



Australian Network of Environmental  
Defender's Offices Inc

## **Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Communication and Environment Inquiry into recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events**

**18 January 2013**

The Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (ANEDO) consists of nine independently constituted and managed community environmental law centres located in each State and Territory of Australia.

Each EDO is dedicated to protecting the environment in the public interest. EDOs provide legal representation and advice, take an active role in environmental law reform and policy formulation, and offer a significant education program designed to facilitate public participation in environmental decision making.

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## Introduction

The Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (**ANEDO**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee inquiry into extreme weather events. As a network of community legal centres, we have a significant body of experience in climate change–related policy analysis and law reform.

In recent years ANEDO has made submissions to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation;<sup>1</sup> and to federal inquiries into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate,<sup>2</sup> the Carbon Farming Initiative,<sup>3</sup> and the Clean Energy Future Legislation.<sup>4</sup>

Our offices have also been heavily involved in state planning law reforms, and have emphasised the importance of making planning laws 'climate change ready'.<sup>5</sup> As well as submissions to relevant state inquiries and government consultations, this work includes federal submissions to the Productivity Commission's inquiry on planning, zoning and development assessments;<sup>6</sup> and submissions on the COAG proposals to streamline development assessments and approvals.

This submission addresses the following issues:

1. Climate Change, adaptation and extreme events
2. The need to plan for the prospect of non-linear climate change and for resilience and adaptive capacity in social, economic and ecological systems
3. The climate change readiness of environmental planning systems
4. Institutional innovation
5. Practical innovation
  - a. Embedding ESD in all government decision-making
  - b. Considering climate change impacts and adaptation in policy and legislative proposals
  - c. Building resilience in Australia's biodiversity
  - d. Building the status, capability and responsive capacity of local government
6. Climate justice considerations

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission inquiry information at [www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/climate-change-adaptation/draft](http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/climate-change-adaptation/draft). All ANEDO submissions are available at <http://www.edo.org.au/policy/policy.html>.

<sup>2</sup> ANEDO, *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's Biodiversity in a Changing Climate*, 5 August 2011.

<sup>3</sup> ANEDO, *Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Carbon Farming Initiative Bills*, 8 April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> ANEDO, *Inquiry into Australia's Clean Energy Future*, 22 September 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, EDO NSW, *Submission to the Review of the NSW Planning System (Stage 1)*, 4 November 2011, [www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review\\_nsw\\_planning\\_stage\\_1.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review_nsw_planning_stage_1.pdf); Environment Defenders Office (Vic) and Victorian National Parks Association Inc., *Submission in Response to Coastal Climate Change Advisory Committee Issues and Options Paper February 2010*, 12 May 2010, [www.edovic.org.au/law-reform/submissions-and-issues-papers/coastal-climate-change](http://www.edovic.org.au/law-reform/submissions-and-issues-papers/coastal-climate-change).

<sup>6</sup> ANEDO, *Submission on the Productivity Commission Issues Paper – Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Planning, Zoning and Development Assessments*, 16 July 2009; and *Submission on the Productivity Commission's Draft Research Report – Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Planning, Zoning and Development Assessments*, 1 April 2011.

## **1. Climate change, adaptation and extreme events**

Links between climate change and extreme weather now have a strong scientific basis, although correlations between climate change and extreme events are complex, high-variable and replete with uncertainties, especially in applying links or trends at local scale or in respect of individual events.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a Special Report on the risks of extreme events and disasters related to climate change (SREX).<sup>8</sup> This report dealt with a broad range of issues and included in its findings the likelihood of increased temperature extremes, increases in precipitation and drought events, increases in cyclone intensity and sea level rise, and increases in related disaster phenomena (such as landslides and storm surges). More recently, Australia's Climate Commission has published a report on extreme summer heat<sup>9</sup> that confirms and is consistent with trends to extreme weather events deriving from the changing climate. As noted, the Productivity Commission has also undertaken an inquiry into climate change adaptation, with Government yet to release the final report.

The issue of climate change adaptation necessarily takes into account the greater likelihood, magnitude, intensity and/or frequency of extreme events.

What might fall within the concept of 'extreme events' for the Committee's purposes is open to interpretation. Increased frequency, intensity and magnitude of events such as hot days, floods, bushfires, and cyclones clearly fall within the ambit of the Committee's deliberations. Insofar as 'extreme' events equate to events tipping over some threshold identified with norms or stable conditions, other events associated with climate change may be considered relevant, such as mass coral bleaching events or ocean acidification processes.

Our remarks are limited to those Terms of Reference dealing with institutional, regulatory and governmental processes and responses, especially those with an environmental and planning law dimension. In particular:

- (c) 'an assessment of the preparedness of key sectors for extreme weather events...' (and relatedly, 'impacts on natural ecosystems'); and
- (f) 'progress in developing effective national coordination of climate change response and risk management, including legislative and regulatory reform, standards and codes, taxation arrangements and economic instruments;'

## **2. The need to plan for the prospect of non-linear climate change and for resilience and adaptive capacity in social, economic and ecological systems**

There is a scientific consensus that climate change is already occurring and, by virtue of systemic inertia, global warming to a certain degree is already 'locked in'.<sup>10</sup> We are already facing the pressing issues of climate adaptation and more frequent and intense extreme events. These issues need to be considered alongside the question of mitigation, control and stabilisation of existing warming trends. That is to say, adaptation

<sup>7</sup> See generally, for example, Thomas Peterson, Peter Scott and Stephanie Herring 'Explaining extreme events of 2011 from a climate perspective' (2012) 93 *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 7 1041; see also James Hansen, Makiko Sato and Reto Ruedy 'Perceptions of climate change' (2012) 109 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 37 E2415

<sup>8</sup> IPCC Managing the risks of extreme events and disasters to advance climate change adaptation: special report – summary for policy-makers (2012), <http://www.ipcc-wg2.gov/SREX/> (viewed 10 January 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Climate Commission *Off the Charts: Extreme Australian Summer Heat* (2013), at <http://climatecommission.gov.au/report/off-charts-extreme-january-heat-2013/> (viewed 14 January 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See generally Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report* (2007), 30, 45-47

and mitigation policies must go hand in hand. It is necessary for mitigation policies to have regard to the 'safe operating space'<sup>11</sup> in which average global warming can occur (such as the '2 degrees' threshold); not least because warming in excess of that threshold has a fundamental impact on the nature, scope and likelihood of extreme events and necessary adaptation. Humanity is operating at or beyond these limits now.<sup>12</sup>

Policy, legislative or institutional responses to climate adaptation need to anticipate more extreme events with greater magnitude or intensity. Greater levels of uncertainty need also to be factored into decision-making. Government and official planning for climate change needs to take account of the likely non-linear character of this change and thereby take account of the prospect of critical thresholds (such as the 'safe operating space') in the climate system and the gravity of the mitigation and adaptation tasks. We concur with the views of the CSIRO in its response<sup>13</sup> to the Productivity Commission's draft adaptation report<sup>14</sup> that there is the need for the correct 'framing' of the issue and that such framing must include climate adaptation efforts that take account of non-linear change (which appears increasingly likely), social and institutional inertia, the need for the national leadership of government and requirements for systemic analysis across sectors and economies.

Government action needs to be ambitious and innovative but it also needs to be placed on a new footing, one that acknowledges ecological change is increasingly unpredictable and irreversible.<sup>15</sup> The environmental context in which Government and society are operating is one in which it is necessary to anticipate, prepare and adapt. Increasingly important goals in climate change adaptation planning and preparation to extreme weather events will be resilience and adaptive capacity, in human and in natural systems.

### 3. The climate change readiness of environmental planning systems

As noted above, ANEDO has made various submissions relating to climate change adaptation. Relevant submissions are attached to this submission, including ANEDO's response to the 2011 House of Representatives inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate (**Attachment A**) and ANEDO's submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into barriers to climate change adaptation (**Attachment B**).

The ANEDO submission to the House of Representatives inquiry into biodiversity in a changing climate noted:<sup>16</sup>

...biodiversity conservation under a rapidly changing climate will require new ways of thinking that acknowledge the likely changes and uncertainties of climate change impacts on species and ecosystems. It will require a governance framework focused on managing and responding to a dynamic system.

In response to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into barriers to climate change adaptation, ANEDO identified a number of key issues that need to be considered in governmental decision-making and action.<sup>17</sup> These include:

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<sup>11</sup> Johan Rockstrom et al 'A safe operating space for humanity' (2009) 461 *Nature* 472.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See CSIRO *Submission 12/448 to Productivity Commission Draft Report: Barriers to effective climate change adaptation* (2012), [http://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/117511/subdr136.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/117511/subdr136.pdf) (viewed 14 January 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Productivity Commission *Barriers to effective climate change adaptation – Draft report* (2012).

<sup>15</sup> See Robin Kundis Craig "'Stationarity is dead": Long live transformation: five principles for climate change adaptation law' (2010) 34 *Harvard Environmental Law Review* 9, especially 31-40.

<sup>16</sup> ANEDO *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate* (2011), 2, at [http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110805aust\\_biodiversity.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110805aust_biodiversity.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> ANEDO *Submission to Productivity Commission Draft Report: Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation* (2012), at <http://www.edo.org.au/120608Productivity Commission Climate adaptation barriers.pdf>.

- nationally consistent regulation and guidance on local government liability;
- the need for robust, scientifically-based strategic planning;
- problems with restrictive planning frameworks, especially as available to local government, limiting innovative planning and policy responses to climate change impacts and limiting local development of resilience and adaptive capacity;
- lack of State and Territory government leadership on adaptation frameworks and systems;
- the need for fast-track 'green development' options;
- the lack of national sustainability standards; and
- the lack of innovative and flexible best-practice building standards.

State and Territory planning and development systems are essential to the integration of environmental protection, social issues and economic development in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Australia. As they regulate the way our communities are built, link together and relate to the natural world, planning systems are also central to climate change and extreme event preparedness. Unfortunately, despite a considerable amount of legislative and regulatory reform occurring at the state level, integration of environmental protection and planning systems has not been very successful to date. Planning systems have also been slow to come to grips with planning for climate change.

For example, the NSW Government's Green Paper on *A new planning system for NSW* (September 2012) set out a proposed vision for a new planning system in NSW. In subsequent consultations, the Green Paper has been widely criticised for placing excessive weight on economic development, and little emphasis on social development or environmental protection as part of a forward-looking, 21<sup>st</sup>-century planning system. The Green Paper does not refer to climate change mitigation or adaptation.

'Climate change readiness' was a key issue raised in the EDO NSW submission on the Green Paper.<sup>18</sup> Relevant recommendations included:

- adopting ecologically sustainable development (ESD) as the overarching aim of the planning system, and embedding ESD considerations and principles in all stages of the system;
- ensuring the direct and indirect impacts of climate change are mandatory considerations in the strategic planning phase;
- establishing a robust approach to coastal climate change adaptation (including, for example, statutory controls on buffer zones, restrictive zoning, setbacks and resilience measures);
- adopting comprehensive frameworks to assess the climate change implications of development proposals, particularly major projects (from both mitigation and adaptation perspectives).

A general tenor of these submissions is that there is a need for government leadership, rigour and vision on the question of emergent climate change impacts, having regard to the level of uncertainty involved.

At the same time, there are concerns that COAG proposals to 'streamline' environmental assessment and planning laws, as well as climate change programs, could further hinder progress on climate change and disaster preparedness.

Further, we submit that there is a strong need for national leadership of the issue of climate change adaptation. The Federal Government is being increasingly drawn into such areas of action in largely reactive ways, for example through assistance in response to natural disasters and emergencies. The need for more strategic and long-term intervention by the Federal Government is also evident, such as in the context of

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<sup>18</sup> See [http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/120914A\\_New\\_Planning\\_System\\_for\\_NSW.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/120914A_New_Planning_System_for_NSW.pdf).

planning for the Murray-Darling Basin. We submit that the Federal Government will find itself increasingly compelled to take more considered, prospective and strategic action on climate change adaptation issues.

#### **4. Institutional innovation**

At an institutional level, an independent, scientifically focused lead government agency is needed to advise on natural, social, institutional and economic developments, prospective changes, strategies and planning. That is to say, there is a need for an authoritative climate change adaptation body, which will undertake investigation and planning, coordinate other institutions and actors, and advise government and the public generally. Presently, the Climate Commission has a limited remit along these lines,<sup>19</sup> but its functions and resources are limited and they are not targeted specifically to the climate adaptation problem. The Climate Change Authority has a mandate generally limited to review of mitigation efforts.<sup>20</sup> What is required is an institution comparable to those with high-level economic planning advisory functions, such as the Productivity Commission and predecessor organisations,<sup>21</sup> but in this context a body dedicated to development of adaptive capacity, underpinned by a systems thinking approach, informed by independent scientific expertise and the accumulated knowledge of the general community, and adequately resourced to undertake innovative long-term thinking. The Climate Commission could be developed into such an entity, providing advice and recommendations on both mitigation and adaptation issues.

#### **5. Practical innovation**

##### **a) Embedding Ecologically Sustainable Development in all government decision-making**

The principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) should be key considerations in all major Commonwealth legislative initiatives. ESD principles encompass generally:

- the integration of long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations into decision-making;
- the precautionary principle;
- intergenerational equity and intra-generational equity in decision-making;
- the conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity;
- improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms.

ESD principles should not be limited solely to those areas of Government activity identified as 'environmental.' This wider 'socio-ecological' approach to development was the model anticipated by the 1992 *Rio Declaration* and the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*<sup>22</sup> and it is appropriate, given the comprehensive socio-ecological problems posed by the need for climate change adaptation, that ESD principles be applied more expansively than solely to matters falling under the scope of environmental law.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, Climate Commission Terms of Reference at <http://climatecommission.gov.au/about/terms-of-reference/> (viewed 16 January 2013).

<sup>20</sup> *Climate Change Authority Act 2011* (Cth), ss 11-13.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the Economic Planning Advisory Council, previously established under the now repealed *Economic Planning Advisory Council Act 1983* (Cth).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/index.html> (viewed 17 January 2013).

