

National Parks Association of the Australian Capital Territory Inc. Submission for Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy

The National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT) was formed in 1960 to lobby for a national park for the national capital which ultimately resulted in the declaration of Namadgi National Park in 1984. The Association has since been involved in a wide variety of activities to promote conservation of nature including making submissions for management plans for Namadgi and other national park and reserves and lobbying ACT and federal politicians to protect the environment. The Association also runs outings and activities, puts on a bi-annual symposium to promote scientific research and runs work parties to remove weeds, plant trees, and to restore degraded areas in the national park. It also has an interest in conserving the ACT's bushland, and in conservation in NSW and other areas of Australia.

NPA ACT's members along with many others value the Australian bush for its uniqueness, its beauty and diversity, and to relax physically and mentally while enjoying it and appreciating the value of biodiversity for its own sake. This is becoming increasingly important as a release from our frenetic, highly urbanised and pressured society.

NPA ACT's active members are a dedicated team of volunteers, many with a background in the sciences and a deep interest in the natural history of the ACT and beyond. They have built up an extensive knowledge bank and look for supportive directives and actions from government, both local and federal.

Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy: strengths

The *Strategy* provides a useful overview on what biodiversity is; what the threats are; and how it should be protected in general terms.

We support statements such as the following in the strategy:

- Biodiversity is essential for our existence.
- Biodiversity is of value in its own right.
- We should apply the precautionary approach to biodiversity conservation. (*The strategy's vision*, p.8);
- We also know that pressure from expanding human populations, the ongoing intensification of resource uses and the impacts of climate change present our generation with the responsibility for action. (1 *Call to action*, p. 9).
- The recognition of knowledge gaps (A5.2 *Knowledge and uncertainty*, p. 60).

Valuable information also lies in the appendices, particularly the snapshots of Australia's biodiversity, which describe the landscapes at risk and the list of threats.

Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy: weaknesses

The Strategy proposes no specific strategies to:

- provide a basis for boosting funding of the environmental budget that oversees our national parks and reserves without resorting to their commercialisation;
- help overcome discrepancies between local, state or territory, and federal jurisdictions;
- strengthen national environmental legislation (eg the EPBC Act) and frameworks;
- appoint an independent national body to monitor, audit and assess major developments Australia-wide that impact on the environment;
- ensure that environmental legislation is enacted upon with substantial fines for heavy industry polluters and illicit land clearing;
- sufficiently emphasise the value of biodiversity for its own sake. A nation's psyche and morale can be affected as much by environmental destruction and erosion of our biodiversity as by an economic downturn. The *Strategy* has a largely anthropocentric

approach where the environment is seen as a resource where a “triage” approach is necessary.

In the sections *Call to action*, *Background*, and *Making enduring changes*, the *Strategy* makes many general statements which summarise the actions necessary to protect biodiversity against climate change. Although the statements are valid and provide an overview and timely reminder, they do not provide new information or direct national activities into new directions or channels.

Nor do they provide sufficient specific information about how the *Strategy* will be enacted to achieve the urgent and very necessary outcomes against the rapid acceleration of climate change which is overtaking environmental strategies nationally and globally.

Need for change in government priorities

For many years, conservation organisations and local landcare groups have been exchanging information, working with, and providing advice to, government environmental authorities. These community groups can see very clearly that governments at all levels must change their priorities to at least attempt to keep pace with climate change. Environment portfolios must be given a higher priority than previously because of the increased threats the environment is facing. The *Strategy* does not acknowledge this.

Without a healthy environment, the economy will continue to deteriorate. Until the environment is given top priority, the value of strategies like the *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy* is debatable; the actions necessary to protect Australia's biodiversity require legislative, financial and committed government support.

Jurisdictional challenges facing Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy

One of the challenges facing any national biodiversity strategy is Australia's three-tier system of government: local or council, state or territory, and federal. Each level of government in Australia has its corresponding set of legislation which can cause conflict and be detrimental to environmental and biodiversity protection. This aspect is not discussed in detail in the *Strategy*, yet this problem lies at the heart of the failure of many cross-jurisdictional initiatives.

