

Submission to Independent Biodiversity Legislation Review Panel Issues paper August 2014

THEME 1:

1. Should there be an aspirational goal for biodiversity conservation?

A: Yes, it is important that Australia's natural and cultural heritage is preserved for future generations and to protect our quality of life.

3. To what extent are the current objects being met?

A: To a limited extent as little is done to follow up environmental breaches. The science behind conservation regulation has not convinced the broader rural community that biodiversity needs to be improved.

Having lived for many years in rural communities I frequently experience attitudes that there is not a problem, that landholders are doing the right thing by clearing the land and that they are morally justified in breaking the law.

They don't see the soil erosion, the loss of biodiversity and habitat because the extent of their knowledge covers kangaroos, magpies, galahs and crows as "native biodiversity" and those species are considered by them to be "doing fine".

A considerable amount of ongoing plain English education needs to take place showing the decline of our vulnerable plants and animals reinforcing the "what's in it for you/me" principle so that the general community will actually realise that without a diverse range of plants and animals human existence will most certainly be jeopardised.

THEME 2:

1. Is the current system effective in encouraging landowners to generate public benefits from their land and rewarding them as environmental stewards? Or are current mechanisms too focused on requiring private landowners to protect ecosystem services and biodiversity at their own cost?

A: As someone who has voluntarily committed my property to biodiversity conservation I believe the current mechanisms (i.e. covenants, management agreements etc.) provide a good framework to undertake conservation on private lands. The problem is in the fallout of those mechanisms where passionate landholders meet agency staff who has little interest and little to no practical knowledge. In a nut shell, they don't really know what they are looking at if they even bother to look and therefor devalue what's right in front of them.

This makes conservation management a lonely experience where practical support is difficult to find. Having experienced technically skilled staff who are actually interested in what private conservation can achieve would be a big start.

There were great schemes run by some Catchment Management Authorities that supported landholders. The commonwealth stewardship program was excellent but disappeared just as it was gaining momentum.

Landcare seems to run very basic, poorly executed programs like giving away trees but they're not interested in what happens to them. You mostly get the impression that paid staff in both agencies and Landcare seem to think all the environmental money should go on their salaries with the landholder thrown a few leftover scraps. These attitudes place a huge physical, financial and emotional burden on conservation managers who have committed their immediate wellbeing for the future of our country. Environmental stewardship has been the only exception to this.

2. Are there elements of the current system for private land conservation that raise impediments (for example, the binding nature of agreements and potential loss of production) for individuals who want to manage their land for conservation? If so what are they? What incentives might be effective, efficient and equitable in promoting biodiversity conservation on private land?

A: The biggest impediment is the lack of on-going technical and financial support. Easily accessible help to identify new plants, invasive weeds and pests, Agency interest in what has been achieved would help with motivation, Financial assistance when what you are doing is genuinely benefiting the environment should cover some elements of "lost opportunity" but most of all they must encourage active management addressing key threats known and new.

3. What should be the role of organisations and bodies, such as the Nature Conservation Trust, in facilitating and managing private land conservation through mechanisms such as conservation and bio banking agreements?

A: As a non-government organisation NCT offers an alternative mechanism for those uncomfortable about dealing with "government". Particularly in regards to permanent trust agreements. They may also have a role in providing technical advice if staff actually had the skills.

4. How should the government determine priorities for its investment in biodiversity conservation whilst enabling and encouraging others (e.g. community groups) to contribute to their own biodiversity conservation priorities?

A: Scientific determinations which help guide "what" is important at a strategic level. Develop efficient models which support private conservation activities. Make sure the majority of the funding is going "where the rubber meets the road" i.e. landholders who actually do the work and achieve the conservation outcomes.

5. How can the effectiveness of conservations programs be monitored and evaluated?

A: All conservation programs should have management plans that list the key assets being protected, the current threats to these assets tailored to the specific site, recommended threat mitigation actions and current actions being implemented. These should be dynamic documents which can easily be updated for new threats and actions implemented. Successes and failure should be shared in a timely fashion with other landholders so that they can see exactly what works and what doesn't and don't waste valuable time, money and effort needlessly. Not just pretty pictures

and a touchy feely story about a particular conservation area's success but the nuts and bolts of how they achieved their success. Such as chemicals used or not used to successfully eradicate certain weeds. How to assess an area's soil type properly and the methods used to physically plant trees to maximise success rates. Who to call who has the right answer to questions asked.