## **b) Considering climate change impacts and adaptation in policy and legislative proposals**

Developing the adaptive capacity of Government to consistently factor in climate change impacts and associated uncertainties will be an important response to the challenges noted above. It is a valuable part of the legislative and policy-making processes for decision-makers to have available to them analysis and/or expert input into proposed legislative or policy measures. This information is provided in a range of ways, including Parliamentary inquiries, explanatory or regulatory statements,<sup>23</sup> or, in the case of environmental decision-making, impact assessments. With policy and legislative proposals, systematic requirement for analyses or statements in respect of associated climate change impacts or climate adaptation problems would, in our view, be valuable in informing legislators of prospective impacts of those proposals. Such requirements may take different forms. For instance, there may be scope for the use of expanded explanatory memoranda considering prospective climate change impacts and adaptation issues associated with policy or proposed laws, or statements analogous to regulatory impact statements (for example, climate impact statements). Alternatively, statutory mechanisms could be introduced to require legislative, policy or regulatory proposals to be the subject of inquiry and/or assessment for the purposes of considering climate impacts including climate change adaptation needs and prospects. Present requirements for such analysis and consideration as operate, for example, under the US *National Environmental Policy Act*, may be a useful approach or starting point for development of such requirements.<sup>24</sup> The relevant extract from that legislation is appended to this submission at **Appendix 1**.

## **c) Build resilience in Australia's biodiversity**

Adaptation and preparedness to deal with extreme weather events will require greater resilience in Australia's ecological systems. A key message from Australia's State of the Environment Report 2011 is that 'Our unique biodiversity is in decline, and new approaches will be needed to prevent accelerating decline in many species.'<sup>25</sup> The ANEDO submission to the House of Representatives inquiry into biodiversity in a changing climate has responded comprehensively to the issue of how greater resilience can be built into these systems and responds to the continuing decline in Australia's biodiversity. Included in the key recommendations of that submission are:

- strengthening ecosystem resilience and facilitating adaptation and the use of adaptive management principles;
- fast-tracking implementation of National Reserve System and including climate change considerations and adaptive management principles expressly in management tools;
- giving greater focus to threat abatement planning;
- legislating improvements to landscape scale assessment and planning;
- further facilitating conservation on private land;
- conserving biodiversity must remain a fundamental principle in all adaptation and mitigation response to climate change.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, *Legislative Instruments Act 2003* (Cth), s 26; *Subordinate Legislation Act 1994* (Vic), ss 10, 12E.

<sup>24</sup> *National Environmental Policy Act* 42 USC 4321 (1969), s 102:

<sup>25</sup> Australian Government State of the Environment Committee, *State of the Environment Report 2011*, 'Headlines'.

#### **d) Building the status, capability and responsive capacity of local government**

Local government across Australia is too often considered as an afterthought in governmental action and decision-making generally, although local government is effectively on the 'front line' of climate change. Local government has acquired a broad range of functions relevant to planning for extreme weather events and to climate change adaptation although this level of government retains as a general rule limited resources and limited powers.

The status of local government and the resources, skills, information and competence available to local governments need to be boosted substantially. Among other changes that need to be implemented in respect of local government are development of uniform national provisions for local government liability for climate-related impacts<sup>26</sup> and the development of common or standard planning instruments providing guidance to local government on matters such as coastal planning in the context of climate change.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, State Governments need to move away from the present contradictory and/or regressive signals on climate change adaptation. Robust state laws are needed to set out a strategic, comprehensive system of climate adaptation. Such laws should include planned retreat policies in regions of high vulnerability, buffer zones in local planning policies, restrictive zonings, measures to build ecosystem resilience (such as dune re-vegetation), early warning systems and emergency response plans.<sup>28</sup> These need to be coordinated with local government and provide local government with clear, transparent and scientifically-informed channels for participating in these planning processes.

### **6. 'Climate justice' considerations**

Well-established environmental laws, including in the area of climate change, can also help to address social disadvantage and access to justice issues. For example, it is not uncommon that individuals from marginalised or lower socio-economic groups are more often exposed to inappropriate developments or environmental hazards which may contribute to climate change vulnerability, lower air quality, water quality or the amenity of an area. Flow-on effects can lead to ill-health, reduced land values, disadvantage and disempowerment.

One relevant example is the 'urban heat island effect', whereby poor planning controls and urban design can exacerbate high temperatures. This problem is often experienced in outer city suburbs, which can have a range of complex socio-economic issues, and whose residents may not benefit from leafy streets or sea breezes as in wealthier areas of a city. A second example is the projected rises in temperatures across regional and rural Australia, including many communities with high indigenous populations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in low-lying areas are also likely to be affected by sea level rise and storm surges.

These are issues of 'climate justice'. Disadvantaged communities may be disproportionately at risk from a changing climate and increased extreme events. These communities are also less likely to engage in government policy-making, have fewer resources to protect themselves from extreme events, and may have less influence to attract ongoing government assistance. It is therefore important that the voices of

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<sup>26</sup> See ANEDO *Submission to Productivity Commission Draft Report: Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation* (2012), 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> See: ANEDO *Submission on the Inquiry into climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities*, 7 June 2008.



vulnerable groups are engaged, heard and protected in considering issues of climate change mitigation, adaptation and coping with extreme events.

All governments, and the environmental and planning laws they enact, should ensure that all Australians have equal rights to a healthy environment, liveable communities and protected cultural heritage; and ensure that citizens, businesses and government agencies have appropriate legal responsibilities towards our environment and natural resources.

## Appendix 1

### *National Environmental Policy Act 42 USC 4321 (1969), s 102*

SEC. 102. The Congress authorizes and directs that, to the fullest extent possible:

(1) the policies, regulations, and public laws of the United States shall be interpreted and administered in accordance with the policies set forth in this Act, and

(2) all agencies of the Federal Government shall—

(A) utilize a systematic, interdisciplinary approach which will insure the integrated use of the natural and social sciences and the environmental design arts in planning and in decision making which may have an impact on man's environment;

(B) identify and develop methods and procedures, in consultation with the Council on Environmental Quality established by title II of this Act, which will insure that presently unquantified environmental amenities and values may be given appropriate consideration in decision making along with economic and technical considerations;

(C) include in every recommendation or report on proposals for legislation and other major Federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, a detailed statement by the responsible official on—

- (i) the environmental impact of the proposed action,
- (ii) any adverse environmental effects which cannot be avoided should the proposal be implemented,
- (iii) alternatives to the proposed action,
- (iv) the relationship between local short-term uses of man's environment and the maintenance and enhancement of long-term productivity, and
- (v) any irreversible and irretrievable commitments of resources which would be involved in the proposed action should it be implemented.

Prior to making any detailed statement, the responsible Federal official shall consult with and obtain the comments of any Federal agency which has jurisdiction by law or special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved. Copies of such statement and the comments and views of the appropriate Federal, State, and local agencies, which are authorized to develop and enforce environmental standards, shall be made available to the President, the Council on Environmental Quality and to the public as provided by section 552 of title 5, United States Code, and shall accompany the proposal through the existing agency review processes;

(D) Any detailed statement required under subparagraph (C) after January 1, 1970, for any major Federal action funded under a program of grants to States shall not be deemed to be legally insufficient solely by reason of having been prepared by a State agency or official, if:

- (i) the State agency or official has statewide jurisdiction and has the responsibility for such action,
- (ii) the responsible Federal official furnishes guidance and participates in such preparation,
- (iii) the responsible Federal official independently evaluates such statement prior to its approval and adoption, and
- (iv) after January 1, 1976, the responsible Federal official provides early notification to, and solicits the views of, any other State or any Federal land management entity of any action or any alternative thereto which may have significant impacts upon such State or affected Federal land management entity and, if there is any disagreement on such impacts, prepares a written assessment of such impacts and views for incorporation into such detailed statement. The procedures in this subparagraph shall not relieve the Federal official of his responsibilities for the scope, objectivity, and

content of the entire statement or of any other responsibility under this Act; and further, this subparagraph does not affect the legal sufficiency of statements prepared by State agencies with less than statewide jurisdiction.

(E) study, develop, and describe appropriate alternatives to recommended courses of action in any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources;

(F) recognize the worldwide and long-range character of environmental problems and, where consistent with the foreign policy of the United States, lend appropriate support to initiatives, resolutions, and programs designed to maximize international cooperation in anticipating and preventing a decline in the quality of mankind's world environment;

(G) make available to States, counties, municipalities, institutions, and individuals, advice and information useful in restoring, maintaining, and enhancing the quality of the environment;

(H) initiate and utilize ecological information in the planning and development of resource-oriented projects; and

(I) assist the Council on Environmental Quality established by title II of this Act.



# australian network of environmental defender's offices

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## Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate

5 August 2011

The Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (**ANEDO**) consists of nine independently constituted and managed community environmental law centres located in each State and Territory of Australia.

Each EDO is dedicated to protecting the environment in the public interest. EDOs provide legal representation and advice, take an active role in environmental law reform and policy formulation, and offer a significant education program designed to facilitate public participation in environmental decision making.

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## **Executive Summary**

ANEDO welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Committee Inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate.

The inquiry is welcome recognition of the fact that Australia's biodiversity, already under threat from a wide range of stressors – such as destruction and fragmentation of habitat, invasive species, changes in disturbance regimes, and over-exploitation of native species - now faces a further threat from a rapidly changing climate.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, climate change is expected to become the first or second greatest driver of global biodiversity loss over the next century.<sup>2</sup>

**Reflecting our interest and expertise, our submission largely addresses the following terms of reference:**

- **Whether current governance arrangements are well placed to deal with the challenges of conserving biodiversity in a changing climate; and**
- **Mechanisms to promote the sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services in a changing climate.**

The impacts of climate change raise serious concerns about the adequacy of existing biodiversity conservation regimes to effectively protect biodiversity in the current context. Much of our current approach to conserving biodiversity in Australia reflects an asset based approach to biodiversity conservation and land management and is based on a static notion that the fundamental character of biodiversity being protected in any area will remain essentially the same over time.<sup>3</sup> However biodiversity conservation under a rapidly changing climate will require new ways of thinking that acknowledge the likely changes and uncertainties of climate change impacts on species and ecosystems. It will require a governance framework focused on managing and responding to a dynamic system.

Furthermore, changes in biodiversity will have far-reaching impacts for natural resources and ecosystem services essential to human well-being. To ensure that natural resources and ecosystem services such as clean water and clean air are guaranteed for the benefit of all in the future, it is essential that use of natural resources and ecosystem services is sustainable. A robust sustainability framework is necessary to guide use and management in the long term.

We note that reducing the threat of climate change to biodiversity, and therefore the viability of critical resources and services, will require both effective mitigation and adaptation strategies. We support Commonwealth and State Governments taking rapid mitigation action to reduce emissions. In line with the focus of the inquiry, this submission focuses solely on adaptation strategies for biodiversity conservation.

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<sup>1</sup> Auld TD and Keith DA 2009, 'Dealing with threats: integrating science and management', *Ecological Management and Restoration*, 10(S1): S79-S87.

<sup>2</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity management in the face of climate change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32; ; Sala et al, 'Biodiversity – global biodiversity scenarios for the year 2100' *Science* 287, 1770-74.

<sup>3</sup> Dunlop, M and Brown p (2008) 'Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment.' Report to the Department of Climate Change, February 2008. Department of Climate Change, Canberra, Australia.

In June 2009 EDO NSW recently produced a comprehensive discussion paper, *Climate change and the legal framework for biodiversity protection in Australia: a legal and scientific analysis*, evaluating the current legal regime at the Federal level and its adequacy to protect biodiversity under climate change. ANEDO has also previously addressed the appropriateness of the Commonwealth environmental law regime for dealing with climate change and other emerging pressures in numerous submissions to the Commonwealth government; most recently in our submission to the ten year review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). We have incorporated much of what we have previously advocated in these papers in this submission, however the discussion paper and submission can be accessed from the EDO NSW website (<http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/publications.php>) and the ANEDO website (<http://www.edo.org.au/policy/policy.html>) respectively.

**Part one** of this submission sets out the predicted impacts of climate change on biodiversity. **Part two** outlines emerging scientific principles for conserving biodiversity under a changing climate. Measured against these principles, **part three** analyses the adequacy of current governance arrangements to deal with the challenges of conserving biodiversity under climate change and provides recommendations for legislative and policy reform necessary for the conservation of biodiversity in the current context. **Part four** considers the increased use of ecologically sustainable development principles as a mechanism to promote sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services.

## Summary of Recommendations

### 1. Conservation goals

- Facilitate national debate on the appropriateness of our current approach to biodiversity conservation under climate change.
- Maintain the aspirational conservation goals of seeking to protect all species from extinction.
- Ensure that conservation goals reflect the realities of climate change by incorporating new objectives specifically referring to strengthening ecosystem resilience and facilitating adaptation and the use of adaptive management principles.

### 2. Protected areas

- Greater funding and resources should be provided to ensure that the implementation of the National Reserve System (NRS) framework occurs at a faster rate.
- The design of the reserve system should focus on building resilience to climate change.
- ‘Threat’ should be identified as a criterion in the process to prioritise what areas should be protected under the NRS framework. Identification of climate refugia and key migration corridors should also be a priority.
- Climate change considerations should be explicitly included in management tools. In particular, management plans for protected areas should be amended to include strategies that build resilience and manage for uncertainty in light of climate change.

- Adaptive management should be used as a management framework of all protected areas and barriers to the effective implementation of adaptive management frameworks across the reserve system should be identified.

### **3. Threatened species listing**

- Broaden species protection by greater focus on ecosystems and habitats as well as single species at risk.
- The EPBC Act should be amended to enable the listing of ‘key functional species’; populations of species; and species not currently threatened but likely to be vulnerable to climate change.
- The definition of ‘native’ under the EPBC Act should be amended to accommodate circumstances of species moving in response to climate change
- The Species Scientific Committee should have a greater role in listing decisions.

### **4. Threatening processes and threat abatement planning**

- A greater focus should be given to threat abatement planning
- Threat abatement efforts should focus on sets of threats that overlap and interact to affect large numbers of species.

### **5. Critical habitat**

- The definition of critical habitat under the EPBC Act should be amended to encompass areas essential for the conservation of threatened species and communities, even though the area is not presently occupied by the species or community.

### **6. Landscape-scale assessment and planning**

Landscape-scale assessment could be improved by:

- Requiring the Minister to be satisfied that a policy, plan or program meets the ‘improve and maintain’ test before granting approval.
- In deciding whether the ‘improve and maintain’ test is satisfied, require the Minister to be satisfied that areas of high conservation value for listed threatened species and ecological communities are protected, and any loss of other areas of less value for listed species and ecological communities is offset in accordance with offset rules.
- Inclusion of a discretionary mechanism which allows the Minister to override the above rules in circumstances where the Minister is of the opinion that a better outcome could be achieved by departing from the rules.
- Facilitating the adaptation of biodiversity to climate change should form a key component of any bioregional plans made.