For example, the *Strategy* states as an ideal “All levels of government are using nationally consistent baseline datasets linked to state of the environment reporting that include key indicators, measure biodiversity conditions and trends over time, are used to inform and help fine tune policy.” (Table 3.6 *Priority for change* 6: *Measuring success*, 6.1.1, *Results* p. 44). Under the corresponding *Actions* for 6.1.1 we see: “Build baseline datasets, including key indicators, to measure biodiversity condition and trends over time.”

While this is a worthy ideal, there is no information on how it will be achieved, or in fact how it will be financed. Further, the *Strategy* does not address how these datasets will be achieved between three levels of government.

- **We suggest that an independent body should be authorised by the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council to design, collect and analyse data and to report nationally on the health of our biodiversity.**

Local, state and federal legislation

It is a matter of record that state and federal governments have failed to act to protect biodiversity. There is no indication as to how such failures, as documented below, would be avoided under the new *Strategy*. Significant failures of existing legislation include:

- **Sydney:** population growth and consumption is straining urban infrastructure and

increasing the city's ecological footprint. If a council decides to reduce the scale of medium or high density residential development to protect nearby bushland and its biodiversity, or because local infrastructure and services cannot support greater numbers, the NSW state government can and often does override the decision.

- **Gunns Pulp Mill, Tasmania** is a highly questionable project because of the toxic effluent which will affect the Tamar River, and ultimately Bass Strait. Emissions will cause health concerns and are likely to affect local agriculture. The previous Tasmanian premier heavily influenced procedures. The federal government's initial suppression of a relevant CSIRO briefing paper by Dr Martin Herzfeld did not increase public confidence in the federal government's judgements. Independent monitoring of the project, should it eventuate, is not assured. The *Strategy* does not address how independent monitoring can be assured in such circumstances yet it relies on reliable monitoring and data collection to report on its overall success.
- **Gungahlin Drive Extension (ACT):** In 2004, the contents of the Gungahlin Drive Extension Authorisation Bill 2004, show the ACT government authorised that “The amendments of the *Land (Planning and Environment) Regulations 1992* made by the *Land (Planning and Environment) Amendment Regulations 2004 (No 1)* SL2004-12 have effect, and are taken to have had effect from the day after their notification day, as if they had been enacted by an Act.” After altering the legislation, against significant and informed community opposition based on science, the ACT government allowed the Gungahlin Drive Extension, a major roadway, to proceed by revoking part of Black Mountain Nature Reserve. The action affected local biodiversity in two significant ways:
 - the habitat of the Southern Boobook (*Ninox boobook*) was fragmented and resident Southern Boobooks have since disappeared from Black Mountain Nature Reserve in Canberra (Jerry Olsen, University of Canberra, pers. comm). The effects of the GDE development stand in stark contrast to key strategies proposed in the *Strategy*: “Conservation connectivity and building resilience will be key strategies to ensure that natural systems have the capacity to adapt to shifting climatic zones”.
 - Securing and enhancing critical intact habitats through the National Reserve System is the most important and immediate step we can take to increase ecosystem resilience (Taylor and Figgis 2007). Restoring habitat connectivity through restoration and revegetation on private lands and linking with core protected areas will also be important adaptation strategies. (Appendix 9 *Threats to biodiversity* A9.1 *Climate change*, p.83). The Southern Boobook’s habitat has little chance of being restored when it has been reduced and is under threat of further reduction and fragmentation.
- **East O'Malley (ACT):** this is a case of endangered yellow box woodland being destroyed in 2003 in the suburb of East O'Malley to clear the way for residential development. The woodlands provided habitat for the scarlet robin, a flagship species (Stateline transcript, O'Malley woodlands, 16/5/2003).
 - The *Strategy* states: “Box woodlands ... once covered about 10 million hectares of southeastern Australia. Temperate woodland is one of the most extensively cleared and modified ecosystems in Australia ...” (Appendix 7 *Snapshots of Australia's biodiversity*, A7.2 *Temperate woodlands, grassy woodlands and grasslands*, pp 65-66).

