions.

> *"It must be acknowledged that the importance* [of cultural landscapes] *is multivalent. Importance might be in Dreaming places, in physical archaeology, or in ceremonial grounds, which, like burial grounds, are highly important areas. We are most invested in these areas because of their importance for our ancestors and the emotional connection we have with them."* (Traditional Owner interviewee)

Figure 3-1: Langidoon-Metford State Conservation Area. Credit: NPWS

Priority koala habitat

The Project has made a substantial contribution to koala conservation by directly supporting Pillar 1 of the NSW Koala Strategy (2018–21), which focused on stabilising and increasing koala populations through targeted land acquisition. With $20 million allocated for this purpose, the Project secured 14 properties across seven Areas of Regional Koala Significance, protecting more than 6,100 hectares of high-quality koala habitat. These acquisitions are estimated to support between 172 and 252 individual koalas, with properties selected using a rigorous framework that prioritised areas with suitable feed trees, recent evidence of koala occupation, and opportunities to strengthen habitat connectivity. Importantly, the acquisitions also reduced threats from land clearing, fragmentation, development and wildfire, ensuring that key strongholds could be safeguarded and expanded.

Two new koala reserves, Yarri Barri Nature Reserve on the mid-north coast and Guula Ngurra National Park in the Southern Highlands were created as part of the Project, with a further property at Mt Numeralla in the Southern Tablelands expected to form another new reserve. These additions protect habitat for both coastal and inland koala populations and enhance the size and resilience of existing reserves. They also provide critical refugia for genetically diverse and climate-resilient populations, including the Southern Highlands koalas, which are among the most genetically diverse in Australia, and the Southern Tablelands population, which shows unique adaptations such as the use of high-elevation habitats and low-fertility eucalypts. The acquisitions also reflect strong cultural and community connections; for example, Guula Ngurra, meaning "koala country" in Gundungurra language, was named by Traditional Owners and is recognised as both an ecological refuge and a landscape of cultural significance.

The urgency of these investments is underscored by the uplisting of the koala from vulnerable to endangered in 2022, during the term of the project. By strategically targeting properties across three bioregions, the acquisitions have secured vital koala habitat at a time when populations face growing threats from habitat loss, wildfire, disease and climate change. Collectively, these protected landscapes not only offer immediate refuges for local populations but also form part of a larger, connected conservation network essential for the long-term recovery and persistence of the species across NSW.

Contribution to the CAR reserve system

The Project has made a measurable contribution to the comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness (CAR) of the NSW protected area network. In total, over 169,000 hectares of land were acquired, adding six new parks and reserves and expanding protection across 12 of the state's 18 bioregions. Importantly, five of these acquisitions were located in bioregions that had previously been considered poorly reserved, addressing long-standing gaps in the system.

Property acquisitions in western NSW were particularly significant. Four large properties, together covering more than 150,000 hectares, were secured in arid and semi-arid landscapes where formal protection had been very limited. These acquisitions resulted in the creation of Narriearra Caryapundy Swamp National Park, Koonaburra National Park, and Langidoon-Metford State Conservation Area, representing a major investment in ecosystems and landscapes that had historically lacked conservation status. Evaluation of these acquisitions demonstrates that they substantially improved the adequacy and representativeness of multiple subregions, with several previously unprotected landscapes now meeting adequacy thresholds (Table 3-6). NPWS staff interviewed for this evaluation confirmed that these acquisitions have delivered clear, quantifiable benefits for biodiversity conservation in the west, although underrepresentation in these regions remains a challenge and should remain a future priority.

While five properties (Narriearra, Langidoon, Metford, Koonaburra and Avenel) made the most significant contributions to CAR outcomes (Table 3-7), other acquisitions provided supporting benefits. These included improving external boundary configurations, buffering existing parks from threatening land uses, and complementing recovery efforts under the NSW Government's Saving our Species program. In some cases, properties improved adequacy within already well-reserved bioregions, even where contributions to comprehensiveness or representativeness were limited.

Overall, the Project significantly advanced the NSW Government's commitment to building a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. Its most substantial impacts were in the western bioregions, where acquisitions secured large, intact landscapes at relatively low cost per hectare and delivered co-benefits such as cultural heritage protection. However, the mixed CAR outcomes across the broader set of acquisitions highlight the importance of maintaining a clear prioritisation framework to balance different conservation objectives and ensure resources continue to be directed towards areas of highest strategic value.

Economic benefits

NPWS staff managing new reserves reported notable economic benefits from new acquisitions during interviews. Once infrastructure such as trails and signage, was established, they noted that visitation increased rapidly and substantially. Interviewees suggested this growth in visitor numbers was likely to generate economic benefits for nearby communities, for example, through increased overnight visits in local towns.

Social benefits

Interviews with staff indicated that while social factors (e.g. recreational use, aesthetics, visitation potential) were considered in the acquisition process, they were secondary to environmental criteria and rarely decisive. Interviewees did not point to any explicit guidance for this weighting. There were some indications that the availability of quantitative data may have affected the process. For instance, ecological significance is typically well documented, whereas social dimensions such as recreation, education, and regional benefits are harder to quantify and therefore less available for inclusion in the assessment. As a result of the data availability, a more flexible approach to assessment was adopted, drawing on site visits, regional knowledge, and management input to identify some social factors (such as opportunities for recreation and community access).

Following reservation, the social impacts of acquisitions became more apparent. Some interviewees reported substantial increases in visitation to reserves that had benefitted from infrastructure such as trails, signage, and campgrounds (funded separately to the Project). They described strong community support for these acquisitions, highlighting the intrinsic social value of expanding the parks estate. However, this support was not unanimous across the state, with reports of community opposition in western bioregions stemming from concerns over the loss of productive agricultural. It was also noted that some acquisitions, such as Yarriabini, have yet to deliver social benefits due to limited infrastructure development, which restricts public access. The realisation of social benefits was also strongly shaped by Ministerial commitments. Staff explained that Ministerial statements about visitor infrastructure set clear expectations for planning and investment. While these commitments provided direction, associated funding was not guaranteed and often competed with other state priorities, limiting the pace and scale of delivery.

> *"Most of the time, the focus is strictly around ecological outcomes… and in a lot of cases, the only social benefit [of the properties acquired in our region] is that the land isn't going to be cleared."*
> (NPWS staff interviewee)

Public policy benefits

The Project delivered strong public policy benefits by directly aligning with Australia's international commitments and national biodiversity targets. As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Australia has committed to halting extinctions, protecting 30% of its landmass and marine areas by 2030, restoring degraded ecosystems, and building resilience to climate change. The expansion of the NSW protected area network through strategic acquisitions contributes to these goals by permanently protecting ecologically significant land, safeguarding threatened species, and enhancing landscape connectivity. By doing so, the Project ensured that NSW plays an active role in meeting Australia's Strategy for Nature 2024–2030 and advancing the national "30 by 30" target.

Since 2018, the extent of protected areas in NSW has increased from 7.2 million hectares (9% of the state) to more than 8.3 million hectares (10.4%). While multiple initiatives have contributed to this growth, this Project has made a significant and measurable contribution by securing high-value properties for permanent inclusion in the national parks system. By doing so, the Project has strengthened the security and integrity of conservation outcomes, removed land from development pressures, and built a more representative and connected reserve network that underpins biodiversity protection, climate resilience and the provision of ecosystem services that benefit communities across the state.

Table 3-6: Summary of properties by bioregion based on annual reporting

BIOREGION	PROGRAM / # PROPERTIES	HECTARES ACQUIRED THROUGH GRANT	CONTRIBUTION TO CAR MADE BY PROJECT?[8]	AVERAGE $/HA	% OF REGION PROTECTED (2024)[9]
Coast and Coastal Ranges					
NSW North Coast	Koala (9), Statewide (3)	4,939	Minor	$ 4,117	26.54
South East Corner	Statewide (1)	275	Minor	$ 727	43.26
South Eastern Queensland	Koala (2), Statewide (3)	1,641	Minor	$ 12,491	15.12
Sydney Basin	Statewide (5)	433	Minor	$ 19,333	42.61
Tablelands and Western Slopes					
Brigalow Belt South	-	-	-	-	9.29
Nandewar	-	-	-	-	5.23
New England Tablelands	-	-	-	-	10.61
NSW South Western Slopes	Statewide (1)	1,035	Supporting	$ 829	2.80
South Eastern Highlands	Koala (3), Statewide (3)	3,773	Supporting	$ 2,117	15.72
Australian Alps					
Australian Alps	-	-	-	-	81.37
Central Western Plains					
Cobar Peneplain	Statewide (1)	4,780	Significant	$183	3.26
Darling Riverine Plains	-	-	-	-	3.14
Riverina	-	-	-	-	4.74

[8] Significant = acquisitions represented a major addition to the CAR system, reserving underrepresented bioregions, subregions and/or landscapes. Supporting = some acquisitions in this bioregion listed CAR benefits, mostly small improvements in adequacy for underrepresented landscapes. Minor = acquisitions did not report CAR benefits, and the majority of improvements were in landscapes where protection is already deemed adequate.

[9] CAPAD 2024, https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/nrs/science/capad/2024. Cells are highlighted orange where % reserved falls below the Aichi Target 11 of 17% of terrestrial areas conserved through protected areas. Cells are highlighted green where the total for the bioregion is above this target.