### **7. Conservation on private land**

- Barriers to the up-take of different schemes should be identified and addressed.
- The objectives and rules of different schemes should be better coordinated so that conservation investment on private land is more effectively targeted.
- Greater incentives should be provided for the restoration of land, including land that is not necessarily of high conservation value currently.

- More flexible schemes should be developed to broaden options for private conservation, including short-term schemes.
- A native vegetation trigger should be introduced under the EPBC Act to enable the Commonwealth government to take a lead role in halting broad-scale clearing of native vegetation across Australia.

#### **8. Resources**

- The conservation of biodiversity must remain a fundamental principle in all adaptation and mitigation response to climate change.
- Ongoing funding for biodiversity conservation should be made available to allow for the effective utilisation of legislative conservation tools.

#### **9. Recommendations of the Hawke Review**

- The Government should release its response to the Hawke review without delay.
- The Government should implement the recommendations of the Hawke review aimed at addressing adaptation issues under the EPBC Act, including adding 'ecosystems of national significance' as a matter of national environmental significance.

#### **10. Promoting sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystems**

- Strengthen the recognition of ecologically sustainable development principles by amending relevant natural resource legislation to make it a primary consideration and require decision-makers to act consistently with the principles.

### **1. Predicted impacts of climate change on biodiversity**

It is well documented that climate change is already impacting Australia's biodiversity, and that further significant impacts are expected as the climate continues to change. What is most remarkable is that significant impacts are already being observed under the modest level of change observed thus far in comparison to future projected changes.<sup>4</sup>

Climate change threatens biodiversity both directly, through impacts from changes such as rising temperatures and sea levels, and indirectly, by exacerbating the impacts of existing and ongoing threats on biodiversity, and because of the complex interactions between them. Furthermore, climate change is predicted to impact on biodiversity through increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as droughts, heat waves, floods and storms. Climate change is expected to become a leading driver of biodiversity decline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Biodiversity and Climate Change Expert Advisory Group, *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change: a strategic assessment of the vulnerability of Australia's biodiversity to climate change – summary for policy makers* (2009), p3.

<sup>5</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity management in the face of climate change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32.



A number of scientific studies have assessed the impacts that climate change is already having on biodiversity and the likely impacts in the future.<sup>6</sup>

As summarised in EDO NSW's discussion paper, broadly, the likely biodiversity impacts of climate change are:

- Reductions and shifts in the geographic distribution of species
- Changes to the timing of species' lifecycle events
- Changes in population dynamics and survival
- Changes in the location of species' habitats
- Increase in the risk of extinction for species that are already vulnerable
- Increased opportunity for range expansion of invasive species
- Changes in the structure and composition of ecosystems and communities
- Changes in coastal and estuarine habitat due to rising sea levels

Species and ecosystems that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are those with long generation times, low mobility, small or isolated ranges and low genetic variation.<sup>7</sup> Species already under threat due to restricted distributions and small population sizes are at great risk of becoming extinct.<sup>8</sup> Certain ecosystems have been identified as more vulnerable than others to the negative impacts of climate change such as coral reefs, alpine ecosystems, mangroves and wetlands.

## **2. Ecological principles for conserving biodiversity under climate change**

While there is considerable uncertainty about the precise nature and extent of climatic impacts on biodiversity and varied predictions of actual responses, several principles have consistently emerged in the scientific literature as a basis for conserving biodiversity under a changing climate.<sup>9</sup>

Below we have identified some key principles that should underpin biodiversity management under the impacts of climate change. EDO NSW discusses these principles in detail in its discussion paper. We summarise them here.

A number of these principles are established conservation principles that should continue to be implemented, or implemented more effectively and urgently under a changing climate. The principles apply to both terrestrial and marine environments.

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<sup>6</sup> Biodiversity and Climate Change Expert Advisory Group, *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change: a strategic assessment of the vulnerability of Australia's biodiversity to climate change – summary for policy makers* (2009), p5; Dunlop M and Brown P (2008) *Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change Canberra, Australia, p 59 and 124; Garnaut R, *The Garnaut Review 2011: Australia in the Global Response to Climate Change* (2011) 12.

<sup>7</sup> Howden, M., Hughes, L., Dunlop, M., Zethoven, I., Hilbert, D. and Chilcott, C. (2003) *Climate change impacts on biodiversity in Australia*, Outcomes of a workshop sponsored by the Biological Diversity Advisory Committee, 1-2 October 2001, Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Secretariat of the Convention of Biological Diversity (2003). Interlinkages between biological diversity and climate change. Advice on the integration of biodiversity considerations into the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol. Montreal, SCBD, 154p. (CBD Technical Series no. 10).

<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive review of scientific recommendations on biodiversity management and adaptation in the face of climate change can be found in Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity management in the face of climate change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32.

## 2.1 Facilitating Adaptation

Species have historically responded to climate change using a combination of adaptation mechanisms – acclimatisation; migration/dispersal; and evolutionary adaptation.<sup>10</sup>

However, due to the projected rapid pace of current climate change, many species are unlikely to be able to migrate quickly enough and evolutionary adaptation may not be an option, particularly for those species already under threat.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the extent of existing pressures on biodiversity creates further complexities. For example, in many cases, migration to more suitable habitat is no longer possible due to extensive habitat loss and fragmentation.

As previously advocated by ANEDO and reiterated in the discussion paper prepared by EDO NSW, it follows that to reduce the impacts of climate change on biodiversity we should aim to facilitate adaptive responses by minimising disturbance to adaptation options as much as possible. The literature commonly classifies adaptation strategies into<sup>12</sup>:

- Resistance strategies - enhance the ability of species and ecosystems to remain unaffected by climate induced or other climate-exacerbated threats.
- Resilience strategies - enhance the ability of species or ecosystems to absorb or recover from disturbances induced or exacerbated by climate change.
- Transformative strategies - attempt to assist systems to a new state, or that are designed to protect a future state.

Building resilience by promoting diversity and flexibility within ecosystems is generally advocated in preference to resistance strategies.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Enhancing Resilience

Resilience can be enhanced by:

- Ensuring that a diversity of ecosystem types is well protected (representation) in multiple examples (replication). If the biodiversity of a system is fully represented in multiple examples, the likelihood of losing entire ecosystems to a disturbance is substantially decreased.
- Maintaining large patches of habitat. Large patches of habitat are critical for their ecological value in maintaining populations of interior dwelling species, providing core habitat with less influence of edge effects and supporting a greater number of species than smaller patches of similar habitat.<sup>14</sup> Large patches are also integral to supporting large, genetically diverse populations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mackey B (2007) 'Climate change, connectivity and biodiversity conservation' in *Protected Areas: buffering nature against climate change. Proceedings of a WWF and IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas symposium, 18-19 June 2007, Canberra* (eds Taylor and Figgis), pp90-96, WWF-Australia, Sydney; Noss, R (2001) 'Beyond Kyoto: Forest management in a time of rapid climate change' *Conservation Biology* 15(3): 578-590.

<sup>11</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity Management in the face of Climate Change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32.

<sup>12</sup> Poiani K.A et al 'Redesigning Biodiversity Conservation Projects for Climate Change: Examples from the Field' (2011) 20 *Biodiversity Conservation* 185.

<sup>13</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity Management in the Face of Climate Change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32.

<sup>14</sup> Forman, R. (1995) 'Some general principles of landscape and regional ecology' *Landscape Ecology* 10(3):133-142; Fischer, J., Lindenmayer, D. and Manning, A. (2006) 'Biodiversity, ecosystem function, and resilience: ten guiding principles for commodity production landscapes' *Frontiers in Ecology and Environment* 4(2): 80-86.

<sup>15</sup> Lindenmayer, D. and Burgman, M. (2005) *Practical Conservation Biology*. CSIRO Publishing, Australia.

- Maintaining and improving connectivity between different types of habitat and different patches of habitat.
- Enhancing the ability of the broader landscape or matrix (those areas surrounding protected areas) to support species and ecosystems. It has long been recognised that protected areas alone are not adequate to protect biodiversity because they are too few, too isolated, not always adequately managed<sup>16</sup> and often not appropriately located.<sup>17</sup>
- Identifying and protecting climate refugia. These are key sites or refuge areas that are likely to provide important habitat allowing species to persist in the face of climatic stress.
- Protecting ecosystem structure and function, particularly 'key functional species'.<sup>18</sup> Ecosystem functionality and resilience depends on a dynamic relationship within species, among species and between species and their environment, as well as physical and chemical interactions within the environment.

### 2.3 Recognise and manage for uncertainty

Recognising that ecosystems change and the inherent and complex uncertainties of natural systems, scientists have long advocated that management within an adaptive framework is vital to enhancing the protection of biodiversity, particularly those ecosystems that are highly complex or poorly understood.<sup>19</sup>

Adaptive management is an iterative process that seeks to improve management by testing hypotheses and learning from the results, and then incorporating lessons learnt into future management actions. It is particularly useful in situation where there is high uncertainty regarding ecological processes.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.4 Prioritise conservation actions

It has long been the case that resources for biodiversity protection are limited, which has meant that government agencies often fail to provide adequate funding to manage the biodiversity that they are responsible for protecting.

Prioritisation currently occurs largely on the basis of conservation status,<sup>21</sup> that is, more funding is allocated to those species or ecological communities with the highest risk of extinction. However there are concerns within the scientific community about this approach. Spending the most money on the species with the highest extinction rate is

<sup>16</sup> Fischer J, Lindenmayer D and Manning A (2006) 'Biodiversity, ecosystem function, and resilience: ten guiding principles for commodity production landscapes' *Frontiers in Ecology and Environment* 4(2):80-86.

<sup>17</sup> Margules C, Pressey B (2000) 'Systematic conservation Planning' *Nature* 405: 243-253.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Walker B (1995) 'Conserving biodiversity through ecosystem resilience' *Conservation Biology* 9(4): 747-752.

<sup>19</sup> Holling CS (1978) *Adaptive Environmental Assessment and Management*. Blackburn Press, Caldwell, NJ; Walters C (1986) *Adaptive Management of Renewable Resources*. McGraw Hill, New York.

<sup>20</sup> Holling CS (1978) *Adaptive Environmental Assessment and Management*. Blackburn Press, Caldwell, NJ; Walters C (1986) *Adaptive Management of Renewable Resources*. McGraw Hill, New York; Climate Change Science Program (US) (2008): *Preliminary review of adaptation options for climate-sensitive ecosystems and resources*. A report by the U.S Climate Change Science Program and the subcommittee on Global Change Research. [Julius SH and West JM (eds), Baron JS, Griffith N, Joyce LA, Kareiva P, Keller BD, Palmer MA, Peterson CH, and Scott JM (Authors)]. U.S Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, USA..

<sup>21</sup> Joseph L, Maloney R and Possingham H (in press) 'Optimal allocation of resources: a project prioritization protocol' *Conservation Biology*.

not the most efficient way of minimising species extinctions, because often these species will require significant resources with only a small chance of success.<sup>22</sup>

It has been recommended that to maximise conservation outcomes within a limited budget, prioritisation must take into account four factors:<sup>23</sup>

- species values (this could be defined by conservation status, evolutionary distinctiveness, social value, economic value, ecological function etc).
- cost of management (generally, all else being equal, a cheaper action should be prioritised over a more expensive action).
- benefit of management (this is the difference in outcomes with management taking place versus without management taking place).
- likelihood of success of management (generally, all else being equal, an action likely to succeed should be prioritised over an action likely to fail).

In addition, any prioritisation process needs to clearly establish the objective of the process and a timeframe over which the objective should be achieved.<sup>24</sup>

### **3. Adequacy of the Commonwealth regime for conserving biodiversity under climate change**

In this part we discuss the adequacy of key aspects of the existing biodiversity conservation regime at the national level in conserving biodiversity under a rapidly changing climate.

Given the breadth and complexity of the issue, it is not possible for this submission to consider the implications of climate change on every aspect of current governance arrangements that affect biodiversity. We focus on what we consider to be priority areas to deal with the challenges of conserving biodiversity in a changing climate. The issues discussed are largely governed under the Commonwealth's principle piece of biodiversity conservation legislation, *the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

Our analysis demonstrates that while a number of key mechanisms for conserving biodiversity under the current regulatory framework are potentially useful for protecting biodiversity under climate change, the overall conclusion is that current mechanisms are not adequately designed or equipped to deal with the challenges of climate change on biodiversity. These mechanisms need to be revised to accommodate changes and uncertainties under climate change. We provide some suggestions for improvement.

#### **3.1 Conservation goals**

Given the significant threats faced by Australia's biodiversity together with the emerging threat of climate change, ANEDO considers that it is an appropriate time to evaluate the current approach to biodiversity conservation in Australia.

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<sup>22</sup> Possingham HP, Andelman SJ, Burgman MA, Medellin RA, Master LL and Keith DA (2002) 'Limits to the use of threatened species lists' *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 17(11): 503-7.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph L.N et al 'Optimal Allocation of Resources Among Threatened Species: Project Prioritization Protocol' (2009) 23(2) *Conservation Biology* 328; Briggs S (2009) 'Priorities and paradigms: directions in threatened species recovery' Online early: <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119881249/issue>

<sup>24</sup> Joseph, above n 42; Briggs S (2009) 'Priorities and paradigms: directions in threatened species recovery' Online early: <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119881249/issue>

Currently, we have a snapshot approach to conserving species and ecosystems as they are, and where they are. It is an approach based on identifying threatened species and focusing our efforts on managing these particular species as well as identifying important areas and seeking to preserve them as they are. For example, the EPBC Act aims to protect ecological communities, which are identified (amongst other ways) in terms of current species composition of the community, often in a particular location.<sup>25</sup>

As noted, the impacts of climate change on biodiversity are predicted to be significant, with species changing their geographic distributions and abundance, the alteration of ecosystem structure and function and significant extinctions likely to occur given the limitations of the natural adaptation of biodiversity and the range of other threats that also exist. As a result, we need to reconsider the fundamental goals of biodiversity conservation. Conservation goals must be re-defined to recognise the likely changes, and to manage the uncertainty of future climates.

Some scientists argue that current overarching goals and legislative objectives which generally aim to protect all species from extinction and to prevent change to biodiversity will be impossible to achieve under climate change.<sup>26</sup> A recent report commissioned by the Australian Government observed that:

Some ...conservation aspirations may become conceptually difficult if not practically impossible (in a natural setting). For example, maintaining:

- specific populations, communities or ecosystems in a given location,
- particular communities and ecosystems anywhere,
- species richness at a given location, or in a region, and
- specific patterns of ecosystems at a landscape level<sup>27</sup>

The report proposes that the task under climate change is one of 'managing change to minimise loss' rather than 'preventing change' and in this context, suggests that the following two overarching conservation goals are appropriate;

- to facilitate natural changes in species and ecosystems, including natural adaptation to climate change
- to preserve elements of biodiversity that are both particularly valued and threatened.

