



## 10-year review of the Nature Conservation Act 2014 and the Nature Conservation Strategy 2013 – 2023

The National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT) is a community-based conservation organization with more than 60-years of experience in helping to protect the natural environment through an active program of walks and outings, work parties, participation in Parkcare activities, publications, public meetings and conferences, advocacy, and support for scientific research.

### Overall opinion

NPA ACT believes that the *Nature Conservation Act 2014* (NCA) has failed to achieve its central objective to protect, conserve and enhance biodiversity in the ACT. In the past decade, 23 additional species have been listed as threatened, the landscape is more fragmented, and the urban footprint has expanded.

### General comments

NPA ACT notes and strongly supports the Conservation Council ACT Region's submission on this review.

The following matters are of particular concern to us:

- State of Environment Reports (SOE) over the period in question clearly show that the government is failing to meet the NCA's central objectives and the related targets of the NCS.
- Even when SOE and NCS implementation reports reveal negative outcomes, this does not appear to trigger corrective action – just more reporting!
- Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) is the key organization created under the NCA to deliver results for the Conservator and NCS strategic goals. There needs to be an explicit strategic goal in the NCS to be able to maintain a high standard of environmental and cultural stewardship.
  - PCS is only as good as its people. In recent years, it has had a poor record in attracting skilled recruits, providing opportunities for professional development, and retaining experienced operational staff. This has led to a thinning out of expertise, putting conservation values at risk. PCS should transition to a professional ranger force with mandatory degree-level qualifications, as with NSW NPWS. This could be implemented over several years by supporting existing rangers to upgrade their skills and providing a bespoke pathway for indigenous staff.
  - PCS field staff who are authorized officers under the NCA should receive certified training in compliance. Education and warnings can only go so far. Credible conservation land-management requires authorized officers who can enforce the

rules. This review should include consultation with the Australian Federal Police and frontline PCS staff to capture all lessons learnt.

- Conservation on leased lands should be possible under the NCA through methods detailed in the Biodiversity Network paper and Conservation Council ACT submission. However, the NCA should preclude anomalous situations such as the Kinleyside Nature Reserve, which is on a rural lease and closed to the public. Its designation as a nature reserve incongruously implies that public access is permitted when entry would presumably require the lessee's permission. .
- Reservation of land as national parks and similar protected areas should come under the NCA rather than the Planning Act. Boundaries of these areas and any adjustments should require parliamentary approval .
- Where feasible, IUCN benchmarking for sustainability standards should applied to protected areas in the ACT (<https://iucngreenlist.org/about/>).
- Environmental offsets are failing to 'deliver an overall conservation outcome that 'maintains or improves' the value in question. A comprehensive review of environmental offsets, including public consultation, is needed. In future, offset policy should sit primarily under the NCA, not the Planning Act.
- Loss of ecological connectivity is the most obvious failure of the NCS. In the past 10 years, large areas of land have been cleared as the urban footprint relentlessly expands. In 2022, the Conservation Council ACT and Friends of Grasslands co-authored a paper titled 'A Biodiversity Network for the ACT' that succinctly describes the situation and offers practical remedies (<https://conservationcouncil.org.au/publications/>). These should be considered for incorporation into the NCS.
- The actions and outcomes of the NCS should primarily be based on SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound) principles. Most strategic goals can, and should be, framed this way and would make the NCS far more accountable.
- Review of the NCS should be coordinated with reviews of related environmental issues including management of weeds, pest animals, bushfires, and water, to ensure consistency across these increasingly siloed areas.
- The Conservator should retain authority to protect natural and cultural values in emergencies. Incident Management Teams (IMT) should include a trained values officer authorized under the NCA 2014. Protection of life will in all cases have priority. Property is not as clear cut. It is more important to protect an alpine bog than a shed or a fence, and IMT decisions should reflect that.
- Science has demonstrated that invasive species are a huge and immediate threat to biodiversity and a key driver of the current crisis. We believe that invasive species deserve more attention from government, including in this review. The NCS deals with this through reference to the Weeds Strategy 2009 – 19 and the Pest Animal Management Strategy 2012 – 22. Both should be subject to expert review as the impact of weeds and feral animals on the biodiversity continues to worsen.
- All new Land Management Agreements should be consistent with NCA/NCS objectives and include inspection and compliance provisions that align with a nil tenure approach to nature conservation.

- We are concerned about an apparent disconnect between the philosophy, aims and actions of the specialist teams responsible for managing invasive species, including the native dingo, and the Office of Nature Conservation, responsible for native species and the Nature Conservation Strategy. The current administrative structure reflects a view of invasive species that applied in the post-war ACT when primary production was regarded as all-important. In this biodiversity crisis the environmental impacts of invasive species are of far greater concern than their economic impacts. This disconnect is a serious strategic disadvantage.
- Retention of healthy plant and animal communities is one of the most cost-effective conservation strategies. Therefore the ecological-community-based ACT Woodland Strategy, ACT Native Grassland Strategy, and the conservation culling program of the Eastern Grey Kangaroo Controlled Native Species Management Plan are seen as preferable to individual action plans for threatened species. The woodland and grassland strategies need to be given higher priority in planning and development decisions: offsets are no substitute.
- Many other threatened species remain to be assessed and declared. The Tree Goanna (*Varanus varius*), one of our largest native predators, was widespread and relatively abundant in Canberra but is now almost extinct in the ACT and sparsely distributed in the local region. Several small mammals also appear to be in trouble in the ACT (e.g. Bush Rat, *Rattus fuscipes*) or are probably already extinct in the wild (e.g. the Yellow Footed Antechinus *A. flavipes*). No government resources are presently allocated to identify such species or find out why they are disappearing faster in the ACT than in NSW, nor to reverse this trend. The NCS should include actions to actively identify species under threat to ensure there are no more extinctions in the ACT
- There seems to be a growing trend towards online, tick-the -box reviews that are more focused on generating reports than improving conservation outcomes. The detailed responses of community groups such as the Conservation Council, NPA ACT and Canberra Ornithologists Group should be given much more weight than those of a member of the public who spends a few minutes ticking boxes in an online survey. A recent survey, 'Determining the impacts of Invasive species in the ACT', is a good example of a largely meaningless review. Effective consultation should support complex, nuanced responses.

If you require further information on our comments or our organization, please contact John McRae, convener, NPA ACT Environment Subcommittee on 0402 297 738 or [john@npaact.org.au](mailto:john@npaact.org.au) .

Yours sincerely

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