BIOREGION	PROGRAM / # PROPERTIES	HECTARES ACQUIRED THROUGH GRANT	CONTRIBUTION TO CAR MADE BY PROJECT?[8]	AVERAGE $/HA	% OF REGION PROTECTED (2024)[9]
Far West					
Broken Hill Complex	Statewide (2)	60,469	Significant	$ 161	5.08
Channel Country	Statewide (1)	46,000	Significant	$ 84	16.46
Mulga Lands	Statewide (1)	2,726	Supporting	$ 73	5.54
Murray Darling Depression	Statewide (1)	41,162	Significant	$ 183	9.20
Simpson-Strzelecki Dunefields	Statewide (1)	2,446	Significant	$ 173	11.59

Table 3-7: Summary of properties that made a significant contribution to CAR based on annual reporting

PROPERTY	BIOREGION	GRANT ACQUIRED AREA (HA)	CONTRIBUTIONS		
			COMPREHENSIVENESS	ADEQUACY	REPRESENTATIVENESS
Narriearra Caryapundy Swamp NP	Channel Country	46,000	▪ Increased 26 – 42% with three landscapes added	▪ Adequacy improvements in all landscapes, most notably: – Bullo Linear Dunes within Sturt Stony Desert increased 0 – 8.5% – Adequacy for all four landscapes within Bullo reached – Adequacy for one landscape within the Central Depression reached, and improved for another three	▪ Increased 0 – 80% in Bullo with four landscapes added ▪ Increased 0 – 33% in Central Depression with four landscapes added ▪ Increased 80 – 83% in Sturt Stony Desert with one landscape added
Langidoon-Metford SCA (Langidoon property)	Broken Hill Complex	35,555	▪ Increased 42 – 50% with two landscapes added	▪ Adequacy improvements in all landscapes, most notably two landscapes within Barrier Range shifted from no protection to adequately protected	▪ Increased 29 – 86% in Barrier Range with four landscapes added

PROPERTY	BIOREGION	GRANT ACQUIRED AREA (HA)	CONTRIBUTIONS		
			COMPREHENSIVENESS	ADEQUACY	REPRESENTATIVENESS
Langidoon-Metford SCA (Metford property)	Broken Hill Complex	24,914	▪ Increased 42 – 46% with one landscape added	▪ Adequacy improvements in all landscapes; however, they are still poorly reserved. Most notably Barrier Fresh Lakes and Swamps within Barrier Range Outwash increased 0 – 6%	▪ Increased 29 – 57% in Barrier Range with two landscapes added ▪ Increased 24 – 35% in Barrier Range Outwash with two landscapes added
Koonaburra NP	Murray Darling Depression / Cobar Peneplain	45,942	▪ Murray Darling Depression: increased 76 – 81% with two landscapes added ▪ Cobar Peneplain: increased 51 – 54% with two landscapes added	▪ Adequacy improvements in all landscapes; however, they are still poorly reserved. Most notably: – Reserved two previously unreserved landscapes in Barnato Downs (e.g., Belarabon range increased 0 – 12.5%) – Reserved two previously unreserved landscapes in Darling Depression (e.g., Barnato Incised Streams increased 0 – 10%)	▪ Increased 52 – 62% in Barnato Downs with two landscapes added ▪ Increased 57 – 67% in Darling Depression with two landscapes added
Avenel SCA[10]	Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields / Broken Hill Complex	2,446	▪ Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields: increased 38 – 69% with five landscapes added ▪ Broken Hill Complex: increased 50 – 57% with two landscapes added	▪ Adequacy improvements in all landscapes, most notably: – Three landscapes within Strzelecki Desert shifted from no protection to adequately protected (e.g., Barrier Alluvial Plains increased 0 – 44%) – Three further landscapes reached adequate protection across two other subregions (e.g., Barrier Sandplains increased from 2 – 32%)	▪ Increased 71 – 100% in Barrier Range with two landscapes added ▪ Increased 38 – 69% in Strzelecki Desert with five landscapes added

[10] While the grant acquired area was proportionally small for this acquisition, the benefits to CAR of the overall property acquisition are considered significant to report on.

3.2.3 VALIDATION OF CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Validating critical assumptions is an essential part of evaluating impact, as it tests whether the logic underpinning the Project holds true in practice. Assumptions provide the foundation for linking activities to outcomes, but if they are not sound or if external conditions change, the intended impacts may not be achieved. In this evaluation, evidence was available to validate all of the critical assumptions underpinning the Project. This strengthens confidence in the program logic and confirms that the Land Acquisition Project is making a tangible contribution to biodiversity conservation (Table 3-8).

Table 3-8: Summary of evidence to validate critical assumptions outlined in the Business Plan

LEVEL OF THE PROGRAM LOGIC	ASSUMPTION	VALIDATION
Ultimate outcome	Reservation and management as national park estate will maintain or improve status of natural values and help deliver international, national and state biodiversity/environmental goals	▪ Core role in conservation – National parks are the cornerstone of biodiversity protection in NSW; they provide safe and healthy ecosystems for native plants and animals (NSW SoE 2024). ▪ Threatened species protection – ~70% of NSW's 1,000+ threatened species occur within the park estate (NPA NSW 2022). ▪ Connectivity and resilience – Parks form the backbone of a connected reserve system, enabling species migration, gene flow, and climate adaptation (NPA NSW 2022). ▪ Policy alignment – Reservation and management as National Park estate supports Australia's commitment to global targets under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming-Montral Global Biodiversity Framework, delivery against targets in Australia's Strategy for Nature 2019–2030 and contributes to the National 30 by 30 Roadmap.
Intermediate outcome	Reserves are the cornerstone of conservation effort to protect terrestrial biodiversity and deliver a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system and associated social and economic benefits (ecosystem services)	▪ Protect biodiversity and ecosystems - By safeguarding species, habitats and ecological processes (NSW EPA SoE 2024). ▪ Comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserves - Secure the full range of ecosystems at viable scales across NSW (NSW EPA SoE 2024). ▪ Provide ecosystem services – Provide clean water, clean air, carbon storage, pollination, and buffer extreme events (NSW EPA SoE 2024; NPA NSW 2022). ▪ Support Aboriginal custodianship - Through access, cultural practice and joint management of Country (NSW EPA SoE 2024). ▪ Build climate resilience - By maintaining refugia, connectivity and healthy landscapes (NSW EPA SoE 2024). ▪ Deliver social and economic benefits - Through tourism, recreation, regional economies and long-term natural capital.

LEVEL OF THE PROGRAM LOGIC	ASSUMPTION	VALIDATION
Immediate outcome	The acquisition priorities identified in the National Parks Establishment Plan / Directions Statement delivers conservation results for Government	▪ The Establishment Plan / Directions Statement provide guidance on the preferred characteristics of land to be acquired through the project, and these preferences are based on recognised systems and frameworks that highlight biodiversity values (e.g. national, state and regional conservation status) ▪ The CAR framework is the accepted method used to assess the land protected through the reserve system ▪ The extent to which acquisitions contributed to changes in comprehensiveness and representativeness has been considered in the priority setting process for the project.

3.2.4 UNEXPECTED/UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

Positive

Through navigating a range of complex challenges, the Project team gained valuable experience and expertise over the five-year period, strengthening their capacity in land acquisition planning and implementation. Most core team members were retained for the duration of the Project, and their knowledge is now being carried forward to benefit the ongoing delivery of the Environmental Trust Land Acquisition Project 2020/NGP/0007.

Negative

Interviewees, including NPWS staff and Traditional Owners, noted challenges in the western district of NSW stemming from negative sentiment within the agricultural community. NPWS staff reported widespread misinformation and criticism, including perceptions that the government aimed to "buy up all the land" and that properties were being purchased above market rates, which allegedly inflated land prices and limited pastoralist participation.

Both NPWS staff and Traditional Owners countered these claims, noting that Western NSW bioregions remain significantly underrepresented in the reserve system. They suggested that the acquisition team could improve public communication in these communities, using data on the number of properties assessed versus purchased to correct misconceptions. More frequent, evidence-based messaging could clarify that property assessment does not automatically lead to acquisition, while also raising awareness of the region's significant environmental and cultural values, which are often perceived as less important than coastal areas.

> *"We have a lot of trouble managing expectations. If we inspect a property, the landholders think we'll buy it. This shouldn't be the case, but because we don't talk about properties that we don't purchase, there are misconceptions. There is a view that everything we look at, we buy, but the reality is about 5%. We need to get better at communicating the numbers while keeping properties private – how many properties we've looked at, how many get a desktop assessment, how many get an in-person assessment, then how many get a proposal for purchase. This would definitely help expectations – making the data more transparent."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.2.5 IMPACT INSIGHTS

- Acquisitions contributed to conservation outcomes by safeguarding habitat for 63 fauna species (including 12 endangered) and 15 flora species and strengthening landscape connectivity.
- The project substantially advanced cultural outcomes in several regions, enabling Aboriginal custodianship, improved access to Country, protection of sacred sites, and the establishment of co-management arrangements.
- Public policy benefits include alignment with national biodiversity targets and international commitments, supporting the "30 by 30" goal and broader climate resilience objectives.
- Economic and social benefits emerged post-acquisition, including increased visitation, tourism opportunities, recreation, and long-term natural capital.
- Koala habitat protection was a notable achievement, with 14 properties covering 6,100 hectares across seven Areas of Regional Koala Significance secured, supporting hundreds of koalas and enhancing the resilience of existing populations.
- The project contributed directly to the state's CAR reserve system, adding six new parks and reserves across 12 bioregions, including underrepresented western NSW ecosystems.
- Critical assumptions of the program logic were validated, strengthening confidence in long-term conservation impacts.

3.3 APPROPRIATENESS

The appropriateness of the Project was assessed by determining the extent to which the project design and delivery approaches supported the achievement of intended outcomes, aligned with best practice and enabled effective governance, financial management and risk oversight throughout implementation. The evaluation focused on the relevance and suitability of planning processes, decision-making frameworks, stakeholder engagement strategies, and geographic targeting. It also considered how well the project addressed recommendations from the 2018 evaluation and managed key risks. The following key evaluation questions guided this assessment:

Appropriateness

- How appropriate was the planning process between the grantee (participating landholders) and Trust administration in the business plan development phase?
- To what extent was the allocated budget appropriate for the scale of the project?
- What actions identified in the 2018 evaluation were adopted to improve the design and delivery?
- The land acquisition prioritisation framework was a key element of the design of the project. Was this framework appropriate?
- To what extent were the governance arrangements (e.g. methods for making decisions and managing the project) appropriate?
- To what extent were the actions taken to stimulate landowner interest in the project appropriate and effective?
- To what extent was the focus on four broad geographic areas appropriate and effective?
- What were the associated risks with governance, financial management and project planning and how were these managed?