ANEDO considers that debate on the appropriateness of the current approach to biodiversity conservation must be stimulated as a matter of urgency.

We make the following points:

- Aspirational goals and legislative objectives currently seeking to protect all species from extinction should be retained. The threats of climate change highlight the need and present an opportunity for a renewed commitment to the conservation of biodiversity. However, in light of the predicted impacts of climate change on biodiversity, and the potential for climate change to deleteriously affect all matters of national environmental significance, there is a need for conservation goals to explicitly reflect the realities of climate change. We should move beyond the narrowly

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<sup>25</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* s 366.

<sup>26</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change Canberra, Australia; Climate Change Science Program (US) (2008): *Preliminary review of adaptation options for climate-sensitive ecosystems and resources*. A report by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program and the Subcommittee on Global Change Research. [Julius SH and West JM (eds), Baron JS, Griffith B, Joyce LA, Kareiva P, Keller BD, Palmer MA, Peterson CH, and Scott JM (Authors)]. U.S Environmental Protection Agency, Washington DC, USA.

<sup>27</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change Canberra, Australia

focused single-species, 'preserve and conserve' model that is currently central to our biodiversity conservation regime to ecosystem or landscape based biodiversity protection. Conservation goals and legislative objectives should be updated to specifically address matters such as the need to promote ecosystem resilience and adaptive capacity and to recognise and adopt flexible management principles including adaptive management.

- Although decisions about our approach to biodiversity conservation under climate change involve ethical questions that should be informed by society, science plays an important role in informing the debate. Science should identify what changes are likely due to climate change, what sorts of overarching goals might be achievable, and what are the best ways of achieving these goals once set. For example, if the objective remains to protect all species from extinction, a key role for science will be to determine how to make the best use of limited resources to achieve this (i.e. prioritisation) which involves a range of scientific and economic questions.

### **Recommendations**

- Facilitate national debate on the appropriateness of our current approach to biodiversity conservation under climate change.
- Maintain the aspirational conservation goals of seeking to protect all species from extinction.
- Ensure that conservation goals reflect the realities of climate change by incorporating new objectives specifically referring to strengthening ecosystem resilience and facilitating adaptation and the use of adaptive management principles.

## **3.2 Protected Areas**

Protection and management of habitat is a central aspect of biodiversity protection in Australia. On public land, this is achieved through the declaration of protected areas. Certain conservation initiatives on private land that result in in-perpetuity protection of high conservation value land are also recognised as part of the protected area system.

The system of protected areas in Australia is known as the National Reserve System (NRS). The goal of the NRS, which was endorsed by all Australian jurisdictions, is to achieve a system of protected areas that is comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR).

Associated with the CAR objectives are a number of key targets:

- Comprehensiveness - at least 80% of the number of extant regional ecosystems in each bioregion are represented in the NRS by 2010-2015.
- Adequacy - the need to secure an 'adequate' size and configuration of protected areas to provide long term protection and security for the natural and cultural values they support (no quantified target set).
- Representativeness - at least 80% of extant regional ecosystems in each sub-region are represented in the NRS by 2010=2020.

In addition, other priorities include the protection of critically endangered and endangered species and regional ecosystems in each sub-region.

All Australian governments have agreed on a set of minimum standards that must be met before a protected area can be included in the NRS. These include:<sup>28</sup>

- The area must be protected in perpetuity.
- The area must contribute to meeting the CAR goal of the NRS.
- The area must be able to be classified into one or more of the six IUCN protected area management categories.
- The area must be managed in a manner that is open to public scrutiny.

### **Protected areas under a changing climate**

As noted, although there is considerable uncertainty about what the impacts of climate change on biodiversity will be, or how species and ecosystems will respond, many studies conclude that protected areas remain essential for the conservation of biodiversity under climate change.<sup>29</sup>

While historically, the design of protected area systems has not generally taken into account the impacts of climate change on biodiversity,<sup>30</sup> there is general agreement that the NRS, which aims to maximise the diversity of habitats protected, provides a robust framework for conserving biodiversity framework under a changing change. As noted, the CAR goals are based on sampling the diversity of ecosystem types (comprehensiveness) and the diversity within ecosystem types (representativeness) across geographic ranges.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, increasing protection of a full range of habitats is considered likely to be much more effective under climate change than approaches to habitat protection that solely target endangered species and ecosystems.<sup>32</sup>

The NRS currently includes over 9,000 protected areas and protects nearly 13% of Australia's land mass. It is made up of national parks, indigenous lands, private protected areas and land held by landholders under covenants.

Despite this, however, many of Australia's ecosystems are not adequately protected. A review undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2007 concluded that:

The National Reserve System does not yet meet the test of being comprehensive, adequate and representative.

While all 85 bioregions have some representation, there are currently 34 regions where less than 10% of the area is reserved. Of the 403 subregions, 42 have no representation at all. This indicates that the CAR principles are far from being achieved, and the rate of reservation needs to increase dramatically, particularly given the challenges of climate

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<sup>28</sup> Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (2005) *Directions for the National Reserve System: A Partnership Approach* Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

<sup>29</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity management in the face of climate change: A review of 22 years of recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142: 14-32.

<sup>30</sup> Margules CR and Pressey RL (2000) "Systematic Conservation Panning" *Nature* 405 at pp 243-253.

<sup>31</sup> Hyder Consulting (2008) *The Impacts and Management Implications of Climate Change for the Australian Government's Protected Areas: Final Report*, Canberra, ACT: Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts; Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implication of Climate Change for Australia's National Reserve System: A Preliminary Assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>32</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of climate change for Australia's National Reserve System: A preliminary assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change Canberra, Australia

change. It has also been observed that, to date, reserve design does not systematically consider biodiversity change due to climate change.<sup>33</sup>

The ability of the NRS framework to protect biodiversity under climate change will depend largely on the ability to achieve the CAR goals within each bio-region. Therefore there is a need to improve the representation, comprehensiveness and adequacy of the NRS, as well as reserve design.

## **Establishment of protected areas**

### *Adequacy*

The challenge for the NRS under a changing climate is maintaining adequacy. Changes in the distribution and abundance of species, species interactions, habitat suitability and the nature of threats will affect the ability of protected areas to maintain long-term viability of populations. For example, if changes in species distributions occur existing protected areas may decrease in their effectiveness, as the species that are found within protected areas currently may be unable to live within those areas in the future. In general, climate change is likely to require greater effort to ensure current levels of adequacy are maintained for a given species.<sup>34</sup>

A number of strategies commonly suggested for addressing adequacy in light of climate change include:

- increasing the size of protected areas to ensure populations remain viable and to absorb higher levels of disturbance;
- increasing connectivity of areas
- decreasing threats
- complementary management of the surrounding matrix

### *Future resilience*

While the principles of a comprehensive, representative and adequate reserve system remain critical and relevant, under a changing climate selection of protected areas needs to be more precisely focused on future resilience.

A key issue in relation to the current process under the NRS framework for prioritising what land should be protected is that the process does not appear to consider 'threats'.<sup>35</sup> Given that protected areas are often 'residual' to human requirements, we consider threat to be an important consideration in this process. Without its consideration, there is no way of determining whether an action to protect land is having a conservation outcome that is additional to what would have otherwise occurred.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *National Reserve System Protected Area Requirements*, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities <<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/nrs/about/management.html>> at 29 July 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of Climate Change for Australia's National Reserve System: A Preliminary Assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>35</sup> Pressey B (2009) 'The Mis-Measure of Conservation: How Much Do We Find Out How Much Difference we Make?' Abstract, Fenner Conference on the Environment. Available at: [www.landscapelogic.org.au/Fenner\\_2009.html](http://www.landscapelogic.org.au/Fenner_2009.html)

<sup>36</sup> This is the concept of 'additionality', which is an important concept that is applied in relation to both carbon offsetting and biodiversity offsetting under the NSW BioBanking scheme.



In addition to recognising threats, the design of the reserve system under a changing climate needs to focus on building resilience to climate change by increasing connectivity (through protection of key migration corridors) and identifying and protecting ecological processes and climate refugia.

As noted, refugia are critical habitats for the protection of biodiversity and their protection will become even more critical to building resilience and adaptive capacity for biodiversity under a changing climate. Identification of refugia and key migration corridors across bioregions should therefore be a key priority for the identification of proposed protected areas under the NRS.

### *Funding*

The establishment of new protected areas will depend in particular on adequate funding to purchase and manage land and the availability of suitable land for purchase, which depends largely on the extent of clearing in a region.

The Australian government's commitment in of \$180m over five years to accelerate the development of the NRS, partly in light on the challenges posed by climate change, is a welcome start.

## **Management of protected areas**

### *Management plans*

Although all the terrestrial Commonwealth reserves have a current management plan prepared,<sup>37</sup> the EPBC Act is currently not prescriptive enough in terms of the strategies that should be contained in management plans. As a result, climate change considerations have not been at the forefront of thinking when formulating these plans. The Australian government has commissioned two major reports into the management of protected areas to assess the impacts and management implications of climate change. Both these reports raise profound issues for the management of these areas in coming years, and demonstrate that climate considerations are not explicitly included in management plans.<sup>38</sup>

For example, the 2008 report, *The Impacts And Management Implications of Climate Change For The Australian Government's Protected Areas: Final Report*, found that:

Existing management plans for protected areas should be amended to include strategies that build resilience and manage for uncertainty in light of projected climate change impacts.

As a result, the report recommended that management plans for protected areas should be amended to include strategies that build resilience and manage for uncertainty in light of projected climate change impacts. ANEDO supports the explicit inclusion of climate change considerations in both terrestrial and marine biodiversity management tools.

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<sup>37</sup> Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Parks and Reserves.  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/parks/index.html>

<sup>38</sup> Hyder Consulting (2008) *The Impacts and Management Implication of Climate Change for the Australian Government's Protected Areas: Final Report*, Canberra, ACT: Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and The Arts; Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of Climate Change for Australia's National Reserve System: A Preliminary Assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change Canberra, Australia.

There should be mandatory requirements to incorporate assessments of climate change impacts and to focus on climate change adaptation.

### *Adaptive management*

Furthermore, the effectiveness of current management strategies will become more uncertain as protected areas become subject to changes in biodiversity and the nature of threats. While many scientists argue that addressing existing threats is a key strategy to combat the impacts of climate change,<sup>39</sup> current management strategies that address existing threats may become less applicable and will need to be modified, or new, untested approaches implemented. It will become increasingly difficult to decide what new management strategies to try and decisions may be based less on existing experience and more on modelling and monitoring.<sup>40</sup>

Increasing uncertainty in relation to the management of protected areas under climate change strongly suggests the need to apply adaptive management frameworks to the implementation of management strategies, which deal explicitly with uncertainty.

Park managers will, however, require the legislative and institutional backing to adopt adaptive management approaches. Thus there is a clear need to identify and overcome the barriers to effective implementation such as lack of institutional support, high costs and lack of funding.<sup>41</sup>

One way to potentially create greater institutional support could be to incorporate adaptive management as a management principle under the EPBC Act. Management principles must be taken into consideration in preparing management plans under the Act.

### *Funding*

In light of increasing management costs for the reserve system under climate change, it is essential that the budgets for national park management agencies are increased.

## **Recommendations**

- Greater funding and resources should be provided to ensure that the implementation of the NRS framework occurs at a faster rate.
- The design of reserve system should focus on building resilience to climate change.
- 'Threat' should be included as a criterion in the process to prioritise what areas should be protected under the NRS framework. Identification of climate refugia and key migration corridors should also be a priority.
- Climate change considerations should be explicitly included in management tools. In particular, management plans for protected areas should be amended to include strategies that build resilience and manage for uncertainty in light of climate change.

<sup>39</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) 'Biodiversity Management in the Face of Climate Change: A Review of 22 Years of Recommendations' *Biological Conservation* 142 14-32.

<sup>40</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of Climate Change for Australia's National Reserve System: A Preliminary Assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>41</sup> Boemann B et al (2007) 'Adaptive Management of Forest Ecosystems: Did Some Rubber Hit the Road?' *BioScience* 57(2): 186-191; Climate Change Science Program (US) (2008): *Preliminary Review of Adaptation Options for Climate-Sensitive Ecosystems and Resources. A Report by the U.S Climate Change Science Program and the Subcommittee on Global Change Research.* (Julius SH and West JM (eds), Baron JS, Griffith B, Joyce LA, Kareiva P, Keller BD, Palmer MA; Lindenmayer D and Burgman M (2005) *Practical Conservation Biology.* CSIRO Publishing, Australia.

- Adaptive management should be used as a management framework of all protected areas and barriers to the effective implementation of adaptive management frameworks across the reserve system should be identified.

### 3.3 Listing of threatened species

The listing of threatened species and ecological communities is a central element of biodiversity conservation regimes around Australia, including for the protection of nationally significant species and ecosystems under the Commonwealth's EPBC Act.

Criticisms of focusing on threatened species as a basis for biodiversity conservation, however, have intensified in the past decade.<sup>42</sup> A key criticism has been that threatened species lists reflect a single-species approach to conservation, which often fails to adequately protect overall biodiversity, ignoring entire habitats and ecosystems. This criticism has been addressed to some extent in Australia by enabling the listing of ecological communities and key threatening processes. A further criticism of focusing on threatened species is that it may result in perverse outcomes for biodiversity in general. For example, a development that clears a large amount of habitat for non-listed species may be allowed to proceed, while a development that clears a small amount of habitat for threatened species may not be approved.<sup>43</sup>

#### Listing of threatened species under climate change

The problems identified above are likely to be exacerbated under a changing climate. Climate change will also raise additional issues associated with the listing process.

We make the following points:

- A focus on threatened species may not accurately reflect what needs to be done to protect overall biodiversity under a changing climate. For example, areas important for connectivity for a wide range of species may not be properly considered in decision-making without a relationship to threatened species. Thus there is a risk that attention may be diverted from resourcing other strategies to protect biodiversity under climate change.<sup>44</sup>
- While the listing of threatened species is often criticised for failing to protect overall biodiversity, the listing process provides a potential tool to protect key functional species and groups which play an important role in maintaining ecosystem functions. As noted, by better ensuring that ecological functions are maintained, we can maximise the number of species protected, including the many we have not yet identified.<sup>45</sup> This will be particularly important under a rapidly changing climate.
- The current listing process under the EPBC Act allows species to be listed on the basis of current conservation status. Species that are not currently threatened, but are likely to become threatened in the future are not eligible to be listed.