- **Pressures on Majura and Belconnen natural temperate grasslands (ACT):** An increase in the number of Eastern Grey Kangaroos has led to indiscriminate grazing pressure on the endangered natural temperate grasslands on Defence land at Majura and Belconnen. Between the two sites, the grasslands provide habitat for several endangered species: the Sun moth (*Synemon plana*), the vulnerable Perunga Grasshopper (*Perungra ochracea*), the Striped Legless Lizard (*Delma impar*), the Grassland Earless Dragon (*Tympanocryptis pinguicolla*), the Button Wrinklewort (*Rutidosis leptorrhynchoides*), Canberra Spider Orchid (*Arachnorchis actensis*), the Brown Treecreeper (*Climacteris picummus victoriae*), and Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata cucullata*). These species were cited by The Limestone Plains Group in a letter dated 8 October 2007 to the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.
 - The ACT Government has no capacity to enforce protective measures on the Department of Defence under the current provisions of the EPBC Act.
- **Namadgi Plan of Management unacceptably delayed (ACT):** a final version of the *Namadgi National Park Plan of Management*, first released as a draft in September 2005 (to supersede the 1986 *Namadgi National Park Management Plan* prepared under Commonwealth legislation) is still not finalised. Not only is the Management Plan unavailable but there have been no annual reports against the current Namadgi Plan of Management. With such a situation, it is impossible to evaluate official data on monitoring or auditing the ecological changes in Namadgi National Park with which climate change is associated and to assess how biodiversity is being affected.

In the face of increasing pressure from the mining, transport, building and timber industries (among others) the legislation to protect biodiversity needs to be strengthened. The *Strategy* provides an excellent opportunity to set out how such legislation should be framed and the common areas it should encompass across all jurisdictions but it fails to address this issue.

- A key element of jointly agreed legislation should be identical provisions in state and federal legislation for identifying, naming and imposing substantial fines for heavy industry polluters and illicit land clearing.

Need for cross-border cooperation to achieve whole-of-landscape outcomes

The *Strategy* has clear grounds to propose stronger national protection legislation because of its own acknowledgement of the need to manage on a whole-of-landscape approach. The Australian Alpine National Parks is a classic example of the need for different governments to co-operate and use common planning, programs and evaluations in order to protect our valuable biodiversity. Sensitive and fragile alpine and subalpine ecosystems occur in the ACT, NSW and Victorian alpine parks and are particularly vulnerable to climate change and fire.

The *Strategy* itself emphasises the biodiversity significance of the Alps: “Despite representing less than 1% of Australia, this unique landscape is considered to be of national and international significance (Kirkpatrick 1994). The Australian Alps contain the most significant extent of alpine communities in mainland Australia, and the area is identified as a centre of vascular plant endemism. The Alps contain 14 wetlands of national significance, 78 types of ecosystems (23 identified as threatened) and more than 20 state or nationally listed vulnerable or endangered species.”(Appendix 7 *Snapshots of Australia's biodiversity*, A7.1, p. 64).

With neighbouring national parks in different states it is vital to have uniform environmental legislation and protection but this is not the case. For example, invasive animal species

common to both the ACT and NSW alpine parks include horses, pigs, foxes, deer, and rabbits. However, there are quite different approaches in eradicating eg. feral horses.

- Feral horses cause substantial damage by trampling vegetation, wetlands and bogs, damaging stream banks and causing siltation and creek erosion (*Kosciuszko National Park Horse Management Plan* December 2008, *Impacts of Horses* pp 8-10). Feral horses have moved from northern KNP in NSW into Namadgi National Park in the ACT and into Victoria (*KNP Horse Management Plan*, p. 14). This is of particular concern because Kosciuszko National Park is the source of several significant rivers: the Snowy, the Murrumbidgee, and the Murray while Namadgi is the source of the Cotter River which provides most of Canberra's water supply. Recently the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Snowy Mountains Region Advisory Committee expressed concern about the direct impact of feral horses on the Corroboree Frog Recovery Program (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, News Release, May 12, 2009).
- The ACT government culls feral horses which NPA ACT endorses. In contrast, the NSW government, in response to the powerful horse riding lobby and animal liberationists will not permit culling although the number of horses in KNP has been estimated at 1700 in 2005 (*Kosciuszko National Park Horse Management Plan* December 2008, *Introduction* p.1).
- The Kosciuszko National Park Horse Management Community Steering Group has advised on the *Horse Management Plan* which advocates trials to remove feral horses only from key areas in the park. They involve trapping feral horses using lures and mustering using low stress techniques (*Kosciuszko National Park Horse Management Plan* December 2008, p.25). The numbers of feral horses removed by such methods cannot match their rate of increase and the damage they cause.
- Recreational horse riding is provided for in northern KNP to the detriment of the natural environment and there is pressure to continue the trend in Namadgi. NPA ACT has incorporated suggestions to re-route the Bicentennial National Trail in its submission to the Draft Namadgi Plan of Management to follow the border of NNP. It remains to be seen if the advice is accepted.