3.3.1 BUSINESS PLAN DEVELOPMENT

The planning process between the grantee and the Trust administration was appropriate, with the business plan providing a clear articulation of the project approach, outcomes, and measurable targets. It was clearly linked to the relevant legislative and policy frameworks, and the incorporation of lessons from the previous independent evaluation strengthened its credibility. These elements gave the Trust a sound basis for approving the Project.

The plan also addressed governance, risk, and communications, setting out arrangements that were fit for purpose and attentive to the challenges of land acquisition. Overall, the process was well structured and provided a practical foundation for implementation.

3.3.2 BUDGET ALLOCATION

In total, $51.09 million was approved for the Land Acquisition Project over five years (2018/19 to 2022/23). The budget combined existing unpaid grants, new allocations, and enhancements across both the state-wide and koala acquisition themes, as outlined in Table 3-9.

Table 3-9: Grants and funds merged into the 2018–2023 Land Acquisition Project

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	TOTAL
2014/MG/0007 – State-wide Land acquisition -unpaid grant	$5.03M					**$5.03M**
2016/MG/0002 - Koala acquisition - unpaid grant	$1.97M	$1.97M	$1.97M			**$5.91M**
Koala Evaluation – unpaid grant			$0.15M			**$0.15M**
Business Plan 2019/20-22/23 - approved March 2018		$5.03M	$5.03M	$5.03M	$4.93M	**$20.02M**
State-wide Evaluation – new funds					$0.1M	**$0.1M**
State-wide theme - new funds (enhancement)	$2.485M	$2.485M	$2.485M	$2.485M		**$9.94M**
Koala theme -new funds (enhancement)	$2.485M	$2.485M	$2.485M	$2.485M		**$9.94M**
Total	**$11.97M**	**$11.97M**	**$12.12M**	**$10M**	**$5.03M**	**$51.09M**

Interviewees considered the budget allocation suitable to the Project's scale and desired outcomes, noting that it supported acquisitions that exceeded reservation targets and secured land of high environmental and cultural value. A key strength was the flexibility to move funding between years, allowing the team to act quickly when priority properties became available. This responsiveness meant that over 90% of the total budget was expended within the first three years, ensuring high-value opportunities were not missed despite the unpredictable nature of the market.

"We need enough budget to do good things. Cost is high. What we had was practical, we could manage it and deliver against it on an annual basis." (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.3.3 RESPONSE TO 2018 EVALUATION

Table 3-10 summarises the 2018 evaluation recommendations, NPWS's response, and the extent to which recommendations were adopted to improve the design and delivery of the Project. Overall, NPWS accepted most recommendations and integrated them into Project design and practice, with the exception of vendor motivation data, which was considered of limited value.

Table 3-10 also highlights that some recommendations have only been partially implemented: the outcomes evaluation framework does not yet directly capture the impacts of specific acquisitions, the updated Reserve Establishment Guidelines remain interim, and no comparative evaluation with the BCT private land conservation program was undertaken.

Table 3-10: Response to the 2018 evaluation

RECOMMENDATIONS	NPWS RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS	ADOPTED TO IMPROVE THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY?
Program appropriateness		
Trust should continue to provide the Program as the mechanism to fulfil its statutory object to fund the acquisition of land for the national parks estate.	**Accepted**	**Yes** ▪ The land acquisition program continues under clear legislative and policy frameworks. ▪ NPWS supports the Trust as the appropriate body to fund the acquisition of land for the national parks system. ▪ NPWS applies strict and long-standing criteria to ensure the appropriateness of each property acquired under the Project.
Program management		
(a) The Program should continue to be managed in accordance with the Reserve Establishment Guidelines.	**Accepted**	**Partially** ▪ The NPWS Reserve Establishment Guidelines provide consistency, probity, and transparency and have been found effective through independent audits. NPWS prepared updated Guidelines in 2021, but they remain in interim form as of 2025, pending formal approval. ▪ The interim version continues to guide Project delivery.
(b) Ministerial approval for land acquisitions should be sought periodically instead of annually and any approval should extend for a three-year period to align with the program funding cycle and offer NPWS and landowners increased flexibility.	**Accepted**	**Yes** ▪ A three-year approval cycle has been implemented, improving Project control, flexibility, and landholder engagement. While not yet reflected in the Interim Reserve Establishment Guidelines, it has been effective in practice. Some financial reporting challenges remain for settlements spanning financial years, but these are administrative rather than approval issues.
Program effectiveness		
(a) The Program's direct and indirect benefits (including those identified in this evaluation) should be subject to the new outcome evaluation framework being implemented by NPWS in its 2018 State of the Parks assessment. This will assist to provide additional evidence of the long-term contribution of the Program.	**Accepted**	**Partially** ▪ An outcomes logic and evaluation framework was developed and embedded in the 2018–23 business plan, providing clearer pathways for demonstrating progress. However, the framework does not directly measure the environmental, cultural, social, or economic impacts of specific acquisitions. ▪ State of the Parks data and Ecological Health Performance Scorecards offer useful proxies and case study potential but are not directly attributable to the Project's acquisitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS	NPWS RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS	ADOPTED TO IMPROVE THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY?
		▪ The Narriearra-Thurloo Downs Ecological Health Performance Scorecard will provide a valuable case study from one of the acquisitions through this project. However, it had not yet been published at the time of this evaluation.
(b) Consideration should be given to systematically collecting and recording information about vendor motivation to enable the Trust and NPWS assess the capacity of the Program to influence stronger commitment for conservation in bioregions where it is needed most.	**Contested**	**No** ▪ Not systematically adopted and considered of limited value. ▪ Vendor motivations are diverse, ranging from lifestyle change, financial stress, environmental extremes, reduced productivity, government funding, nearby acquisitions, and environmental benefit. ▪ NPWS questions whether this data reliably indicates community commitment to conservation, noting that public perceptions typically evolve over 10–20 years through engagement with newly established parks.
(c) Consider increasing Trust funding allocated to the Program and/or regularly supplementing the Program with capital funds from other NSW Government sources. This would enable NPWS to accelerate the achievement of direct and indirect benefits.	**Accepted**	**Yes** ▪ The Trust allocated $20.12M to the Project for 2015/16–2018/19, with a further $10M from 2016–2021 specifically for koala conservation. This iteration of the Land Acquisition Project had a total budget of $51.09M, including the koala funding rollover. Additional funding has enabled NPWS to consider higher-cost properties typically outside its scope.
(d) Given the similar but also varying objectives of the Program and the NSW Government's planned funding for private land conservation by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) over the next 5 years, and the potential impacts of that funding, the Trust may wish to assess the pros and cons of each approach as part of the next value for money evaluation of the Program.	**Accepted**	**No** ▪ No comparative evaluation between the two Programs was conducted. NPWS has collaborated with BCT to ensure private land conservation and the public national parks system deliver complementary benefits for biodiversity and CAR goals, especially in high-priority and poorly reserved bioregions.
Potential allocative efficiency (value to consumers) could be improved by implementing recommendations 2 (Program management) and 3 (Program effectiveness) in this evaluation.	**Accepted, except recommendation 3(b) which is contested**	As above.
While the Program represents value for money and it should be continued, recommendations 2 (Program management) and 3 (Program effectiveness) in this evaluation should be implemented to improve some aspects of the Program's fitness for purpose and allocative efficiency.	**Accepted, except recommendation 3(b) which is contested**	As above.

3.3.4 LAND ACQUISITION PRIORITISATION FRAMEWORK

The Project applied a detailed prioritisation framework guided by a nested set of strategic documents that shape assessment and decision-making. These include the Draft NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017), the NSW National Parks Establishment Plan (2008), and the NPWS Interim Reserve Establishment Guidelines (2021). Collectively, these documents define the state's strategic priorities for land acquisition and set out the processes for undertaking evidence-based assessments at the property scale.

The Draft NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017) updates and revises the 2008 NSW National Parks Establishment Plan. As the Directions Statement remains in draft form, the Establishment Plan continues to be considered part of the framework until formally superseded.

Under this approach, properties are assessed on their conservation value and their suitability for reservation. A comprehensive set of ecological, cultural, social and economic attributes is considered (Table 3-11), ranging from landscape context and reserve system representation to cultural heritage, land management feasibility and socio-economic factors.

Table 3-11: Attributes considered in a comprehensive assessment at a property scale

ATTRIBUTES CONSIDERED	DESCRIPTION
Landscape context	National/state/regional significance, World Heritage, wilderness, scenic/unique landscapes
Comprehensive, adequate, representative (CAR) reserve values	Representation within IBRA bioregions/subregions, contribution to Comprehensive, Adequate, Representative (CAR) system, connectivity and corridors
Native vegetation and flora	Vegetation types, extent and condition, threatened species/communities, old growth, endemism, diversity
Fauna and habitat	Threatened/migratory species, critical habitats, corridors, refugia, breeding/roosting sites
Water	Rivers, wetlands (Ramsar, SEPP, national listings), water rights and infrastructure
Geological and geomorphological importance and diversity	Geological/geomorphological significance, soils, active processes, gap analysis
Environmental services	Climate change mitigation, soil/water protection, coastal protection, pollination, ecosystem services
Cultural heritage	Aboriginal and historic heritage sites/values, cultural connections, renewal potential
Public appreciation and understanding	Recreation, education, aesthetics, visitor experiences, wellbeing
Land management	Access, boundary rationalisation, restoration needs, fire/pest/weed issues, infrastructure, reserve management efficiency
Suitability for reservation	Alignment with NPW Act and establishment plans, feasibility, size/connectivity, threats, long-term sustainability, costs
Socio-economic factors	Landholder motivations, property infrastructure, economic uses, employment, neighbouring land uses, community support

The 2018/19–2022/23 iteration of the Project marked the first application of the Koala Land Acquisition Prioritisation Framework. All Areas of Interest (AOIs) were assessed through this framework, enabling a streamlined and consistent approach to both koala-focused and statewide acquisitions.