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<sup>42</sup> For example, see Rohlf D (1991) 'Six Biological Reasons Why the Endangered Species Act Doesn't Work- And What to Do About It' *Conservation Biology* 5 273-282.

<sup>43</sup> Possingham HP et al (2002) "Limits to the Use of Threatened Species List" *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 17(11) at pp 503-7.

<sup>44</sup> Possingham HP et al (2002) "Limits to the use of Threatened Species Lists" *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 17(11) at pp 503-7.

<sup>45</sup> Possingham HP et al (2002) "Limits to the use of Threatened Species Lists" *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 17(11) at pp 503-7.

Therefore those species that are likely to become threatened under future climates are not eligible to be listed. This could be addressed by enabling listing on the basis of vulnerability assessments or ‘susceptibility traits’.<sup>46</sup>

- The listing of ecological communities, by reference to (amongst other things) community composition and location in a particular area may become problematic under a changing climate as communities expand, contract, change their nature, disassemble and re-assemble.<sup>47</sup>
- The EPBC Act currently does not allow for the listing of populations. Providing for the listing of populations would add flexibility to the process, which is likely to be required under climate change. For example, protecting populations at the limits of their range or disjunct or genetically distinct populations would provide a mechanism to protect advancing populations as they migrate in response to climate change (though the species itself would not be eligible for listing).
- Under the EPBC Act, only species native to Australia (present in Australia or an external territory before 1400) are eligible for listing.<sup>48</sup> This definition may become problematic in facilitating natural adaptation under climate change. For example, a species previously restricted to Papua New Guinea may move into Australia in response to climate change and establish a small population. Under the current definition of native, this species would not be eligible for listing under the EPBC Act, despite its tenuous hold in Australia.<sup>49</sup> (Implementation of this option would need to take into account the impact of the species on native species).
- The current listing process under the EPBC Act provides the Minister with broad discretion to decide on a theme for nominations and finalising the priority assessment list. As climate change is likely to increase the extinction risk of many species, we believe there is a key role for the Scientific Committee (and a more limited role for the Minister) in ensuring that nominations and assessment for threatened species listing focus on the areas of greatest need, such as groups of species particularly vulnerable to climate change or species that play a key role in ecosystem function.

### Recommendations

- Broaden species protection by greater focus on ecosystems and habitats as well as single species at risk.
- The EPBC Act should be amended to enable the listing of ‘key functional species’; populations of species and species not currently threatened, but likely to be vulnerable to climate change
- The definition of ‘native’ under the EPBC Act should be amended to accommodate circumstances of species moving in response to climate change.
- The Scientific Committee should have a greater role in listing decisions.

<sup>46</sup> Bradshaw C et al (2008) ‘Threat or Invasive Status in Legumes is Related to Opposite Extreme of the Same Ecological and Life-history Attributes’ *Journal of Ecology* 96 869-883.

<sup>47</sup> Dunlop M and Brown PR (2008) *Implications of Climate Change for Australia’s National Reserve System: A Preliminary Assessment. Report to the Department of Climate Change* Department of Climate Change, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>48</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* s 528.

<sup>49</sup> Adam P (2009) ‘Going with the Flow? Threatened Species Management and Legislation in the Eyes of Climate Change’ *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 ss 44-45.

### 3.4 Key threatening processes and threat abatement planning

As noted, a key impact of climate change will be the exacerbation of existing threats. Many scientists therefore argue that addressing existing threats is a key strategy to combat the impacts of climate change.<sup>50</sup>

The EPBC Act provides for the listing of key threatening processes. These are processes which threaten, or may threaten, the survival, abundance or evolutionary development, of native species, or ecological communities in that it adversely affects an already listed species or community, or because it might result in an unlisted species or community becoming listed.<sup>51</sup>

The Minister may decide whether to develop a threat abatement plan for key threatening processes.<sup>52</sup> Threat abatement plans provide for the research, management, and any other actions necessary to reduce the impact of a listed key threatening process on native species and ecological communities.<sup>53</sup>

Threat abatement planning provides an important mechanism for identifying and coordinating the management of threats at a broad scale.<sup>54</sup> A key characteristic of threatening processes is that they operate in ways that affect multiple species, usually simultaneously, and therefore actions to abate threats are likely to benefit multiple species.<sup>55</sup> Threat abatement planning is therefore an important tool for addressing conservation issues above the species level. That is, it moves beyond single-species approaches.

Threat abatement planning will remain a key mechanism to protect biodiversity under climate change. Many of the threats likely to be exacerbated by climate change such as invasive species, changes in fire regimes and changes in hydrology operate at a landscape scale, and can rarely be managed on a site by site basis.<sup>56</sup> As such climate change may increase the need to manage threats at a landscape scale. Threat abatement plans provide a good mechanism to coordinate threat abatement actions across regions and to target priority areas. Threat abatement planning also provides a mechanism to identify and focus on sets of threats that overlap and interact to affect large numbers of species (known as ‘threat syndrome’) which is likely to be more cost effective.<sup>57</sup>

Climate change does however present a number of challenges to the threat abatement planning process:

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<sup>50</sup> Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) ‘Biodiversity Management in the Face of Climate Change: A Review of 22 Years of Recommendations’ *Biological Conservation* 142 14-32; Heller N and Zavaleta E (2009) ‘Biodiversity Management in the Face of Climate Change: A Review of 22 Years of Recommendations’ *Biological Conservation* 142 14-32; Reaser JK et al (2000) ‘Coral Bleaching and Global Climate Change: Scientific Findings and Policy Recommendations’ *Conservation Biology* 14(5) at pp 1500-1511.

<sup>51</sup> Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, s188(4).

<sup>52</sup> Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, s270A.

<sup>53</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 1999 s271.

<sup>54</sup> Mahon P (2009) ‘Targeted Control of Widespread Exotic Species for Biodiversity Conservation: The Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) in New South Wales, Australia’ *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 s59-69; Downey P et al (2009) ‘Weeds and Biodiversity Conservation: A Review of Managing Weeds under the New South Wales Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995’ *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 s79-87.

<sup>55</sup> Auld T and Keith D (2009) ‘Dealing with Threats: Integrating Science and Management’ *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 s79-87.

<sup>56</sup> Burgman M et al (2007) ‘Threats Syndromes and Conservation of the Australian Flora’ *Biological Conservation* 134 73-82.

<sup>57</sup> Burgman M et al (2007) ‘Threat Syndromes and Conservation of the Australian Flora’ *Biological Conservation* 134 73-82.

- Unlike many other threatening processes, the development of strategies to combat the impacts of climate change on biodiversity are only just beginning and lack of knowledge and uncertainty poses a significant barrier to effective threat abatement.<sup>58</sup> Climate will exacerbate and change the nature of existing threats in ways that will be difficult to predict.
- While threat abatement planning is an effective tool to focus conservation efforts on the broad processes that cause species to decline and therefore is likely to benefit multiple species and be cost effective, some scientists caution against focusing too much on threat abatement plans at the expense of species-specific recovery plans. They argue that many species are affected by multiple threats and failure to abate all threats may not achieve a successful outcome at the species level.<sup>59</sup> Threat abatement plans are likely to work well in cases where one threat is causing the primary impact on many species and the control of that threat is feasible at a large scale.

### Recommendations

- A greater focus should be given to threat abatement planning
- Threat abatement efforts should focus on sets of threats that overlap and interact to affect large numbers of species.

## 3.5 Critical habitat

The value of identifying and protecting habitat critical to the survival of species and ecological communities is well recognised.

The EPBC Act provides for the listing of habitat identified as critical to the survival of listed threatened species and ecological communities.<sup>60</sup> The provisions for listings only apply in Commonwealth areas.

However the critical habitat provisions of the Act have rarely been utilised, with critical habitat only being listed for five listed threatened species to date.<sup>61</sup>

### Critical habitat under climate change

Critical habitat will remain an essential tool for conserving biodiversity under climate change. As noted, the protection of key sites important for the survival of specific threatened species or likely to provide refuge in the face of climate change is a key strategy for conserving biodiversity.

We note however that the impacts of climate change are likely to cause species' habitat to shift, which will lead to difficulties in defining critical habitat.

<sup>58</sup> Auld T and Keith D (2009) 'Dealing with Threats: Integrating Science and Management' *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 s79-87.

<sup>59</sup> Priddel D and Carlile N. (2009) 'Key Elements in Achieving a Successful Recovery Programme: A Discussion Illustrated by the Gould's Petrel Case Study' *Ecological Management and Restoration* 10 ss97-102.

<sup>60</sup> *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 207A.

<sup>61</sup> See Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and The Arts register of critical habitat <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicregisterofcriticalhabitat.pl>

The definition of critical habitat implies that for habitat to be declared critical, it must be current habitat for a threatened species, although there is some uncertainty over this. On this basis, critical habitat cannot be declared for land that is not current habitat for a threatened species or community, but is likely to be required by a threatened species or community in the future under climate change.

Similarly, there is uncertainty over whether buffer areas comprising non-habitat for a threatened species can be included in the area declared to be critical habitat. As noted, buffering important habitat (such as critical habitat) is likely to be an important strategy to conserve biodiversity under climate change.

We therefore consider that the definition of critical habitat should explicitly encompass areas essential for the conservation of threatened species or communities, even though the area is not presently occupied by the species or community.

This is the case in Queensland under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* which defines critical habitat as:<sup>62</sup>

An area of land that is considered essential for the conservation of protected wildlife, even though the area is not presently occupied by the wildlife.

The Hawke review supported the need for greater flexibility in the definition of critical habitat, particularly in instances where information may be limited, referring to a definition proposed by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee:<sup>63</sup>

The geography/place necessary for the persistence of viable populations given plausible futures of impinging factors.

### **Recommendations**

- The definition of critical habitat under the EPBC Act be amended to encompass areas essential for the conservation of threatened species and communities, even though the area is not presently occupied by the species or community.

### **3.6 Landscape-scale assessment and planning**

As noted, landscape-scale management will become increasingly important under a changing climate. The EPBC Act allows the Commonwealth to engage on a landscape scale for protection of matters of national environmental significance through strategic assessments and bioregional plans. These mechanisms can facilitate an ecosystem approach, rather than looking at single species or habitats in isolation.

The Hawke review of the EPBC Act recommend expanded use of strategic assessments and bioregional planning as a means of moving to a more ecosystem or landscape based approach to biodiversity protection (discussed below).

### **Strategic assessment under climate change**

<sup>62</sup> *Nature Conservation Act (Qld) 1992*, s13(2).

<sup>63</sup> Australian Government, *Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*, October 2009 at para 5.18

The site-scale approach to conservation management, which tends to be directed at single threatened species or single developments or activity, has not worked well to date,<sup>64</sup> and is unlikely to do so under climate change. Under a site by site approach, decisions relating to actions are restricted to the site in question with limited scope to consider the impacts of an action on a broader scale. It can therefore be difficult to prove a single action will have a significant impact. Processes important for the protection of biodiversity under climate change such as connectivity cannot be properly considered in decision making. Furthermore, sites that are currently important to a given species may become less important to that species in the future under climate change.

Strategic assessment processes, which are predicated on a landscape scale assessment, offer the greatest potential for broader, macro-level consideration of regional and cumulative impacts and the ability to investigate issues across extended time-scales. This is particularly useful in regard to issues such as climate change, that require action now to mitigate but for which the full impacts may not be clear for a number of years into the future. Furthermore, strategic assessment processes allow key ecological principles for protection of biodiversity under climate change, such as increasing connectivity and representation, to be considered in land-use planning processes, thereby achieving more for biodiversity conservation than site based assessment.

However, given the consequences of strategic assessments, in that no further environmental assessment is required for individual sites, the process must be subject to robust and strict criteria. We caution that the extent to which strategic environmental assessment will provide adequate protection of biodiversity across the landscape will depend on the criteria considered and the process of assessment. There is a danger that if not done properly, strategic assessment will instil a much lower level of environmental protection than a site by site approach. This has already been observed in the Regional Forest Agreement process which has clearly failed in its protection of biodiversity.

We note a number of concerns with respect to the current strategic assessment process:

- Under the current provisions of the Act the Minister has wide discretion in deciding whether to grant approval to a policy, plan or program. Though the Minister's discretion is limited to some extent by the requirement not to act inconsistently with various international conventions and domestic policies. We note, however, with the exception of recovery plans, which contain relatively specific provisions, the factors limiting the Minister's discretion are primarily broad principles, which are often difficult to interpret and apply to specific situations.
- There is no clearly defined standard or level of protection that the Minister must be satisfied of prior to granting approval to a policy, plan or program.
- There are no guidelines that define the appropriate level of environmental information required to properly undertake a strategic assessment.
- Our ability to undertake landscape-scale assessments to ensure the protection of biodiversity is currently limited and subject to much uncertainty. Climate change is likely to significantly increase this uncertainty. For example, it will require us to focus less on planning for biodiversity pattern (the elements of biodiversity that can be

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<sup>64</sup> Bubna-Litic K (2008) "Ten Years of Threatened Species Legislation in NSW—What Are the Lessons?" in Jeffrey et al (2008) *Biodiversity Conservation, Law and Livelihoods: Bridging the North-South Divide* Cambridge University Press at pp 265-279.



mapped and are regarded as static in time and space) and more on planning for biodiversity processes (the things that maintain biodiversity such as pollination, predation etc).<sup>65</sup> However, planning for biodiversity processes is a relatively new and undeveloped concept.

ANEDO considers that the strategic assessment process could be improved by structuring the Minister's decision-making powers in making approvals. We propose that the Act establish criteria that the Minister must be satisfied are met before granting approval of a policy, plan or program under a strategic assessment process (with some allowance for discretion).

One possibility of a test to guide approval of a class of actions under an endorsed policy, plan or program is the 'improve and maintain' test used in NSW. Another is the 'no net loss' test used in Victoria. The Hawke review expressed preference for the 'improve and maintain' test because of its existing application to the biodiversity certification arena, its potential for exceeding the status quo through the concept of improvement and its applicability to the natural and cultural environment.<sup>66</sup>

In deciding whether the 'improve and maintain' test has been met, we submit that the Minister should be satisfied that:

- Areas of high conservation value for listed threatened species and ecological communities (with high conservation value areas clearly defined under EPBC regulation) are protected.
- Any loss of other areas of less value to listed threatened species and ecological communities is offset in accordance with offset rules (with offsetting rules in the context of the strategic assessment provisions clearly defined under EPBC regulation and in accordance with recognised offset principles such as those set out by Gibbons and Lindenmayer)<sup>67</sup>.

