

Submission from [REDACTED] on September 4, 2014

We are private landholders participating in a Voluntary Conservation Agreement (VCA) in a forested area of the Far South Coast, NSW

Overarching issues

It would appear that there is little provision in current legislation for the acknowledgement, consideration in decision making, or publication, of the value of ecosystem services.

We are constantly dismayed by the reference to the 'triple bottom line' of ecological, economic and social sustainability, and would instead present the argument that the only bottom line is actually the sustainability of our environment and that our social and economic sustainability flow from that. In other words, we need to establish an 'ecocentric' view of our relationship with our environment.

Theme 1

Interest point 1.

Should there be an aspirational goal for biodiversity conservation?

Aspirational goals are critically important and set the context for what follows after. Any such goal should acknowledge the absolutely essential role of biodiversity in the maintenance of ecosystems and ecosystem services, value species for their intrinsic worth and be unhedged by caveats and 'out clauses'.

Theme 2

Interest point 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?

In many respects the current VCA system met our needs for conserving that part of our forested property that we did not want to use for any production. One of the reasons we purchased the property was to assist in the forest conservation effort and we were glad of a mechanism to do so.

For that part of our forest that we want to set aside for production (currently personal firewood and building materials, but with the proviso for future 'sustainable' forestry), the current system was less clear. If mechanisms exist that allow these activities whilst still ensuring that forest cover and biodiversity are maintained, then wonderful. We do not believe that current legislation covering forestry activity ensures the maintenance of biodiversity as the mechanisms are not evidence based but rely on offsets and deeming.

As far as rewards for environmental stewardship for our VCA are concerned, we are happy to receive an acknowledgment in the form of a reduction in our land rates (although it would be better if our cash poor local council didn't have to bear this) and there are annual offers of money from the state government for project work. One thing that has always seemed ludicrous about our situation is this; if we flattened our forest and allowed it to regrow (or established a plantation) we could claim credit for carbon sequestration. As things stand with our multi-aged forest, we sequester the carbon for free.

Apart from production for our own use, we do not derive our income from our property. We have a number of friends who are farmers deriving their financial livelihood from their land and who are mindful of biodiversity, for them the situation seems different.

Interest point 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?

Following from the last point above, the major impediments to engagement in conservation works by farmers seem to be: the loss of land from production, the direct materials costs for conservation works, loss of time from economically productive activity whilst engaged in conservation work and the increasing age of many farmers. A significant proportion of these people care about the biodiversity on their land and the future but are very busy trying to earn a living. It may be that the way to facilitate conservation work by farmers would be to devise a system to pay them for what they do such as, money for such labour, money for capital expenses, some form of compensation for lost production. There may be mechanisms or strategies where conservation work compensates for lost production, eg wildlife corridors or shelter belts providing amenity for stock or riparian revegetation preventing gully erosion.

Interest point 5.

How can the effectiveness of conservation programs be monitored and evaluated?

This can be achieved, firstly, by having a stated aim for the programme, and then monitoring designed to see the extent that the aim is achieved. Currently with our VCA we have a couple of monitoring points for vegetation photos to track changes over time. There was a vegetation survey done initially so we have some baseline data for comparison. Probably the landholders should monitor in the first instance with accredited agency oversight or partnership.

Theme 4

This is a general comment about offsets. We have always been uncomfortable with the idea that our private conservation effort could be used in some way unknown to us to offset environmental degradation elsewhere. There needs to be a mechanism in private conservation covenants to allow landholders to opt out of this use of their conservation effort.

Interest point 4.

Does the regulatory system adequately protect listed threatened species, populations and ecological communities? Is there utility in specifically protecting these entities through the regulatory system?

No. We have had a decline in local Koala populations despite regulation to protect them. We are sure there are other examples. Threatened species, populations and communities need protection; they became the way they are because of inadequate protection in the first place. How do you protect without a regulatory system of some kind?

Theme 5

Interest point 1b.

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?

No. We are concerned about this across all land tenures in the state, for both plants and animals. In the forests around us (including ours) are foxes, cats, deer (in increasing numbers) and pigs. There are not too many weeds of great concern in local forested areas, although fireweed is rife in some areas exposed by logging. Many weeds of significance are to be found in agricultural land. There are huge numbers of goats in many areas. Horses are destroying critical habitat in the high country. Problems for biodiversity are caused by predation, displacement and habitat destruction by feral animals.

Theme 6

Interest point 1.

What information should be generated about the different kinds of value (for example, monetary and intrinsic value) of biodiversity and other natural assets in NSW?

We need to understand the role of biodiversity in the assessment of ecosystem health.

We need to understand the function of species in the patterns of nutrient and energy flow in ecosystems. Linked to this, we need to understand the role of biodiversity in providing multiple pathways for these nutrient and energy flows, thus maintaining ecosystem resilience.

We must understand that we are part of the web of life built by all species and that if (at some point) that web fails, so do we.

Because of our potentially fatal preoccupation with economic matters, we need to know the real dollar value of ecosystem services.

Somehow we need to foster the belief system that all other species are of value in and of themselves.

We need to get the message across that the natural assets can and do invigorate the human spirit and are needful for our wellbeing.

Interest point 2.

What type, quality and frequency of data should be collected about biodiversity? Who should be responsible for such a system?

We need to collect data that is reliable, about as many species as we can. This can be done by scientists, trained individuals, accredited community organisations (Atlas of Living Australia for example).

There probably needs to be a central repository overseen by government.

We need to assess changes in populations, and interactions with other species. We can use photographs for verification sometimes, or assign reliabilities based on observer training.

Interest point 3.

Is current data about biodiversity highly credible and readily accessible? If not, how can quality and access be improved?

We think that the biodiversity data that exists is credible and accessible. What is of concern is that we do not really know very much about what is 'out there'.

There is also the situation that species will not be reported when their presence will conflict with other land use decisions.

The lack of data could be helped by encouraging individuals or community groups to survey for biodiversity, and provide training support and expertise for them to access this. The idea of 'community scientists' is appealing on many levels, not least because it engages people with their environment.

Interest point 8.

Should private conservation data be collected and if so how?

Ideally, private conservation data should be collected; however, this would have to be done in a way that did not conflict with people's right to privacy on their property. We would not tolerate someone coming to our property and wandering around to collect data without our consent. We think the property owner is the best person to collect this data in the first instance, perhaps in partnership with other people skilled in the particular kind of survey being conducted.