The Koala Land Acquisition Prioritisation Framework was developed under the NSW Koala Strategy to guide investment in securing core koala habitat. It draws on Saving Our Species (SOS) spatial analysis, which identifies Areas of Regional Koala Significance (ARKS), models threats, and evaluates resilience, habitat integrity and connectivity at a state-wide scale. This analysis highlights where conservation action is most likely to deliver long-term benefits, while also allowing for the integration of local expertise and new evidence to address survey gaps and data limitations.

The framework assesses four elements – resilience, threat, landscape value and site value – to determine acquisition suitability. Priority is assigned to properties within ARKS of moderate resilience where threats can be managed, as these offer the greatest potential gains for koala populations. Landscape value captures a property's contribution to connectivity and reservation status, while site value reflects habitat quality, koala usage and management feasibility. The highest priorities are those properties that combine strong landscape and site value, and where acquisition would directly improve resilience by mitigating threats. This balanced approach ensures that investment is directed to places where it can make the greatest contribution to long-term koala conservation.

Figure 3-2 provides an overview of how the two assessment approaches were implemented.

Strengths

The land acquisition team has extensive experience applying the internal Reserve Establishment Guidelines and brings considerable corporate knowledge to assessments. Detailed review through this evaluation shows the framework was applied consistently and in line with both strategic guidance and Project outcomes. Importantly, the prioritisation process demonstrated adaptability to new data and expert knowledge while maintaining systematic application across AOIs. The consultation indicated that the combination of desktop assessment, field site inspections, and management considerations supported well-informed prioritisation.

> *"Assessment process is reasonably down pat. Follows a consistent process looking at values. Allows good consideration of the values of the property and contribution to CAR."* (NPWS staff interviewee)
>
> *"We try to make sure if we don't have that knowledge locally, we will go to people that do have that knowledge and get their input as well."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

Overall, the prioritisation frameworks have proven to be appropriate for guiding acquisition decisions. They were sufficiently flexible to consider a range of conservation priorities, while allowing for opportunistic acquisition of high-priority properties as they became available.

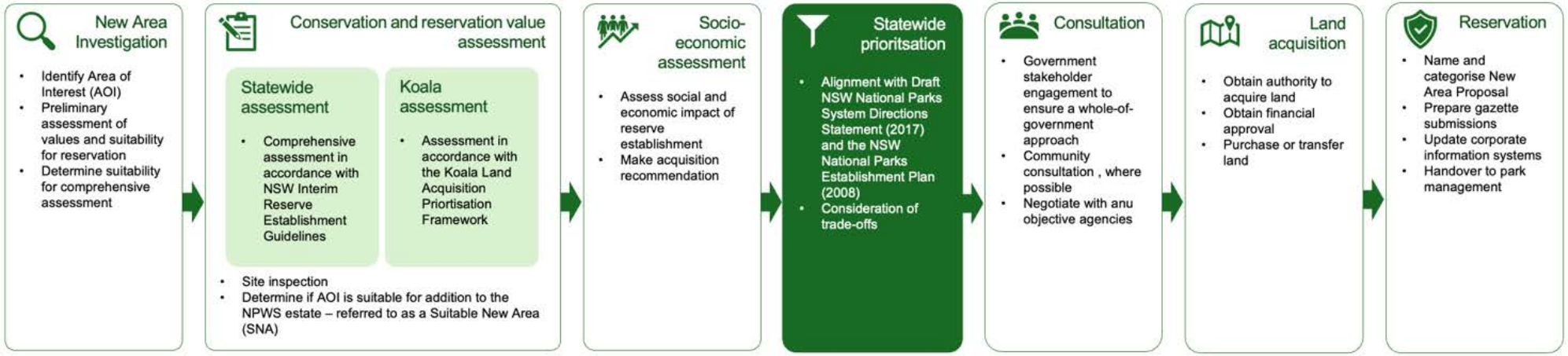

Figure 3-2: Overview of the statewide and koala assessment and prioritisation approaches

Areas for improvement

The consultation also highlighted a number of areas where the framework could be strengthened to improve transparency, documentation, and the integration of broader values (cultural, social, economic) into prioritisation decisions. These observations have been synthesised in Table 3-12.

Table 3-12: Areas for improvement to the land acquisition prioritisation framework

AREA FOR IMPROVEMENT	OBSERVATION	POTENTIAL STRENGTHENING
Statewide prioritisation	While individual acquisitions are well justified, geographic spread is inconsistent and not all acquisitions contributed to CAR[11].	Strengthen alignment with statewide conservation priorities and reserve establishment goals by applying a project-wide lens in addition to property-level assessments. This should include being conscious of the cumulative impact of trade-offs on statewide outcomes. Taking this broader perspective would help ensure acquisitions collectively deliver balanced geographic coverage and stronger contributions to CAR at the landscape and statewide scales.
Documentation consistency	Assessment reports vary in format and content across properties.	Standardise templates and reporting requirements to improve consistency and comparability of acquisition assessments.
Consideration of cultural values	Cultural heritage and other cultural values are actively considered during assessments, often through engagement with Aboriginal knowledge holders. However, because it is often not appropriate to explicitly document these values, they can appear secondary to ecological priorities.	Develop a structured approach to systematically capture and integrate cultural heritage and broader cultural values in the assessment process, ensuring these considerations are clearly reflected in documentation and decision-making.
Consideration of social values	Social aspects are considered inconsistently; engagement and community benefits are not systematically captured in assessments.	Develop processes to integrate social values, community benefits, and visitation potential into prioritisation decisions.
Consideration of economic values	An economic assessment tool was trialled but was often too high-level and generated some counterintuitive results. Some properties with clear community benefits could be deprioritised if relying solely on economic analysis.	Refine economic assessment method by identifying sets of specific indicators that will be used to assess community and public benefit. For example, change in number of visitors and visitor days due to the reserve; change in number of NPWS staff living in the community. These indicators should complement conservation priorities.
Consideration of climate change	Climate change impacts are not explicitly integrated into acquisition prioritisation.	Include climate resilience and connectivity as factors in prioritisation to future-proof acquisitions.
Data gaps (Koala specific)	Knowledge gaps and data deficiencies in koala priority areas made evidence-based assessments challenging initially.	Continue to draw on improved species-specific data, monitoring, and expert consultation to support decision-making for focal species acquisitions.

[11] The five acquisitions that contributed to CAR represented 70% of funds used in the Statewide part of the project, however there were an additional 18 acquisitions (all much smaller in size and cost) that did not contribute to CAR.

"Not as good information on cultural values, a lot not surveyed or little information available. The site visit process is very helpful here." (NPWS staff interviewee)

"Better record keeping on the reasons for purchase outside of the reservation and CAR priorities would be a good improvement." (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.3.5 GEOGRAPHIC TARGETING

Conservation needs and reserve representation vary significantly across NSW, with many of the state's ecosystems still underrepresented in the national parks system. While many eastern bioregions already include substantial protected areas, large parts of central and western NSW remain poorly represented in the reserve system. To guide investment and prioritisation, NSW follows established strategies and frameworks such as the National Parks Establishment Plan (2008) and the NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017), which identify gaps and provide guidance on geographic priorities.

The National Parks Establishment Plan (2008) divides NSW into four planning regions with distinct priorities based on regional attributes and degrees of reservation, as outlined in Table 3-13 and illustrated in Figure 3-3.

Table 3-13: Planning regions and their priorities

PLANNING REGION	PRIMARY FOCUS	SECONDARY FOCUS
Far West	Establish new nodes	Build up existing reserves
Central Western Plains	Build up existing reserves	Establish new nodes
Tablelands & Western Slopes	Fine-tune existing reserves	Establish new nodes
Coast & Coastal Ranges	Fine-tune existing reserves	N/A

Property acquisitions under the Project broadly reflected these directions in some planning regions. Acquisitions in the Coast & Coastal Ranges planning regions generally strengthened existing parks, while significant resources were allocated to the Far West, which enabled the establishment of new parks. This was evidenced in 2020-21, when substantial funds were brought forward to facilitate the timely purchase of four large, high-priority properties in the Far West . However, no properties were secured in the Central Western Plains, and only six in the Tablelands & Western Slopes, leaving vast areas of NSW without additions to the national park estate.

More broadly, acquisitions occurred across 12 of the 18 NSW bioregions. While this represented a meaningful step toward geographically balanced conservation outcomes, gaps persisted. As shown in Figure 3-4, only three properties were acquired in the state's poorly reserved central bioregions (2–5%), while most acquisitions occurred in eastern bioregions that were already relatively well represented (10–17% or >17%).

Acquisitions of priority koala habitat are more closely aligned with geographic targeting goals, with all purchases located within or in close proximity to the Areas of Regional Koala Significance (ARKS) identified in the NSW Koala Strategy 2018–21. While this focus reflects the Project's objective to secure critical koala habitat, which is concentrated along the state's east coast, it also means that large portions of the state's most underrepresented regions received limited attention. This imbalance underscores both the achievements and constraints of the Project's conservation outcomes and reflects the complexity of having two concurrent prioritisation frameworks with different objectives.