8. To what extent does current practice (rather than the legislation) determine outcomes?

A: The limited knowledge and skills of staff who are formulating "offsets" / advising on ecological management and restoration means that many conservation actions are passive and fail to deal with critical threats. Very few people actually know what a healthy ecosystem looks like. We need regional experts who can explain the linkages between landscapes, plants and animals so land managers can fine tune on ground works which will benefit declining species and restore systems to improved health.

THEME 4:

6. To what extent has the current regulatory system resulted in lost development opportunities and/or prevented innovative land management practices?

A. Despite what many landholders may say there is ample flexibility within the current Native Vegetation Act to effectively manage for production purposes. The non-protected regrowth date of 1990 allows ample scope to manage invasive species such as pine, sifton bush etc. with even more scope to extend this through a change of regrowth date. Routine Agricultural Management Activities all provide workable conditions which suit most, with again, the ability to modify through a property vegetation plan to suit individual needs. The reality is the Native Vegetation Act cannot undo past poor management which has degraded the fundamental resource base – soil structure, plant diversity in pastures etc. The problem is that some landholders believe they can flog the landscape back to productivity with enough horse power and fertiliser. They need the Native Vegetation Act to save them from themselves.

THEME 5:

1. Have the threats to biodiversity posed by: (a) people taking animals and plants from the wild, (b) feral animals and weeds, and (c) illegally imported species, been effectively managed?

2. Has the NPW Act and the supporting policy framework led to a positive change in the welfare of native animals (captive and free-living)? What role if any should the government have in ensuring the welfare of individual native animals – particularly where there are already stand-alone welfare laws such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979?

3. Are the provisions for marine mammals effective?

4. Is the current framework for wildlife licensing, offences and defences, including those applying to threatened species, easily understood? Is the current licensing system too complex? How can it be improved and simplified to focus on conservation outcomes?

5. Is there currently appropriate regulation for the sustainable use and trade of wildlife?

A. My observation of crown land management on adjacent reserves indicates that little is being done to effectively manage threats imposed by invasive plants and animals.

Many Travelling Stock Reserves, state forests and conservation areas are suffering from neglect as they are being over- run with weeds and feral animals.

TSR lessees who pay nominal access fees cause appalling long term damage to the plant diversity, vegetation structure and soils which impact hugely on native animals and birds who use these reserves as corridors as well as permanently. The revenue raised from leasing reserves to landholders cannot possibly compensate for the continual term damage done to the landscape and the native flora and fauna that rely on these areas.

Human disturbance impacts such as but not limited to, illegal trail bike riding, firewood collection, garbage dumping, shooting and camping are having major impacts on these important areas with little done by the managing organisation to rectify this situation.

Users of these reserves often leave campfires burning during critical and non-critical fire restricted periods causing much fear and concern to adjacent property owners. The authorities are contacted but little is done with zero feedback given to the complainant. Apparently they can issue significant fines for these activities but fail to act. If action is taken and the perpetrator is charged or fined then these facts should be published for all to see in the local papers as well as other media to reinforce that punitive action will be taken.

Ironically, the vast majority of the rural community would fully support the fining of these vandals as they cause so much damage. Allowing this to happen annoys the rural community as they feel everyone is watching them and what they do but have managing agencies that are unwilling to act with authority regarding these blatantly destructive acts.

Additional methods which would and I believe do have an impact on these problems are:

Regular announcements in local media and newspapers reminding the community on the use of cameras, regular random **night** and day area patrols occurring (*even if they are not*), fine amounts and/or imprisonment terms applicable for Reserve misuse. A loud, clear and regular message needs to be delivered.

Raise your profile. The general community **do not** know who Local Land Services are or what they do. Landholders mostly do but not Joe Bloggs on the street. Get into the schools and teach the children about conservation, its management and what they can do to actively help. Field trips for little kids would go a long way to reinforcing the importance of conservation management.

If I could bring this particular reserve and drop it on your desks for you to see for yourself the damage and neglect, then I would. The best I can do is to attach some photos of the damage to Webbs Reserve, Narromine NSW which adjoins two privately owned conservation reserves and the Macquarie River. I and my neighbour are small holdings but with the larger reserve there are now three conservation areas trying to provide a safe haven for flora and fauna.

I sincerely hope this helps us all.