However we recognise that due to the ecological complexity of landscape-scale assessment processes, it is unlikely to be possible to define a set of rules for determining high conservation value areas and offsets whose strict application will always achieve the best biodiversity outcome when applied across Australia. As such, we suggest that a discretionary mechanism be included under the Act, which allows the Minister to override the rules in circumstances where the Minister is of the opinion that a better outcome could be achieved by departing from the rules.

We note that despite the drawbacks of single species, site based assessments, they remain important under climate change. There is the potential for other factors to be considered in the site assessment process, including consideration of the scientific principles identified in the previous section. For example, consideration of the importance of the site for the adaptation of biodiversity under climate change such as a climate refuge or an important corridor.

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<sup>65</sup> Pressey R, Cabeza M, Watts M, Cowling R, and Wilson K (2007) 'Conservation planning in a changing world' *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 22(11): 583-592.

<sup>66</sup> Australian Government, *Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*, October 2009 at p 86.

<sup>67</sup> Gibbons P and Lindenmayer D (2007) 'Offsets for land clearing: No net loss of the tail wagging the dog?' *Ecological Management and Restoration* 8:26-31.

## Recommendations

Landscape-scale strategic assessment could be improved by:

- Requiring the Minister to be satisfied that a policy, plan or program meets the ‘improve and maintain’ test before granting approval.
- In deciding whether the ‘improve and maintain’ test is satisfied, require that the Minister be satisfied that areas of high conservation value for listed threatened species and ecological communities are protected; and any loss of other areas of less value for listed species and communities is offset in accordance with offset rules.
- Inclusion of a discretionary mechanism which allows the Minister to override the above rules in circumstances where the Minister is of the opinion that a better outcome could be achieved by departing from the rules.

## Bio-regional planning

Bioregional plans are another landscape-scale planning tool available to the Commonwealth government under the EPBC Act.<sup>68</sup> Under the Act, the Minister may prepare a bioregional plan for a bio-region that is within a Commonwealth area, or may cooperate with a State or State agency or any other person in the preparation of a bioregional plan for a bioregion that is not wholly within a Commonwealth area.

The plans may include provisions relating to biodiversity and its conservation status, important economic and social values, heritage values of places, objectives relating to biodiversity and other values, priorities and strategies and actions to achieve the objectives, mechanisms for community involvement in implementation of the plan and measures for monitoring and reviewing the places.

As the Hawke review identified, one of the main benefits of the bioregional planning mechanism is that it allows the Commonwealth government to create an integrated framework for Commonwealth interests at a regional scale.<sup>69</sup>

Once a bioregional plan is made, the Minister must take it into account when making any decision under the EPBC Act to which the plan is relevant.<sup>70</sup>

While there are a number of marine bioregional plans at various stages of completion, no bioregional plans for terrestrial bioregions have been made under the Act.

As the Hawke review recognised, bioregional plans have the capacity to include ecological principles important for the protection of terrestrial biodiversity under climate change.<sup>71</sup>

We note, however, that bioregional plans have limited influence, being one of a number of factors that must be considered by the Minister when making decisions under the EPBC Act. Therefore, even if a plan provides strong statements and establishes

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<sup>68</sup> EPBC Act s 176

<sup>69</sup> Australian Government, *Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*, October 2009 at p 80.

<sup>70</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* s 176.

<sup>71</sup> Australian Government, *Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999*, October 2009 at p80.

priorities to enable adaptation of biodiversity to climate change, these may not be translated to actual on ground protection and implementation through the EPBC Act.

### **Recommendation**

Facilitating the adaptation of biodiversity to climate change should form a key component of any bioregional plans made.

### **3.7 Conservation on private land**

As noted, it is increasingly being recognised that a landscape approach to biodiversity conservation is necessary; one that crosses all tenures. There is broad consensus that relying on public protected areas alone will not prevent biodiversity loss, and that we need to develop mechanisms which allow and encourage private land holders to protect vegetation and habitat on their land.

Significant amounts of land of potential conservation value are found on private property. For example, in Victoria 15 per cent of the State's threatened vegetation types are reliant on private land for their survival while another 35 per cent of threatened vegetation types occur largely on private land.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, many threats to biodiversity take place on private land, such as agricultural practices, grazing and land clearing.

The protection of biodiversity on private land will be a vital strategy to protect biodiversity under climate change. As noted, combating the impacts of climate change will generally require a 'softening' of the matrix, increasing connectivity across landscapes, creation of buffers around sensitive areas, and the protection of a diversity of habitat types. All these strategies will require increasing the protection and management of biodiversity on private land.

There are a number of initiatives established at the Commonwealth and state level for the protection of biodiversity on private land. For example:

- Conservation agreements in perpetuity on whole or part of the land;<sup>73</sup>
- Acquisition programs by philanthropic or Trust bodies that may see the land join the NRS;<sup>74</sup>
- Assistance to purchase land for conservation;<sup>75</sup>
- Technical assistance in managing land for conservation;<sup>76</sup>
- Stewardship payments for the management of land for conservation;<sup>77</sup> and
- Tax incentives.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Commonwealth State of the Environment Report 2006 at <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/publications/drs/indicator/111/index.html>

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* s 305.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, the Australian Bush Heritage Fund. Found at: <http://bushheritage.org.au/> (17 February 2009).

<sup>75</sup> The Natural Heritage trust National Reserve System Program facilitates the establishment of Private Protected Areas, providing up to two thirds of the purchase price to assist voluntary land purchase in exchange for permanent protection of the land.

<sup>76</sup> Many schemes provide this. One such program is Land for Wildlife, which operates across Australia—for example, see: <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrepna.nsf/LinkView/34933B99F789EF0E4A25677800115944BA15AEEDADB3CA6C4A2567D600824A6C>

<sup>77</sup> Section 305 (1)(e) of the *EPBC Act 1999* provides that conservation agreements may contain terms requiring the Commonwealth to provide financial, technical or other assistance to a person bound by the agreement.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* s 31.5.

The Commonwealth plays a major role funding conservation programs through Caring for our Country but most private conservation programs operate under state legislation and are implemented at a regional level.

Conservation on private land, however, has always operated as a supplement to government efforts to protect biodiversity.<sup>79</sup> The take-up of programs at the Commonwealth level has been limited, although the situation seems to have improved in recent years, with greater government attention on facilitating and promoting private conservation initiatives. Nonetheless, take-up remains greater at the state level. For example, there are only 12 conservation agreements finalised under the EPBC Act.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, there are around 200 voluntary conservation agreements finalised in NSW.

Philanthropic organisations operating on a national scale have been relatively successful. For example, Bush Heritage Australia<sup>81</sup> owns and manages 31 reserves throughout Australia covering over 946,276 hectares in six states.<sup>82</sup>

We make the following points in relation to private conservation under climate change:

- There is a clear need to increase private land conservation schemes under climate change. This will require Commonwealth and state governments to address barriers to up-take of private land conservation schemes including lack of appropriate incentives and benefits, and the in-perpetuity nature of some agreements.
- Various schemes operate under different objectives and rules and therefore target investment on different types of land. There is likely to be a need to ensure greater coordination of private land conservation schemes to ensure that conservation investment on private land through the schemes is more strategically targeted. That is, when operating together, they are more likely to result in overall protection and management of private areas important for the protection of biodiversity under climate change.
- Climate change is likely to require significant investment in the restoration of degraded areas. As such, there is likely to be a key role for private land conservation schemes which allow for the protection and management of land that is not necessarily of high biodiversity value currently, but with restoration, is likely to be important for biodiversity under climate change. Examples of such initiatives include Biobanking agreements, Property Vegetation Plans and wildlife refuge agreements under NSW legislation.
- There may be a key role for more flexible schemes in the short term, such as wildlife refuge agreements under NSW legislation. While voluntary and binding while in place, a wildlife refuge declaration can be easily revoked and future landholders do not have to be bound by the agreement if they do not wish to be. Similarly, in Victoria, the Land for Wildlife scheme establishes a voluntary but non-binding agreement with landholders for land to be managed for biodiversity conservation.

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<sup>79</sup> Young MD et al (1996) *Reimbursing the Future: An Evaluation of Motivational, Voluntary, Price-based, Property-right and Regulatory Incentives for the Conservation of Biodiversity* at p 145. Available online at <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/series/paper9/index.html>

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/anout/conservation-agreements.html#list>

<sup>81</sup> A national not-for-profit organization that protects Australia's unique animals, plants and their habitats by acquiring and managing land of outstanding conservation value)

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.bushheritage.org.au/>

Upon registration a commitment is made to uphold the objectives of the scheme. It does not alter the legal status of property and therefore is not passed on to subsequent owners of the land. Such schemes may address the concerns of landholders interested in conservation but reluctant to commit to a binding scheme that forecloses the opportunity to participate in more financially beneficial schemes in the future.

- It is critical that legislation provides strong protection for areas of high biodiversity on private land. Remnant vegetation on private land forms an important component of biodiversity conservation. Few state legislative approaches adequately address ongoing use and management of vegetation remnants on private land. In light of this we consider that an important ‘gatekeeper’ role must be played by the Commonwealth in regulating assessment of significant land clearing proposals under the EPBC Act. Introducing a land clearing trigger under the Act would be one way for the Commonwealth government to take a leadership role in protecting native vegetation on a national scale.

### **Recommendations**

- Barriers to the up-take of conservation initiatives should be identified and addressed.
- The objectives and rules of different schemes should be better coordinated so that conservation investment on private land is more effectively targeted.
- Greater incentives for the restoration of land should be provided, including land that is not necessarily of high conservation value currently.
- More flexible schemes should be developed to broaden options for private conservation, including short term schemes.
- A native vegetation trigger should be introduced under the EPBC Act to enable the Commonwealth government to take a lead role in halting broad-scale clearing of native vegetation across Australia.

### **3.8 Resources**

Biodiversity conservation has historically been under resourced, leading to problems of implementation. This is evidenced by the disparity between the conservation tools available under various legislative schemes and their uptake and implementation. For example, at the national level, the Commonwealth has stepped back from making mechanisms such as recovery plans mandatory and moved to a discretionary planning approach, largely due to a failure to meet legislative requirements under the EPBC Act.

As noted, climate change will require more active management of protected areas with associated resource implications. Many of these costs will be taken from park budgets, but will be unrelated to biodiversity conservation, such as maintenance costs associated with fire frequency, cyclonic activity and extreme weather events.<sup>83</sup> Other costs will

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<sup>83</sup> Hyder Consulting (2008) The Impacts And Management Implications Of Climate Change For the Australian Government’s Protected Areas: Final Report, Canberra, ACT: Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts at pp 52, 63, 81, 197, 215, 226, 235 and 244.

relate directly to biodiversity conservation such as research, monitoring and intensive management and ex situ initiatives.<sup>84</sup>

Resources for adaptation for the purposes of biodiversity conservation will have to compete for resources with other sectors, including within the 'adaptation budget', such as adaptation strategies around human settlements.

The establishment of an ongoing Biodiversity Fund (worth \$948 million in the first 6 years) to support projects that deliver biodiversity and related environmental benefits under the Commonwealth government's carbon price package is very welcome recognition of the importance of protecting and valuing biodiversity as part of tackling climate change.

#### **Recommendations**

- The conservation of biodiversity must remain a fundamental principle in all adaptation and mitigation responses to climate change.
- Ongoing funding for biodiversity conservation should be made available to allow for the effective utilisation of statutory conservation tools.

### **3.9 Recommendations of the Hawke Review**

The Hawke review of the EPBC Act addressed adaptation issues for biodiversity throughout the report. The report proposed that climate change adaptation issues be addressed by using regional and landscape approaches in addition to the current biodiversity management approaches, including expanded use of strategic assessments and bioregional planning;<sup>85</sup> considering emerging threats in decision making; and broader listing key threatening processes.<sup>86</sup>

A key recommendation in the report is that the EPBC Act include 'ecosystems of national significance' as a new matter of national environmental significance in addition to identified species and ecological communities. The inclusion of ecosystems as a matter of 'national environmental significance' is intended to shift the focus of the EPBC Act from individual species and ecological communities to a landscape based approach.

ANEDO supports the above recommendations of the review.

The Government has not yet released a response to the Hawke review despite much energy and resources already being applied to the task. The Government should release its response without delay and begin to implement the recommendations contained in the review.

#### **Recommendations**

- The Government should release its response to the Hawke review without delay.

<sup>84</sup> Hyder Consulting (2008) The Impacts And Management Implications Of Climate Change For the Australian Government's Protected Areas: Final Report, Canberra, ACT: Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts at pp xix, 92, 182, 189, 235 and 244.

<sup>85</sup> Hawke review, recommendation 6.

<sup>86</sup> Hawke review, recommendation 19.

- The Government should implement the recommendations of the Hawke review to aimed at addressing adaptation issues under the EPBC Act, including adding 'ecosystems of national significance' as a matter of national environmental significance.

#### **4. Mechanisms to promote sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services in a changing climate**

A healthy, functioning environment provides invaluable natural resources and ecosystem services essential to human well being such as the food production and water supply. As noted, climate change impacts are expected to severely deteriorate biodiversity and thereby the availability of critical resources and services. The potential impacts of climate change add another layer of uncertainty and complexity to the task of managing those natural resources and ecosystems services which may already be under stress. For example, climate change could potentially reduce the amount of water available to all users of particular river systems.

To ensure that the resources and ecosystem services we depend on are guaranteed for the benefit of all in the future it is essential that the use of natural resources and ecosystem services is sustainable. Therefore a robust sustainability framework is necessary to guide use and management in the long term.

In order to effectively address the impacts of climate change ANEDO submits that all Commonwealth natural resource legislation should better incorporate and implement the principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD). While the concept and principles of ESD is referred to in a various pieces of legislation at the Commonwealth level and across jurisdictions in Australia, it is often merely one of a number of considerations that decision makers need have regard to.<sup>87</sup> To better implement ESD would require strengthening of the legislation to ensure that decision-makers are required to consider and act consistently with or in accordance with the principles of ESD.

#### **Ecologically sustainable development**

Ecologically sustainable development is a long-standing and internationally recognised concept. The concept has been affirmed by the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development and has been recognised in Australia's *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (1992)*.<sup>88</sup> The concept was developed in response to a global realisation that rates of exploitation of natural resources are not environmentally sustainable. The overarching aim of ESD is therefore to achieve a level of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>89</sup> In particular the concept of ESD attempts to make it clear that environmental impacts are no longer seen as separate from economic and social considerations.<sup>90</sup>

Considering the significant potential impacts of climate change, ESD must play a key role in decision-making relating to natural resources and ecosystem services. ANEDO

<sup>87</sup> For example ESD under the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) is one of a large number of decision-making considerations.