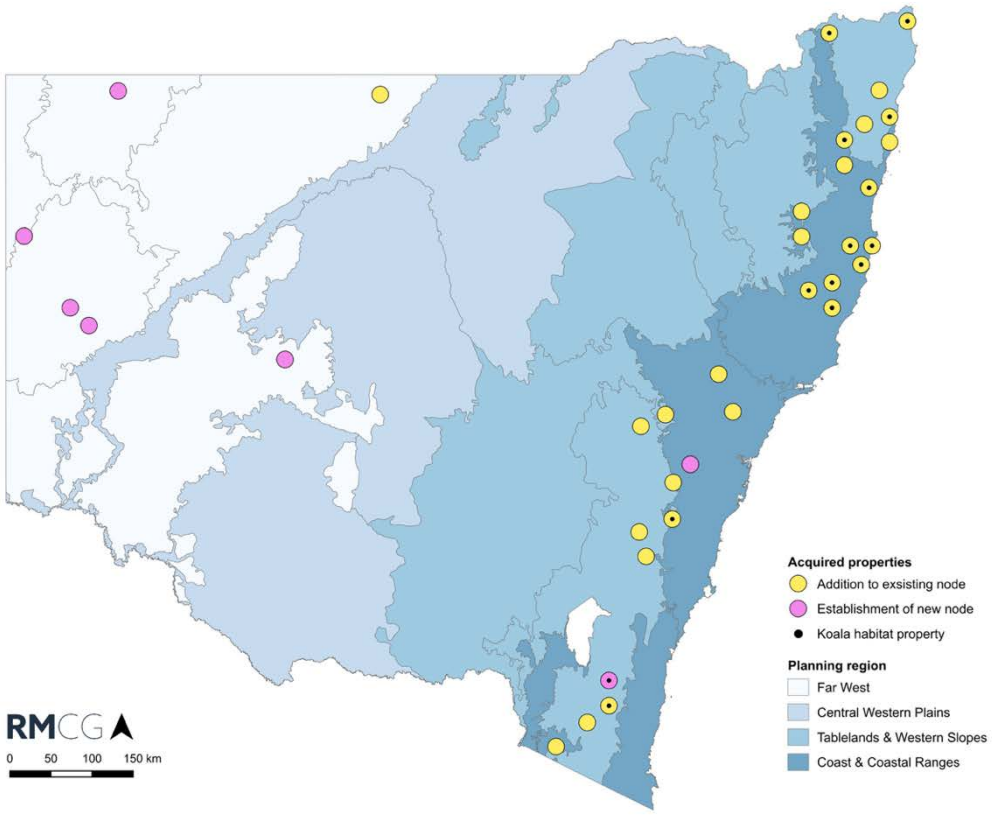

Figure 3-3: Map illustrating the location and nature of property acquisitions, and the four planning regions as defined in the National Parks Establishment Plan

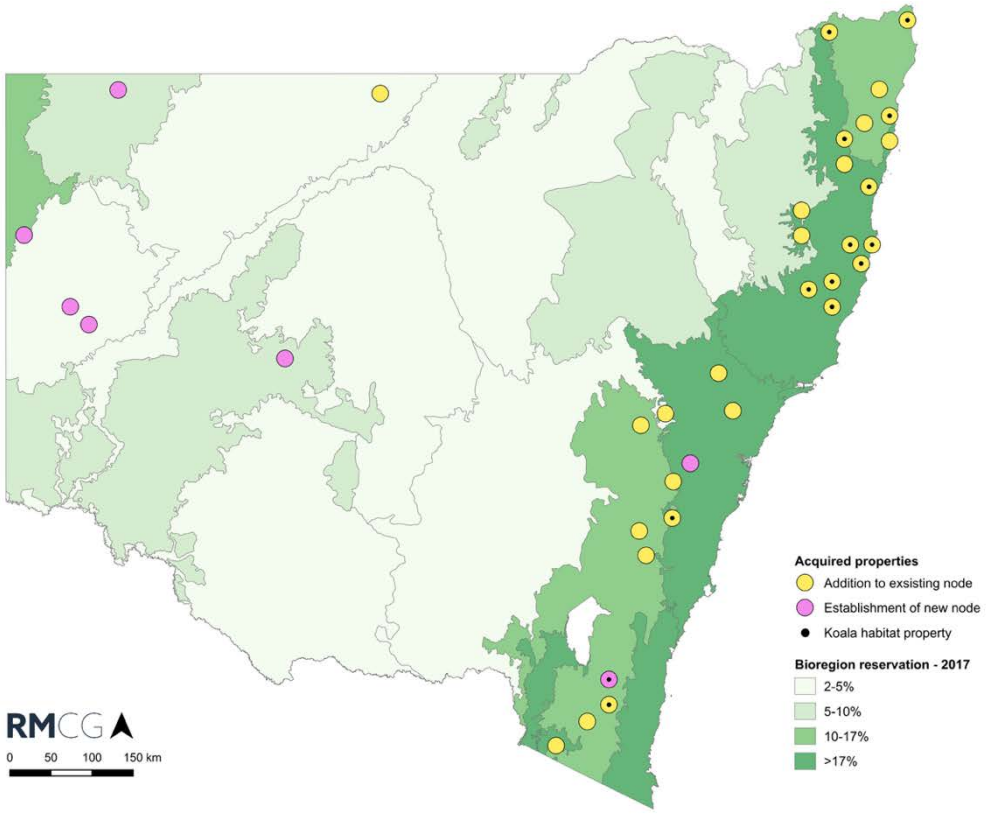

Figure 3-4: Map illustrating the location and nature of property acquisitions, and level of reservation within each bioregion prior to the Project

3.3.6 GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

The Project was supported by a clear governance framework that provided structure and accountability for staff. The assessment pathway was well-defined, with recommendations flowing upward from the NPWS team to the Minister, who ultimately made acquisition decisions. Interviewees generally felt their roles were well defined, with both internal NPWS staff and members of the Trust noting that the framework provided clear guidance and structure.

While the structure and processes were effective in guiding decision-making, several interviewees noted that communication diminished once applications progressed through the process, leading to some uncertainty about higher-level decisions. Enhancing transparency and feedback mechanisms was identified as an area for improvement.

Overall, while the governance framework provided clarity, accountability, and effective collaboration, though some staff perceived limited transparency around higher-level decisions.

Table 3-14: Project governance structure and responsibilities

NAME	ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
Minister or authorised delegate	Project Sponsor	Approve the annual land purchase list and budget expenditure
Environmental Trust	Environmental Trust Governance	Approve Project Business Plan and note Final Reports
Environmental Trust Subcommittee/Technical Committee/Independent Reviewer	Environmental Trust Governance	Endorse Project Business Plan, Progress Reports, and Final Reports
Environmental Trust Administration	Environmental Trust Governance	Approve requests for variations to the project, including timeframe, budget, and scope (by appropriate delegation)
NPWS	Project Manager	Manage grant against approved milestones and budget allocations
Office of Environment and Heritage	Working Groups	Technical advice and support for the Koala acquisition theme

3.3.7 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Project team engaged stakeholders appropriately throughout the Project's duration, with communication methods and protocols tailored to each stakeholder group:

- Communication with the Minister and NPWS Executive followed formal government protocols, with briefings prepared in the departmental format. When necessary, direct issues were escalated via email to enable timely discussion between the Project Manager, Project Sponsor, NPWS Executive, and the Minister's Office.
- Communication with vendors was handled sensitively – contact was initially made by phone before being formalised through written correspondence, usually via email. This process ensured transparency and accountability and was effective in accommodating landholders who were often unavailable during standard business hours.
- The Project team provided verbal updates at Koala Strategy Team meetings to maintain alignment with other DPE koala projects. Feedback indicated that stakeholders were satisfied with the quality and consistency of these briefings. Additionally, a Power BI dashboard was developed to provide NSW Koala Strategy stakeholders with real-time data on land acquisitions.

- Government land use agencies were formally consulted via well-established written referral protocols. NPWS adapted to evolving stakeholder needs by shifting to digital formats and GIS tools for easier access and analysis.
- Communication with the Trust was consistent and timely, including annual progress reports. No concerns were raised by the Trust about communication methods or frequency, indicating stakeholder satisfaction.

Stimulating landholder interest

Efforts were made to stimulate landholder interest and raise public awareness of the Project through a combination of media releases issued by the Minister, targeted expression of interest (EOI) processes and regular updates on the environment website where acquisitions were listed for 3–6 months.

This approach was particularly prominent in the Project's first year, when a six-week targeted EOI for koala habitat was paired with increased media coverage, which generated 138 applications – almost five times the annual average of 30. A similar number of applications were made in 2019–20, when the Minister publicly announced an intent to expand the national parks system and appealed to members of parliament and local government mayors across NSW to engage landholders, which directly drove over 50% of those applications.

While these strategies successfully increased the volume of applications by attracting attention from landholders and real estate agents, the vast majority of these properties were unsuitable and did not translate into successful property acquisitions. As a result, the impact of engagement was widely regarded as negative, with a number of interviewees describing it as "largely a political exercise" that placed unnecessary strain on internal systems as teams struggled to manage the workloads. One interviewee also noted that the surge in interest had the unintended effect of driving up land prices, further complicating acquisitions.

In contrast, interviewees reported that personal networks were the most effective method for generating high-quality acquisition opportunities. Several described how their relationships with local landholders enabled teams to target properties aligned with the Project's conservation goals and ultimately yielded more suitable property applications than broader public engagement efforts.