Commercialisation of national parks

The *Strategy* cites “pressure from tourism” (A7.1 *Australian Alps*, p.65) as one of the threats to the Alps but makes no strategic recommendations. NPA ACT has concerns about the increasing trend towards commercialisation in national parks and is monitoring the situation in Namadgi National Park to prevent what has already occurred and is intensifying in Kosciuszko National Park. Just recently the New South Wales government has enabled Perisher Blue to consolidate 10 leases into one to accommodate 800 beds in the fragile alpine ecosystem and to enable the construction of a substantial new shopping centre in the alpine area. NPA ACT's policy is that commercial development and tourist attractions be developed outside national parks to protect biodiversity and to benefit the local communities. We are disappointed to find no support for this sensible approach in the *Strategy*.

- The *Strategy* should identify a minimum level of funding for protecting biodiversity which all governments commit to as part of their endorsement of the *Strategy*.

Fire trails

The *Strategy* identifies inappropriate fire regimes as one of the six key threats to biodiversity in Australia yet puts nothing in place to address this. In the wake of the severe fire in 2003

that burned much of Namadgi National Park, NPA ACT recommends that “hazard reduction burns” be ecologically based, taking into account habitat variability, the sensitivity of different plant regimes to fire and their differing responses to the length of time between “hazard reduction burns.” We are disappointed that there is nothing to support a sound scientific approach to fire management for biodiversity goals in the strategy. The *Strategy’s* discussion of protecting biodiversity against a background of firestorms of increasing intensity is also limited.

Valuing biodiversity for its own sake

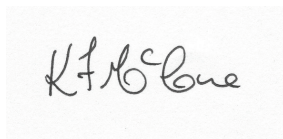
At the heart of our disappointment in the *Strategy* is its unwillingness to give sufficient emphasis to valuing biodiversity for its own sake. Other than an initial comment, there is nothing in any of the priorities for change, nor in the actions or results which gives any credence to the value of all the different species and ecosystems for their own sake. This is a human-centric document and is not merely poorer for that; this approach will impact strongly on the *Strategy’s* ability to deliver strong and successful, outcomes.

Conclusion

While NPA ACT welcomes Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy it is disappointed that it proposes no specific strategies to:

- strengthen national environmental legislation (eg the EPBC Act) and frameworks;
- appoint an independent national body to monitor, audit and assess major developments Australia wide that impact on the environment;
- ensure that environmental legislation is enacted upon with substantial fines for heavy industry polluters and illicit land clearing;
- help overcome discrepancies between local, state or territory, and federal jurisdictions;
- provide a basis for boosting funding of the environmental budget that oversees our national parks and reserves without resorting to their commercialisation;
- sufficiently emphasise the value of biodiversity for its own sake. A nation's psyche and morale can be affected as much by environmental destruction and erosion of our biodiversity as by an economic downturn. The *Strategy* has a largely anthropocentric approach where the environment is seen as a resource where a “triage” approach is necessary.

NPA ACT sincerely hopes that a modified National Biodiversity Strategy can help achieve significant and positive change in conserving Australia's environment and biodiversity. Nationally and globally, the environment and humankind face a serious crisis. For the environment, urgent leadership and action is required. Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy is a start but its omissions need remedying.



for
Judy Kelly
NPA ACT Committee Member
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