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/index.html>

<sup>89</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987) at 43.

<sup>90</sup> For example, see: The 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development and the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development.

considers that ESD should be the guiding philosophy for natural resource and ecosystem service management. To that end, operationalising ESD as a means of addressing the impacts of climate change requires decision-makers to properly consider and implement the key principles of ESD.

We consider the following key principles of ESD to be relevant to climate change.

### **The precautionary principle –**

The definition of the precautionary principle as accepted in the EPBC Act is:

if there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Although there is now a large body of scientific evidence that demonstrates that human-induced climate change is already impacting on the planet,<sup>91</sup> as noted, there is significant uncertainty in predicting the precise consequences of climate change on weather conditions, biodiversity etc. This uncertainty triggers the precautionary principle and requires its consideration in the context of climate change.

The precautionary principle is therefore a critical principle for natural resource and ecosystem service management in order to prepare for the range of potential climate change impacts.

### **Inter-generational equity**

The principle of intergenerational equity is acknowledgment of the need for the present generation to ensure that the integrity of the environment is not compromised for future generations. The EPBC Act expresses the principle as follows:

That the present generation should ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations.<sup>92</sup>

This principle is particularly pertinent in relation to climate change. Climate scientists predict that the impacts of climate change will be felt even more intensely over the coming century, with anticipated temperature increases, in best scenarios, of between 2 and 4 degrees by 2100 if greenhouse gases remain at current levels.<sup>93</sup> This will have significant impacts on future generations and will affect their amenity, standard of living, health and may also lead to displacement of millions of people. Therefore the current generation must adopt a caretaker role to minimise the impact of current activities.

ANEDO therefore considers that the principle of intergenerational equity must remain at the forefront of thinking when making decisions relating to use of natural resources and ecosystem services and climate affecting activities such as determining of water allocations.

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<sup>91</sup> For example, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report.

<sup>92</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, s3A.

<sup>93</sup>



## **Conservation of biological diversity**

The conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity is a central principle of ESD and should be a fundamental consideration in decision-making. As noted, climate change presents significant threats to biodiversity and thereby an ecosystem's ability to deliver goods and services for human well being.

In order to ensure that Australia's biodiversity is preserved, ANEDO considers that the principle of biodiversity conservation should be more consistently factored in when making decisions that may affect threatened species and their habitats.

## **Market mechanisms**

A key element of ESD is the promotion of market mechanisms as a means of integrating environmental, social and economic considerations. Market mechanisms are particularly relevant in the context of climate change, as they can provide incentives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at minimal cost and to encourage preservation and management of biodiversity.

The use of markets to place more appropriate prices on natural resources and ecosystem services can optimise environmental, social and economic outcomes.

### **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen the recognition of ESD principles by amending relevant natural resource legislation to make it a primary consideration, and require decision-makers to act consistently with the principles.



Australian Network of Environmental  
Defender's Offices Inc

## Productivity Commission Draft Report: Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation

8 June 2012

The Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (ANEDO) consists of nine independently constituted and managed community environmental law centres located in each State and Territory of Australia.

Each EDO is dedicated to protecting the environment in the public interest. EDOs provide legal representation and advice, take an active role in environmental law reform and policy formulation, and offer a significant education program designed to facilitate public participation in environmental decision making.

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## Executive Summary

The Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices (**ANEDO**) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

Our offices have significant experience in climate change-related law reform. In 2011, among other efforts, ANEDO provided submissions to Federal Government Inquiries into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate,<sup>2</sup> the Carbon Farming Initiative,<sup>3</sup> and Australia's Clean Energy Future Legislation.<sup>4</sup> Our offices have also been heavily involved in efforts to reform planning law, and have emphasised the importance of making it more responsive to the implications of climate change.<sup>5</sup> ANEDO has previously also provided submissions to the Productivity Commission's inquiry on planning, zoning and development assessments.<sup>6</sup>

ANEDO is a network of legal offices, and we accordingly limit our comments on the discussion paper to those legal and regulatory aspects that are of direct relevance to our work. We address the information requests relating to local government (chapter 7) and relevant requests relating to planning and building regulation (chapter 8). In addressing these requests, we draw mainly on examples from the NSW planning framework.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/climate-change-adaptation/draft](http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/climate-change-adaptation/draft)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices, *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's Biodiversity in a Changing Climate*, 5 August 2011, [www.edo.org.au/policy/110805aust\\_biodiversity.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110805aust_biodiversity.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices, *Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Carbon Farming Initiative Bills*, 8 April 2011, [www.edo.org.au/policy/110408carbon\\_farming\\_initiative.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110408carbon_farming_initiative.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices, *Inquiry into Australia's Clean Energy Future*, 22 September 2011, [www.edo.org.au/policy/110922clean\\_energy\\_future.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110922clean_energy_future.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Environmental Defender's Office (NSW), *Submission to the Review of the NSW Planning System (Stage 1)*, 4 November 2011, [www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review\\_nsw\\_planning\\_stage\\_1.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review_nsw_planning_stage_1.pdf); Environment Defenders Office (Vic) and Victorian National Parks Association Inc., *Submission in Response to Coastal Climate Change Advisory Committee Issues and Options Paper February 2010*, 12 May 2010, [www.edovic.org.au/law-reform/submissions-and-issues-papers/coastal-climate-change](http://www.edovic.org.au/law-reform/submissions-and-issues-papers/coastal-climate-change).

<sup>6</sup> Australian Network of Environmental Defender's Offices, *Submission on the Productivity Commission Issues Paper – Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Planning, Zoning and Development Assessments*, 16 July 2009, [www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/100716productivity\\_commission.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/100716productivity_commission.pdf) and *Submission on the Productivity Commission's Draft Research Report – Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Planning, Zoning and Development Assessments*, 1 April 2011, [www.edo.org.au/policy/110401planning\\_submission.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/policy/110401planning_submission.pdf).

Information request 7.1 states:

*The Commission notes the current arrangements in New South Wales to limit the legal liability of local governments through the Civil Liability Act 2003 (sic) (NSW) and the Local Government Act 1979 (sic) (NSW), and seeks further information on whether this approach (or alternatives) could fully address the legal liability issues facing local governments in other jurisdictions when dealing with climate change adaptation.*

***Uncertainty regarding local government reliability is a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

ANEDO supports the development of nationally-consistent regulation of local councils' legal liability for climate change impacts, provided that this regulation is effective in motivating councils to be proactive about climate adaptation. In our view, statutory provisions for limiting council liability in NSW currently do not fully address the legal liability issues faced by local councils in responding to climate change. For this reason, we do not recommend the nation-wide adoption of these standards.

Part 5 of the NSW *Civil Liability Act 2002* contains a range of provisions that limit the liability of public authorities, including councils. Significantly among these, the Act provides that an act or omission of a council does not constitute a breach of statutory duty unless it is so unreasonable that no other council with that council's function could properly consider it reasonable.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, where a council has a special statutory power (that is, a power granted under a statute that it couldn't otherwise exercise), it will similarly not be held liable for an act or omission in relation to that power unless it was so unreasonable that no other council in that council's position could properly consider that act or omission to be reasonable.<sup>8</sup> The Act also limits the circumstances where a council can be held liable for a failure to exercise its function to prohibit or regulate an activity.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, with some exceptions the Act exempts councils from liability for failure to warn of an obvious risk. These exceptions include, relevantly, where a person has asked a council for information or advice about the risk, or where the council is required by law to provide a warning.<sup>10</sup>

Further protections are extended to local councils under the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW). Local councils are exempted from liability for the good faith provision of advice, or a good faith act or omission, in relation to risks of flood, risks to coastal zones posed by coastal hazards, or bushfire risks.<sup>11</sup> The Act details a number of activities that are covered by these exemptions, including the preparation of environmental planning instruments and coastal zone management plans.<sup>12</sup> The Act further sets out guidance for what can constitute 'good faith'. It includes compliance with manuals prepared by the council, and published in

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<sup>7</sup> *Civil Liability Act 2002* (NSW), s 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Civil Liability Act 2002* (NSW), s 43A.

<sup>9</sup> *Civil Liability Act 2002* (NSW), s 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Civil Liability Act 2002* (NSW), s 5H.

<sup>11</sup> *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW), s 733(1)-(2A).

<sup>12</sup> *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW), s 733(3).

the NSW Government *Gazette*, in relation to land liable to flooding, coastline management or bushfire risk.<sup>13</sup>

In ANEDO's view, while such provisions may provide some protection to councils seeking to undertake climate change adaptation strategies, their operation risks generating counter-productive outcomes. As set out above, the *Civil Liability Act* shields councils from liability in respect of their statutory duties in all but the most manifestly unreasonable circumstances. These provisions derive from the *Wednesbury*<sup>14</sup> test commonly utilised in administrative law, in situations where the decision-maker, unlike councils, has no personal interest in the decision.<sup>15</sup> In the administrative law context in Australia, the *Wednesbury* standard is made out extremely rarely, and it has been suggested that translating this standard to tort law means that there are very few situations in which councils will be liable for negligence in the exercise of their powers.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the statutory provisions curtail council liability in relation to possible nuisance claims.<sup>17</sup>

While we are in favour of measures that will promote best-practice climate risk management among councils, application of the liability shield provisions in the *Civil Liability Act* has wide-ranging consequences. In the context of climate change, the provisions shield councils from liability in relation to a broad range of actions that can be construed as not manifestly unreasonable. Consideration of both the rapidly evolving nature of scientific evidence relating to likely climate change impacts and the political debate surrounding interpretation of this evidence suggests that provisions such as those in the *Civil Liability Act* are likely to protect councils which fail to act appropriately in relation to climate change risks, just as much as they are likely to protect councils that are proactive in this regard.

We therefore recommend that any statutory provisions relating to local government liability for climate change adaptation be framed narrowly, and be clearly targeted at promoting proactive, strategic, evidence-based efforts to respond to climate change adaptation implications. Such provisions must be framed with regard to considerations of climate justice. For example, the coastal impacts of climate change are likely to bear most heavily on vulnerable communities, such as Indigenous groups, retirees renting in caravan parks, and those dependent on public facilities. In relation to Indigenous groups, the impact of sea level rise in areas such as the Torres Strait, and the need for urgent government action, is well understood.<sup>18</sup> Such legal mechanisms as are available for challenging council actions on climate change allow individuals to argue against council policies that restrict their rights,<sup>19</sup> but do not necessarily promote decision making that takes into account the interests of the

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<sup>13</sup> *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW), s 733(4)-(5). For example, a manual relating to coastal zones is the NSW Government's *Guidelines for Coastal Zone Management Plans* [www.environment.nsw.gov.au/coasts/101019guidelinesczmps.htm](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/coasts/101019guidelinesczmps.htm).

<sup>14</sup> The *Wednesbury* test takes its name from the case of *Associated Provincial Picture Houses Ltd v Wednesbury Corporation* [1948] 1 KB 223.

<sup>15</sup> See Greg Weeks, 'A Marriage of Strangers: the Wednesbury Standard in Tort Law' (2010) 7 *Macquarie Journal of Business Law* 131, 140, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Weeks, 'A Marriage of Strangers: the Wednesbury Standard in Tort Law' (2010) 7 *Macquarie Journal of Business Law* 131, 140-141.

<sup>17</sup> See *Coastal Councils and Planning for Climate Change: An Assessment of Australian and NSW Legislation and Government Policy Provisions Relating to Climate Change Relevant to Regional and Metropolitan Coastal Councils*, Report prepared for the Sydney Coastal Councils Group by the NSW Environmental Defenders Office, 2008, [www.sydneycostalcouncils.com.au/sites/default/files/coastalcouncilsplanningforclimatechange.pdf](http://www.sydneycostalcouncils.com.au/sites/default/files/coastalcouncilsplanningforclimatechange.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Case Study 1: Climate Change and the Human Rights of Torres Strait Islanders', *Native Title Report 2008*, [www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/nt\\_report/ntreport08/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/nt_report/ntreport08/index.html); Mark Roy, *Pressure Builds on Sea Walls*, Torres News Online, 06 September 2011.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Byron Shire Council v Vaughan*; *Vaughan v Byron Shire Council* [2009] NSWLEC 88; *Byron Shire Council v Vaughan*; *Vaughan v Byron Shire Council (No 2)* [2009] NSWLEC 110.

community as a whole in dealing with climate change risk. It would be detrimental to implement a liability shield that further disenfranchises vulnerable groups from the ability to push for climate policies that can account for the needs of all residents.

#### Information Request 8.1

Information request 8.1 states:

*To what extent do current state and territory land-use planning frameworks facilitate or impede the use of different land-use planning tools, such as time-limited development approvals or 'triggers'? What changes are required to state and territory planning frameworks to address any impediments?*

Land-use planning frameworks are directly relevant to climate change adaptation in at least two important respects. The first of these concerns strategic planning for the long-term allocation of land to different purposes. The second involves decision-making on individual development applications by relevant consent authorities.

***Lack of robust strategic planning based on comprehensive data is a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

In relation to the first, strategic planning involves setting long term goals and targets for a region based on comprehensive information and data. Effective responses to climate change, including climate change adaptation, will not be achieved without robust strategic planning. Strategic planning includes the use of a broad range of planning tools, targeted at different levels of regional specificity. These include State plans, regional strategies, and local environmental plans.

At the State level in NSW, *NSW 2021: a Plan to Make NSW Number One* is an overarching document setting out the broad goals of the NSW government for the ten-year period to 2021. While the document is not a land-use planning framework, it is worth noting that it is among the government's goals expressed in this plan to minimise the impacts of climate change in local communities. This includes assisting local government, business and the community to understand and minimise climate change impacts. Among the government's strategies is to complete fine scale climate change projections for NSW, which are to be available to councils and the public by 2012, and to work with government agencies and universities to deliver improved climate projections for NSW and the ACT.<sup>20</sup> Provided that these climate change projections are based on best-available scientific data, they can form a valuable resource to improve strategic land-use planning in a way that is responsive to the likely impacts of climate change. Development of a planning framework that can respond adequately to climate change mitigation and adaptation imperatives is an integral component of minimising climate change effects in local communities. Strategic planning initiatives in NSW presently fail to meet this goal.