> *"After the advertising took place, we did 427 property assessments, and in the end, we bought 36. We ended up with 66 permissions to negotiate. It created a high administrative burden and didn't generate many suitable properties for acquisition."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.3.8 RISK MANAGEMENT

As the project progressed, evolving external factors introduced a range of risks that threatened the timely delivery of outcomes. These risks were actively monitored and addressed through adaptive management strategies, which were reported as they emerged:

- **Under-resourcing (2018–2019) –** In the project's first year, staffing levels were insufficient to meet workloads. This was addressed the following year with the appointment of additional land assessment officers, which significantly increased operational capacity.
- **Governance change (2018–2019) –** The appointment of Minister Matt Kean brought changes regarding Ministerial engagement in land acquisition. To manage this, greater detail was incorporated into Ministerial briefings to build understanding of project processes and conditions, and to manage expectations.
- **Budget expenditure (2019–2020 onwards) –** External challenges such as COVID-19 and the Black Summer Bushfires delayed acquisitions, making it difficult to fully expend annual budgets. In response,

the budget framework was adjusted to allow rollover of funds across financial years, ensuring flexibility and access to funding when opportunities arose.

- **Ministerial approvals (2019–2020 onwards) –** The new requirement for Ministerial approval on all acquisitions extended processing timeframes. NPWS responded by providing more comprehensive briefings and initiating verbal consultations with the Minister to reduce impacts on timelines.
- **Multiple valuations (2020–2021 onwards) –** A new mandate for multiple valuations per property increased costs, workload, and delays. This was mitigated by seeking valuer availability early and, when necessary, paying a premium to fast-track reports.
- **Committee approvals for large purchases (2020–2021 onwards) –** Purchases over $3 million required cross-agency circulation and approval by two committees, adding up to a month to the acquisition process. In response, NPWS worked with Property NSW to streamline documentation and reduce administrative burden.

Overall, NPWS demonstrated a proactive and pragmatic approach to risk management throughout the project. While some challenges were beyond their control, the measures implemented helped sustain project momentum and safeguarded the delivery of project outcomes.

3.3.9 APPROPRIATENESS INSIGHTS

- The planning process and business plan were appropriate, well-structured, and aligned with legislation, policy, and lessons from the 2018 evaluation.
- The $51.09M budget was considered suitable for the Project's scale, with flexibility enabling quick action on high-value properties; most funds were spent in the first three years.
- NPWS adopted most 2018 evaluation recommendations, though some remain only partially implemented (e.g. interim guidelines, incomplete outcomes evaluation, no comparison with BCT).
- The prioritisation framework was consistently applied and adaptable, with strong technical expertise, but could be strengthened by improving geographic balance, documentation, and systematic integration of cultural, social and economic values and consideration of climate change.
- Acquisitions advanced conservation priorities, but geographic spread was uneven, with underrepresentation in central NSW bioregions.
- Governance provided structure and accountability, with opportunities to strengthen transparency at higher levels of decision making.
- Stakeholder engagement was generally effective, with tailored approaches and strong communication tools, though some landholder engagement approaches could be refined further.
- Risks from staffing, ministerial processes, external events, and budget timing were managed adaptively, helping sustain delivery despite challenges.

3.4 EFFICIENCY

The efficiency of the Project was assessed by examining both the cost-effectiveness of its implementation and the value delivered through its outcomes. This assessment examined how well the project resources – time, budget and effort – were used to achieve results, and whether design and delivery processes supported value for money.

The following key evaluation questions guided this assessment:

Efficiency
- To what extent was the project on time and on budget?
- To what extent could resources have been allocated more efficiently? What actions were taken in the design phase of the project to ensure the project delivered value for money?
- What changes occurred during project delivery to improve efficiency?

3.4.1 TIMELINES AND BUDGET

As outlined in Sections 3.1.5 and 0, significant challenges arose over the five-year lifespan of the Project that complicated the timely delivery. In particular, the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Summer bushfires in the Project's second year (2019–20), reduced the capacity to assess and acquire land, making it difficult to meet annual targets. However, the Project's flexible design allowed these complications to be managed, and all deliverables were ultimately achieved by the Project's conclusion.

This evaluation has identified several mechanisms that contributed to delays in the land acquisition process. While many of these added value to the framework and were considered critical, there are opportunities to improve overall efficiency.

Interviewees reported that the chain of approvals required to access funds delayed acquisitions. Although these steps were acknowledged as essential, there may be potential to streamline approval pathways for routine or time-sensitive acquisitions through pre-agreed fast-track routes, while retaining independent checks for sensitive purchases.

Similarly, the requirement to obtain multiple valuations for each property (introduced in 2020–21) added time to the process, particularly in remote locations where it proved difficult to source multiple valuations. Efficiency could be improved by limiting this requirement to high-risk purchases which warrant such accountability and transparency. For lower-risk acquisitions a single independent valuation in conjunction with an internal review may be sufficient.

A third factor slowing the acquisition process was the high volume of applications following Ministerial media releases as outlined in Section 3.3.7. Many interviewees noted that this led to "immense workloads" and substantial administrative burden despite yielding few suitable acquisitions. The more targeted approach to community engagement that was taken subsequently was more efficient because it was proactive and targeted and generated properties that were more suitable for acquisition.

Financial management throughout the Project was also complex, starting with the under-expenditure in 2019–20 that resulted from the above-mentioned disruptions. The Project's financial framework allowed these unspent funds to roll over and be utilised in later years when opportunities arose, as illustrated in Figure 3-5 and Figure 3-6. The Project's design also allowed funds to be brought forward when necessary, enabling timely responses to high-priority opportunities, as was done in 2020–21, when $11.9 million was advanced to secure large, high-value properties in western NSW. Similarly, in 2023, $1.5 million in unspent salary funds were reallocated toward land acquisition, allowing the Project to increase acquisitions in its final year.

Interviewees highlighted the strength of these arrangements, noting that effective administration allowed funds to "flow around effectively" to meet opportunities as they arose. Several also emphasised the value of NPWS's record-keeping and financial oversight, describing the processes as smooth, transparent, and dependable.

Overall, the Project's flexible and responsive financial management was regarded as a major strength. While this adaptability sometimes complicated long-term planning, the ability to respond quickly to emerging challenges and opportunities provided great advantages to the project. Ultimately, the full project budget was expended and all major commitments were delivered by the Project's conclusion.

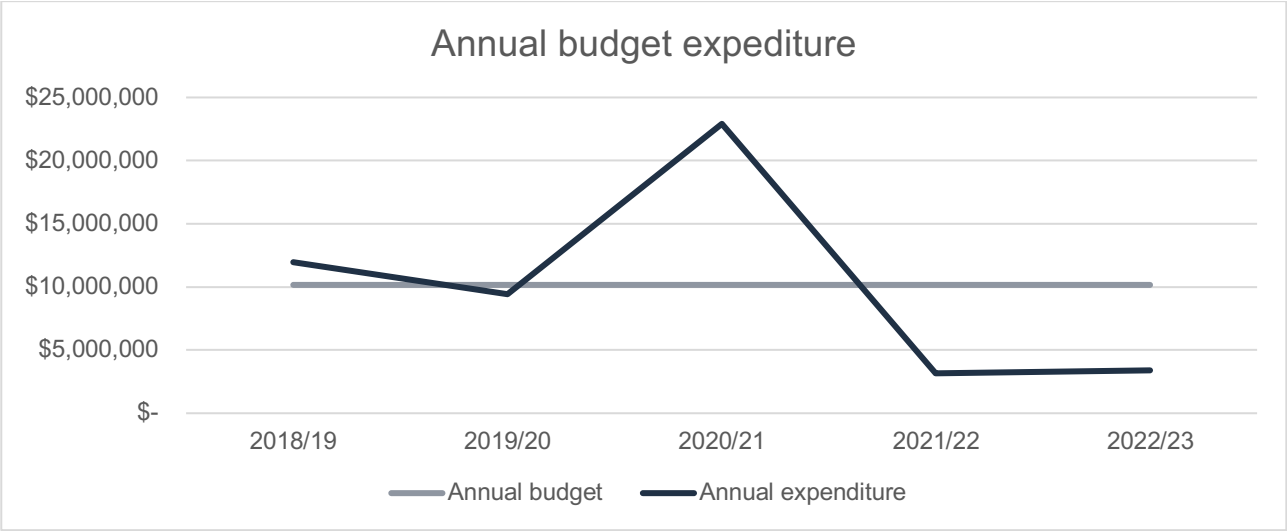

Figure 3-5: Annual budget expenditure over the Project lifespan

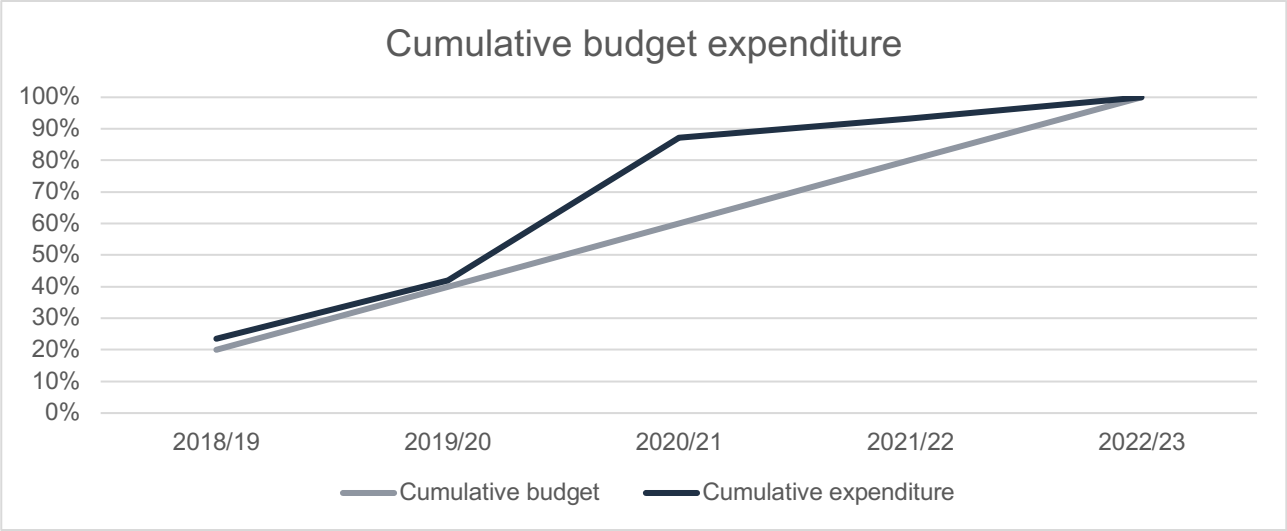

Figure 3-6: Cumulative budget expenditure over the Project lifespan

3.4.2 EFFICIENCY OF RESOURCE USE AND VALUE FOR MONEY

The degree to which the Project was efficient and represented value for money can be assessed by examining two factors – the purchase prices paid for acquisitions and the contributions those acquisitions made toward overall Project outcomes.

The prices paid for the acquisitions were mediated by focusing on willing sellers and by relying on independent valuations to inform purchase offers. This is an effective (and relatively simple) way to safeguard against the risk of overpayment. This is particularly important given that the approach used to publicise the Project and identify potential sellers meant it was widely known that the government was entering the land market. Such situations often create the perception that the government will pay higher prices, given an (assumption of) abundant resources. The transparent use of independent valuations – and, in some cases, multiple valuers – helped mitigate this risk, ensuring purchases were consistent with market value.

The second dimension to efficiency and value for money is the extent to which each acquisition contributed to the Project's outcomes, relative to their cost. Whilst using a quantitative measure (e.g. cost per unit of outcome) can provide a simple and rigorous basis for measuring efficiency, a combined approach – drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence – is generally more appropriate when assessing projects of this nature.

The data recorded as part of the initial screening and detailed assessments of each property provides a robust body of data that describes potential contributions to the Project's outcomes (e.g. contribution to CAR, the provision of habitat for threatened flora and fauna, the rarity of the opportunity, etc.). In its current form, this data, while vital to the acquisition process, does not provide a means of assessing the cost-effectiveness or value for money from each acquisition.

This data includes some quantitative measures that can provide measures of cost-effectiveness. For example, price per hectare of land acquired and contribution to comprehensiveness and representativeness (as part of CAR measures). Examples of how this data could be used are provided in the section below (Reference data set), particularly Table 3-15 and Table 3-16.

While neither of these measures alone provide definitive guidance on the efficiency of any given acquisition, they do provide useful empirical measures of the relative value for money. Given that there have been 36 acquisitions, it is possible to document characteristics like means and ranges for prices per hectare or cost per unit of change in CAR measures. While it would not be appropriate to use these measures as thresholds or minimum criteria, they should be used as part of the acquisition assessment process (e.g. where does a prospective acquisition fall within the range or prices paid).

The utility of the quantitative and qualitative data collected through the acquisition assessments (both successful and unsuccessful) could be enhanced by developing it into a framework that articulates, in a more consistent and systematic way, the benefits that each acquisition will generate. This would help the future program in two specific ways:

1. To provide a way to assess the value for money of prospective acquisitions, and
2. To transparently demonstrate the value for money that each acquisition offers.

These findings do not question whether the acquisitions have yielded benefits and contributed to Project outcomes, but rather to highlight that the available data could be used more effectively to demonstrate how each acquisition delivers on the Project priorities, maximising the benefits from the investment of public funds.

Reference data set

With 36 acquisitions now complete, the Project has generated a body of data that can serve as a reference group for future decision making. Collating this data would enable the development of a set of reference points against which prospective future acquisitions can be compared. For example, Table 3-15 and Table 3-16 show two examples of how existing data from the transactions during the Project period could be applied in this way.

Table 3-15: Prices per hectare across all acquisitions

PRICES PAID		
Grouping of acquisitions (brackets are number of acquisitions)	**Range**	**Mean**
All acquisitions (36)	$73 – $66,667 /ha	$6,211 /ha
Statewide program (22)	$73 – $66,667 /ha	$5,524 /ha
Koala program (14)	$559 – $44,374 /ha	$7,292 /ha
Coast and Coastal Ranges (23)	$727 – $19,333 /ha	$9,167 /ha
Tablelands and Western Slopes (7)	$829 – $2,117 /ha	$1,473 /ha
Central Western Plains (1)	-	-
Far West (6)	$73 – $183 /ha	$135 /ha

Table 3-16: Changes in comprehensiveness and representativeness from acquisitions – each 'increased %' figure represents the progress towards the objective of 80% comprehensiveness and representativeness of each regional ecosystem (in each bioregion or subregion) from that particular property

CAR CONTRIBUTION COMPREHENSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATIVENESS (ONLY)		
Property	**Increased %**	
	Comprehensiveness	**Representativeness**
Narriearra Caryapundy Swamp NP	16	80
		33
Langidoon–Metford SCA (Langidoon property)	8	51
Langidoon–Metford SCA (Metford property)	4	28
		11
Koonaburra NP	4	10
	3	10
Avenel SCA	31	9

3.4.3 EFFICIENCY INSIGHTS

- The Project has been cost–effective by ensuring acquisitions reflect market prices, helping to avoid overpaying for land.
- Independent valuations are the primary mechanism for ensuring efficiency. However, the number of valuations could be adjusted based on the risk associated with each acquisition, rather than always requiring three.
- Assessing the overall value for money of the project is more challenging. While comprehensive data is collected for each property, it is not currently collated or presented to easily assess each acquisition's relative value for money (i.e., contribution to project outcomes versus cost).
- Without changing the existing data collected, a consistent set of quantitative and qualitative measures could be developed for all acquisitions to represent their contribution to Project outcomes.
- Using such a framework (as illustrated in Table 3-17) would allow more consistent and transparent assessment of whether a given acquisition represents good value for money.

Table 3-17: Example of data that could be used in value for money assessment – suggested data is based on what is already collected as part of assessments

CRITERIA	DATA	TYPE OF DATA
Landscape context	For each ecological community: ▪ Conservation status ▪ Increase in area	Quantitative Qualitative
Reserve contribution	CAR contribution – increase in ▪ Comprehensiveness ▪ Representativeness	Quantitative

CRITERIA	DATA	TYPE OF DATA
	Connectivity: ▪ Existing NPWS interest ▪ Proximity to other protected areas ▪ Linkages and corridors	Quantitative
	% of the landscape in reserves in the region (e.g. far western) New reserve or add to existing reserve	Quantitative
Species significance	Listed species and status ▪ EPBC ▪ State ▪ Regional ▪ Local	Quantitative Qualitative
	Significance of site: ▪ Climate refuge ▪ Genetic resources ▪ Translocation – source or sink	Qualitative
Threats	Potential for threats to reduce values	Quantitative Qualitative
Cultural importance	▪ Ongoing Aboriginal cultural use ▪ Significant for the objects or landscape features ▪ Access to country	Qualitative
Geological importance	▪ Significance	Qualitative
Socio–economic benefits and costs	▪ Potential benefits to regional and local economy ▪ Potential costs on regional and local economy ▪ Potential impacts on regional and local community	Quantitative Qualitative
Costs	Total cost and price per hectare	Quantitative
	Establishment costs (one–off) – if required	Quantitative
	Management costs (annual increase)	Quantitative

3.5 LEGACY

The legacy of the Land Acquisition project was assessed by examining the extent to which its outcomes are likely to be sustained over the long term. This includes evaluating the measures taken to support the longevity of results and ensure ongoing impact beyond the life of the project. The following key evaluation questions guided this assessment:

Legacy
- What were the lessons learned and/or other opportunities related to the project?
- What could be done differently?
- To what extent will the project outcomes continue once the project is completed?

3.5.1 LESSONS LEARNED

Procurement Management

The requirement to conduct multiple market valuations for each property created challenges, especially in regional areas with limited valuer availability. This led to vendor confusion, increased costs, and delays in approval and negotiation – particularly for properties on the open market. Discrepancies between valuations also introduced uncertainty around pricing. A key lesson is to seek executive approval to revise the threshold for requiring multiple valuations to reduce delays and improve efficiency.

Project Execution

Over the life of the project, each new Minister brought a different emphasis to the conservation priorities and approval processes, which required adjustments to the acquisition process. The Project had to remain flexible while still adhering to project scope, budget, and due diligence. Future projects should continue to be as adaptable as possible in order to accommodate these types of changes.

Budget Management

The ability to bring forward funds enabled the Project to act quickly on major land acquisition opportunities, such as in 2020–21, when $11.9 million was advanced from future budgets. However, this approach reduced available funds for subsequent years and required adjustments to land assessment planning. This demonstrated that while financial flexibility is valuable, it must be carefully managed alongside future budgeting needs.

Human Resource Management

NPWS' ability to retain most key staff throughout the duration of the Project was identified as a major strength. Continuity in roles such as land assessors, project managers, and conveyancers built deep knowledge, improved processes, and fostered strong team commitment. This stability streamlined delivery and ensured expertise was carried into the new Environmental Trust land acquisition project (2020/NGP/0007). The key lesson identified was that investing in team stability enhances long–term project outcomes.

Whilst many interviewees described their experience of working on the Project as positive and rewarding, several staff also described challenges they faced throughout the project:

- Several interviewees noted that communication within the project was inconsistent. One described how this made their role engaging with the public more difficult, as decisions were not well communicated internally.
- Another staff member highlighted the heavy workload pressures their team experienced, noting that the team was continuously stressed and often felt the need to work "in their own time" to keep up.

> *"I found it quite difficult being that sort of conduit between… the organisation and the public. I didn't know what was happening at those higher levels of decision making. I couldn't convey to [the landholder] what was happening because I didn't know myself."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.5.2 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

The sustainability of Project outcomes is shaped by the long–term conservation value of acquisitions and the ongoing challenge of adequately resourcing their management.