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<sup>20</sup> NSW Government, *NSW 2021: A Plan to Make NSW Number One*, <<http://2021.nsw.gov.au/environment-communities>>, Goal 23.

***Planning frameworks limiting innovation are a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

Local government plays a crucial role in climate change adaptation, not least through its central role in development approvals and local-level planning decisions. There is a concern that, at least in NSW, measures to improve the consistency of environmental planning across local government areas will diminish the capacity for councils to take innovative action in the face of climate change adaptation imperatives.

In 2006, the NSW state government introduced the *Standard Instrument: Principal Local Environmental Plan* (Standard LEP), designed to ensure uniformity of Local Environmental Plans. In relation to coastal zones, the Standard LEP provides a list of objectives for development in coastal zones, including ‘to recognise and accommodate coastal processes and climate change’, through implementation of the NSW Coastal Policy.<sup>21</sup> The Standard LEP also requires that in relation to development in coastal zones, councils cannot grant consent unless satisfied that the proposed development will not be significantly affected by coastal hazards, or have a significant impact upon coastal hazards.<sup>22</sup> Coastal hazards include coastal or tidal inundation, and erosion.<sup>23</sup>

ANEDO supports the inclusion of clauses of this nature in planning policies. In NSW, however, further action could be taken to ensure that the Standard LEP promotes the adoption of best practice climate change adaptation strategies by all local councils. The Standard LEP limits the additional provisions that a council can include in its LEP. Councils cannot include provisions that are inconsistent with mandatory provisions in the Standard LEP.<sup>24</sup> This may mean that councils are unable to implement provisions that are stricter than the LEP. Policies that, for instance, privilege bicycle and pedestrian friendly development at the expense of cars and car parking, or solar power in place of conventional generation, may become more difficult for councils to implement as a result of the Standard LEP.<sup>25</sup> There are comparable barriers to improved water and energy efficiency standards because LEPs are overridden by the requirements to comply with BASIX housing construction standards. The limitations of BASIX are discussed in greater detail below, in relation to Information Request 8.3.

We recommend that planning frameworks capable of accounting appropriately for, and implementing, climate change adaptation imperatives be prepared at State or Territory level. This will decrease the uncertain, piece-meal results engendered by relying on local council planning guidelines to ensure that climate adaptation is adequately incorporated in planning decisions.

***Lack of clear State legislation is a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

Climate adaptation policies must also be set at the state, rather than local, level. Robust state laws are needed to set out a strategic, comprehensive system of climate adaptation. Such laws should include planned retreat policies in regions of high vulnerability, buffer zones in local planning policies, restrictive zonings, measures to build ecosystem resilience (such as dune re-vegetation), early warning systems and emergency response plans. ANEDO welcomes

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<sup>21</sup> *Standard Instrument: Principal Local Environmental Plan*, cl 5.5(1)(b).

<sup>22</sup> *Standard Instrument: Principal Local Environmental Plan*, cl 5.5(3)(d).

<sup>23</sup> *Coastal Protection Act 1979* (NSW), s 4.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Ghanem and Kirsty Ruddock, ‘Are New South Wales’ Planning Laws Climate-Change Ready?’, (2011) 28 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 17, 23

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Ghanem and Kirsty Ruddock, ‘Are New South Wales’ Planning Laws Climate-Change Ready?’, (2011) 28 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 17, 24.

endeavours to set national standards for climate change adaptation for settlements and infrastructure.<sup>26</sup>

***Lack of clear requirements for decision-makers is a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

At the level of development consent for individual projects, ANEDO is firmly of the view that under any planning framework, decision-makers must be explicitly required to consider the climate change impact of any proposed development. State planning laws are presently inadequate in this regard.

In NSW, the development assessment framework is set by the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW) (**EPA Act**) and associated Environmental Planning Instruments. This framework has proven to be ill-suited to responding to the imperatives of climate change adaptation. A particular barrier to adaptation is that NSW planning laws contain no mandatory requirement that climate change adaptation effects be considered.<sup>27</sup>

The EPA Act governs the majority of decision-making on whether approval should be granted for new developments. Most development is assessed under Part 4 of the Act. Section 79C sets out the factors that a consent authority must take into account in deciding whether to approve a development. Among these conditions, the consent authority must take into account the likely environmental impacts of a development, along with the public interest.<sup>28</sup> Beyond these considerations, there is no explicit requirement that the climate change impacts of a development be considered, or alternatives contemplated.<sup>29</sup>

Where development assessment is not required under Part 4 of the Act, there may nonetheless be a requirement to undertake environmental assessment under Part 5. Under Part 5, the decision-maker is required to consider ‘to the fullest extent possible’ all the likely effects of the development on the environment.<sup>30</sup> One factor to be taken into account in this consideration is the ‘impact on coastal processes and coastal hazards, including those under projected climate change conditions’.<sup>31</sup>

In October 2011, the NSW Government introduced new provisions for assessment of State significant development and State significant infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> These provisions replace the old, controversial, Part 3A of the EPA Act, which set out assessment requirements for major projects. Similarly to Parts 4 and 5, there is no explicit requirement for the consideration of climate change impacts within these provisions or in the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000*.

The lack of legislative provision for the consideration of climate change impacts has led to increased reliance on the Courts to read in climate change as a necessary consideration in

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<sup>26</sup> Currently being undertaken by Standards Australia: see [sdpp.standards.org.au/ActiveProjects.aspx?CommitteeNumber=BD-103&CommitteeName=Climate%20Change%20Adaptation](http://sdpp.standards.org.au/ActiveProjects.aspx?CommitteeNumber=BD-103&CommitteeName=Climate%20Change%20Adaptation).

<sup>27</sup> See Environmental Defender’s Office (NSW), *Submission to the Review of the NSW Planning System (Stage 1)*, 4 November 2011, [www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review\\_nsw\\_planning\\_stage\\_1.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review_nsw_planning_stage_1.pdf), 19-21.

<sup>28</sup> EPA Act, s 79C(1)(b).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Ghanem and Kirsty Ruddock, ‘Are New South Wales’ Planning Laws Climate-Change Ready?’ (2011) 28 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 17, 27.

<sup>30</sup> EPA Act, s 111.

<sup>31</sup> *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000*, cl 228(2)(p).

<sup>32</sup> These are contained in Division 4.1 of Part 4 of the Act, and in Part 5.1 of the EPA Act.



planning approvals. The history of cases in this area demonstrates that the Court's power in this regard is highly limited.<sup>33</sup>

Planning Acts in every State and Territory should ensure that climate change impacts are a mandatory consideration for decision-makers at all levels. Any legislative provisions to this effect must be accompanied by mandatory guidelines that codify a process for assessing projects that are likely to challenge climate adaptation goals, such as developments in coastal regions or in bushfire-prone regions. The guidelines must be given legislative force.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, responding to climate change mitigation and adaptation should be incorporated as an objective of all planning laws. In order to be effective, such objectives should be operationalised in all such planning laws. Strategic planning should be undertaken at State, regional and local levels to identify likely climate change scenarios and develop response plans in a timely and effective manner.

***Lack of fast-track options for green development is a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

Beyond simply requiring that decision-makers consider climate change implications when making decisions, we also advocate for measures to encourage proactive innovation in building and planning that is green and adaptation-focused. For example, in Queensland the government has developed a 'Green Door' policy that aims to accelerate decisions for development proposals that are deemed to be the most sustainable in Queensland. Green Door projects are expected to demonstrate exceptional performance across four Green Door principles that identify key sustainability outcomes. These principles are: exemplary planning processes; ecological processes (including improved potable water use; reduction in waste; increase in ecosystem quality and production of energy from renewable sources and a reduction in carbon footprint); economic development and community wellbeing.<sup>35</sup> The Green Door policy is sited within the legislative context of the *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* (Qld), the purpose of which is to seek ecological sustainability through management of the development process.<sup>36</sup> We advocate the implementation of similar incentives throughout Australia. Significant efficiency gains can be made through processes that streamline approvals for forward-looking, efficient, climate-adapted planning proposals. We would recommend that such policies also implement mechanisms that will progressively discourage development that is not sustainable in the context of a changing climate.

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<sup>33</sup> For example, in *Minister for Planning v Walker* [2008] NSWCA 224, the NSW Court of Appeal overturned a Land and Environment Court ruling that had invalidated a concept plan approval on the basis that the Minister had failed to consider whether the flood risk at the site would be exacerbated by climate change. See, however, in South Australia, *Northcape Properties Pty Ltd v District Council of Yorke Peninsula* [2008] SASC 57.

<sup>34</sup> See Environmental Defender's Office (NSW), *Submission to the Review of the NSW Planning System (Stage 1)*, 4 November 2011, [www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review\\_nsw\\_planning\\_stage\\_1.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/111104review_nsw_planning_stage_1.pdf), 22.

<sup>35</sup> See Growth Management Queensland, *Green Door Information Paper*, July 2011, available at [www.dlqp.qld.gov.au/development-applications/green-door.html](http://www.dlqp.qld.gov.au/development-applications/green-door.html). The Green Door policy

<sup>36</sup> *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* (Qld), s 3.

Information request 8.3 states:

*The Commission is seeking submissions on gaps or overlaps between land-use planning and building regulations that may act as barriers to adaptation.*

***Lack of national sustainability standards are a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

There is a close link between improved sustainability and climate change adaptation. As the Commission's Draft Report points out, mitigation activities assist in meeting future adaptation costs.<sup>37</sup> Increased mitigation in the present means that adaptation activities required in the future are likely to be less severe. Additionally, climate change is likely to lead to increased uncertainty of rainfall; greater extremes in temperature and more severe droughts.<sup>38</sup> Adaptation to such impacts will therefore require a planned and sustainable use of water resources. Coping with extremes in temperature is likely to require increased energy use in the form of heating and cooling of buildings, along with innovations in thermal conservation. Innovative use of renewable energy sources, and particularly solar energy, is likely to diminish the costs of these adaptive activities.

***The limitations of current building standards form a barrier to effective adaptation to climate change.***

ANEDO supports the adoption of building regulations that are responsive to changing consumption and technological circumstances, and that promote the use of best-practice building sustainability standards by local authorities. We also encourage development of a national standard that meets these goals. These sustainability standards should have regard to water and energy consumption at all stages of a building's life cycle. This includes consideration of the embedded energy involved in the creation of building materials, and in the activities of construction and demolition of buildings. Having regard to these inputs is essential in light of findings that the building sector accounts for some 23% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, by 2007 figures.<sup>39</sup> It should also include consideration of water-sensitive landscaping, and transportation design.<sup>40</sup>

In NSW, the principal building regulation relating to sustainability is known as BASIX. It is contained in the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Building Sustainability Index – BASIX) 2004 (BASIX SEPP)*. While the intent of BASIX is welcome, its potential to override more innovative and progressive environmental planning instruments is problematic. The BASIX SEPP overrides any environmental planning instrument that is inconsistent with it.<sup>41</sup> In particular, it invalidates the provisions of any environmental planning instrument or development control plan that aims to reduce consumption of mains water; reduce

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<sup>37</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation: Productivity Commission Draft Report* [www.pc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/116539/climate-change-adaptation-draft-report.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/116539/climate-change-adaptation-draft-report.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> As noted in the Draft Report, 34-40.

<sup>39</sup> See Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council, *The Second Plank – Building a Low Carbon Economy with Energy Efficient Buildings*, 2008, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Amelia Thorpe and Kirsty Graham, 'Green Buildings – are Codes, Standards and Targets Sufficient Drivers of Sustainability in New South Wales?' (2009) 26 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 486, 494.

<sup>41</sup> *State Environmental Planning Policy (Building Sustainability Index – BASIX) 2004*, s 7.

greenhouse gas emissions or improve the thermal performance of a building to which BASIX commitments apply.<sup>42</sup>

BASIX applies to all residential developments in NSW that cost \$50,000 or more. This includes alterations and additions to existing dwellings. BASIX imposes a range of energy and water efficiency targets. At their most stringent, these targets require energy and water use reductions of 40% over existing dwellings. Multi-unit residential developments of over 6 storeys are only required to meet reduction targets of 20%. The targets are set by comparison to average NSW water consumption and greenhouse gas emissions as at 2002-03.<sup>43</sup>

As EDO NSW has previously argued, the BASIX tool should be expanded and improved. Among its shortfalls are its inapplicability to multi-use housing, and the fact that it incorporates trade-offs that may reduce its benefits over the long term. For example, BASIX may allow for solar-powered appliances to be traded off against weaker building standards.<sup>44</sup> Among its other limitations, it is problematic that BASIX prevents consent authorities from imposing tighter water and energy use limits on residential buildings. This is particularly limiting given that, despite technological advances that have facilitated the achievement of existing BASIX goals, the BASIX targets have not been tightened since 2006. The existence of BASIX, meanwhile, prevents local authorities from taking individual action to improve sustainability in building design.<sup>45</sup> An improved BASIX standard should be extended to other building types, such as industrial and commercial buildings.<sup>46</sup> The NSW Government has also enacted the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Exempt and Complying Development Codes) 2008*, which includes the NSW Housing Code. The Housing Code sets certain development standards for housing in NSW, including generous maximum floor spaces. It also provides that new housing must comply with BASIX.

As examination of the NSW BASIX provisions demonstrates, building sustainability codes must be continually updated to reflect changes in technology and developments in sustainability best practice. They must also leave room for the adoption of more stringent standards by local authorities. Failure to do so will result in rigid policies that hinder, rather than facilitate, progress in achieving optimal climate change adaptation outcomes.

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<sup>42</sup> *State Environmental Planning Policy (Building Sustainability Index – BASIX) 2004*, ss 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Landreth, Kevin WK Yee and Scott Wilson, 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Building Simulation to Regulate Residential Water Consumption and Greenhouse Gas Emissions in New South Wales, Australia,' *Proceedings of Building Simulation 2011: 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of International Building Performance Simulation Association, Sydney, 14-16 November*, 2859, 2864.

<sup>44</sup> Amelia Thorpe and Kirsty Graham, 'Green Buildings – are Codes, Standards and Targets Sufficient Drivers of Sustainability in New South Wales?' (2009) 26 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 486, 489.

<sup>45</sup> Amelia Thorpe and Kirsty Graham, 'Green Buildings – are Codes, Standards and Targets Sufficient Drivers of Sustainability in New South Wales?' (2009) 26 *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 486, 489.

<sup>46</sup> See Environmental Defender's Office NSW, *Submission on the Discussion Paper for the Metropolitan Strategy Review – Sydney Towards 2036*, 30 April 2010, 4, <[www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/100430metro\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/pdf/subs/100430metro_strategy.pdf)>.