Koala acquisitions were somewhat distinct in that they often came with dedicated restoration funding through the NSW Koala Strategy. This meant that even where properties included large areas of cleared land or

required significant weed management, purchases could be justified on the basis of their role in securing critical corridors and known koala habitat, with restoration funding providing a pathway to improve ecological condition.

In contrast, many statewide acquisitions did not come with dedicated management funding. While some benefited from temporary or incidental support (such as mining offsets, enforceable undertakings, or COVID/post–fire stimulus) this has not been consistent. Interviewees highlighted that new reserves often came without budgets or staffing, leaving area managers to find resources to cover basic responsibilities such as signage, facilities, access management, and weed and pest animal management.

The assumption that public ownership will deliver biodiversity outcomes can be undermined if management resourcing is not considered. In western NSW, large acquisitions targeting underrepresented bioregions were described as "very net positive," but managers consistently noted that sustaining management of these new areas in remote locations is "the biggest challenge, without a doubt." As competition for land from mining, offsets, stewardship, and carbon agreements intensifies, and as stimulus–driven funding cycles end, the risk grows that acquisitions will outpace the capacity to manage them effectively. This could ultimately see the benefits from some acquisitions seriously compromised.

Overall, the acquisitions have secured significant long–term opportunities for biodiversity protection, but their sustainability depends on ensuring ongoing resourcing, clearer policy on managing encumbrances, and closer alignment between land acquisition and management funding. Without this, biodiversity gains may be undermined by gaps in post–acquisition management.

> *"One of the things that doesn't come with a new reserve is a budget to bring it online and the staff to staff it. So, the big challenge has been the arguments required to resource those new acquisitions appropriately. That's not the fault of the reserve establishment team, but obviously the new lands come online and I have to go through the process of arguing for resources to manage those. I've spent the last six years essentially arguing for resources for those new acquisitions and still continue to do so today."* (NPWS interviewee)

> *"I don't think [the Project] was set up for outcomes – it was kind of just set up for land acquisitions… Adding hectares to the estate is great, but we're making a whole lot of assumptions. We're assuming that because the land is transferring to public ownership, it's going to be managed better for biodiversity."* (NPWS staff interviewee)

3.5.3 LEGACY INSIGHTS

- Koala acquisitions were supported by dedicated restoration funding, enabling degraded but strategic properties to deliver long–term value.
- Many statewide acquisitions lacked ongoing management funding, relying instead on offsets or stimulus; new reserves often came online without resources or staff.
- Incorporating acquisitions into the state reserve system is a key step to delivering biodiversity outcomes, but public ownership alone does not guarantee these outcomes. Ecological outcomes are long–term results so ongoing policy support and appropriately resourced on–ground management are critical to ensuring the acquisition program yields these long–term outcomes.

4 Recommendations

The evaluation identified a range of opportunities to strengthen the Land Acquisition Project's strategic direction, efficiency, and long–term impact. The following recommendations build on the Project's demonstrated success and effectiveness, focusing on sustaining strong conservation outcomes, improving transparency and governance, and embedding cultural, social, and economic considerations more systematically into future delivery. Together, these recommendations aim to ensure that the Trust and NPWS continue to deliver value for money, maintain public confidence, and secure enduring environmental and cultural benefits through land acquisition (Table 4-1).

Table 4-1: Evaluation recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
Continued investment	
Given the effectiveness, impact, appropriateness and value for money of this Project, the Trust should continue to invest in this project as a way to fulfil its statutory objective to fund the acquisition of land for the national parks estate.	Ongoing investment will ensure that the Trust continues to deliver strong conservation outcomes and value for money, while fulfilling its statutory object. By maintaining this Project as the primary mechanism for land acquisition, the Trust secures enduring biodiversity, cultural and community benefits, builds on established expertise, and leverages efficiencies from an already proven and effective framework.
Prioritisation and strategic direction	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should update and formally approve the strategic documents that shape assessment and decision-making for the Land Acquisition Project. These include the: ▪ Draft NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017) ▪ NPWS Interim Reserve Establishment Guidelines (2021).	Formally updating and approving the strategic documents will provide a clear, authoritative framework for assessment and decision-making, ensuring consistency, transparency, and accountability in the Land Acquisition Project. It will strengthen governance, reduce ambiguity for staff and stakeholders, and support more efficient and defensible land acquisition decisions aligned with statutory, ecological, and strategic priorities.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure the statewide objectives are clearly reflected in the prioritisation process, including alignment with conservation goals, geographic spread, and assessment of Project performance as a whole.	Keeps acquisitions strategically focused, ensures balanced geographic coverage, strengthens accountability for the Project's overall impact and ensures transparent trade-offs.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should set a clear threshold for the proportion of funds directed towards acquisitions that make a significant contribution to CAR (e.g. 75%).	Ensures accountability to the statewide objectives, guaranteeing the majority of investment drives measurable gains in comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness, while still leaving room for opportunistic and innovative acquisitions.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should continue prioritising underrepresented western bioregions and large landscape purchases that make a substantial contribution to the CAR reserve system.	Delivers the highest conservation leverage per dollar and fills the largest gaps in the reserve network.
Improving evidence base	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should build consistent rigorous assessment of social, cultural and economic values into the acquisition process and ensure these are documented alongside environmental metrics.	Embeds these values into decision-making, ensuring they are systematically considered and preserved even as institutional knowledge evolves.

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should improve the consistency and quality of assessment documentation for all acquisitions, ensuring social, cultural, economic, and environmental values are clearly recorded and accessible.	Strengthens the evidence base for decision-making, reduces variability between assessments, and reduces reliance on individual staff experience.
Koala prioritisation framework	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should document and publish lessons from the koala land acquisition prioritisation framework as a replicable model for other threatened species programs.	Builds a practical blueprint for evidence-based, species-focused land acquisition.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure future prioritisation frameworks integrate climate change scenarios to anticipate shifting habitat resilience and future suitability.	Strengthens long-term conservation outcomes by aligning acquisitions with projected habitat changes and emerging ecological risks.
Financial management and budgeting	
The Trust should retain budget flexibility across years (within the overall Project timeframe) to allow opportunistic acquisitions. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should Balance this with clear forward planning to avoid early depletion of funds.	Keeps the Project responsive to high-value opportunities while avoiding front-loading of funds.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should formalise guidance for managing cross-financial year deposits and settlements, so that financial reporting pressures don't discourage unique but viable purchase arrangements.	Preserves the ability to complete complex purchases across financial years.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should limit mandatory multiple valuations to large or high-risk purchases. For lower value or low-risk acquisitions, accept a single independent valuation plus internal review.	Reduces cost, vendor confusion and delays in regional markets while retaining strong probity on high-value purchases.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should develop a consistent value-for-money framework for acquisitions. Use existing quantitative and qualitative data to systematically assess the contribution of each acquisition relative to its cost.	Improves transparency and consistency in assessing acquisitions and supports efficient use of public funds and stronger decision-making.
Governance and oversight	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should streamline approval pathways for routine and time-sensitive acquisitions by pre-agreed fast track routes, while preserving independent checks for high-value or politically sensitive purchases.	Speeds delivery without sacrificing accountability.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should institutionalise protections against political interference. Establish independent oversight or audit triggers for acquisitions where ministerial interest or external lobbying is apparent.	Maintains staff confidence, protects integrity of decisions and reduces reputational risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should make reserve category decisions accountable. Require that reserve category recommendations be justified against legislated conservation and cultural heritage objectives and published in decision records.	Prevents inappropriate downgrades that permit extractive activities and aligns designations with cultural and conservation outcomes.
Stakeholder engagement and communications	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should improve information flow within and between delivery teams across all stages of decision-making.	Increases efficiency, alignment, and consistency in engagement with stakeholders.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should adopt consistent, evidence-based messaging to the public that addresses misconceptions, highlights ecological and cultural values, and emphasises economic and tourism benefits of new reserves. Ensure transparency about the acquisition pipeline (e.g., % of properties assessed vs acquired) while maintaining confidentiality where required.	Builds public trust, counters misinformation, and strengthens social licence for future acquisitions.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should resource community engagement as a specific, funded activity alongside land acquisition. Prioritise proactive outreach, relationship-building, and targeted engagement campaigns to attract suitable properties for acquisition.	Encourages genuine landholder interest, strengthens relationships, and ensures engagement efforts are consistent, strategic, and sustainable.
Strengthen cultural integration	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should create a structured, representative Native Title and Traditional Owner input pathway into prioritisation and acquisition. Formalise regional committees with elected representatives and clear confidentiality protocols so input can occur early without jeopardising negotiations.	Embeds Indigenous priorities in decisions and reduces reliance on ad hoc personal relationships.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should recognise and value cultural outcomes as core benefits of reservation.	Ensures cultural values are fully integrated into decision-making, supporting a holistic and equitable approach to conservation.
Post acquisition management and sustainability	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should require that every acquisition that forms a new reserve is accompanied by an explicit establishment and first three-year management budget. Allocate that funding directly to the area manager at the time of purchase. A practical minimum is the equivalent of 10 percent of the purchase price or a defined per-hectare establishment figure to be endorsed by NPWS executive.	Ensures new reserves are fully resourced from day one, enabling timely implementation of pest, weed, and infrastructure management.
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should secure dedicated funding streams for ongoing management of acquisitions, ensuring budgets scale with the growth of the reserve estate.	Maintains ecological and cultural values over time and supports effective long-term management planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS	BENEFITS
Quantifying impacts of reservations	
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should conduct retrospective review to evaluate the environmental, cultural, social and economic outcomes of land acquisition over the last 20 years.	Provides authoritative evidence of long-term impact, informs future target setting and legitimises strategic adjustments to acquisition and management practice.

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