

ENQUIRIES: Dr Sandra Abell
PHONE: 07 4241 0516
YOUR REFERENCE: Email letter 31st July 2019
OUR REFERENCE: N/A



WORLD HERITAGE IS OUR PROMISE TO THE FUTURE

13 August 2019

Mr Stephen Palethorpe
Committee Secretary
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Palethorpe,

RE: Inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis: re-adoption

Thank you for the opportunity to update and add new information to our original submission to the Environment and Communications References Committee's inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis. This letter is supplementary to our original submission dated 10th September 2018.

We thank you for considering our previous submission and note that the Interim Report of the Inquiry recognised Commonwealth obligations under the World Heritage Convention and that World Heritage properties are listed as a Matter of National Environmental Significance under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

As explained in our first submission, despite comprising a very small proportion (0.12%) of the Australian continent, the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is one of the most biodiverse regions in Australia, particularly for fauna (700+ vertebrate species, 30% of Australia's marsupials, 40% of birds). In 2014, the Area was ranked the second most irreplaceable natural terrestrial World Heritage site on Earth because of its high concentration of endemic, rare and ancient lineage species.

Our submission of 10 September 2018 described the modelled risks that a warming climate poses to the fauna of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Following extreme heat events and the hottest summer ever recorded (2018-19) new data was presented to the Authority showing that some of the keystone and iconic species for which the Area was listed were under an imminent risk of extinction. Professor Stephen Williams, Centre for Tropical Environment and Sustainability Science, James Cook University, presented this updated data. Professor Williams was the co-author of our 2015-2016 State of the Wet Tropics Report (see [here](#)), which based its findings on 400,000 data points collected over the past 10 years. The updated data is correlating with the modelling from that report, this means the Area is facing the extinction of more than *half* of its endemic species by the end of this century.

The lemuroid ringtail possum, a species for which the Area is renowned, has been steadily declining now for more than a decade. The recent monitoring has identified that the declines in both possums and bird species have continued and are now reaching alarming levels. If the trends continue, which is likely without climate action, populations at sites that previously had the highest density of

lemuroid ringtail possums in the region could become locally extinct as early as 2022. There are similar trends for species such as the Herbert River ringtail possum and green ringtail possum, as well as bird species such as the golden and tooth-billed bowerbirds—species which only occur in the Area. The lemuroid possum and many other climate-threatened species (at least 70 animals and 70 plants) are currently listed as least concern.

Far North Queensland witnessed a mass mortality event, also associated with last summers' unprecedented heatwaves, of thousands of Spectacled Flying Fox individuals in just 3 days. Following a 50% population loss measured by CSIRO between 2004 and 2017, the 2018 summer mass mortality event further decimated flying fox populations by an estimated 30 per cent (see ABC media [article](#)). The Authority recognises the essential role of the Spectacled Flying Fox as a keystone species and important seed disperser within the Area. We strongly supported the uplisting of this species to Endangered under the EPBC Act.

In response to this new data and events, the Authority's Board released a ten point [statement](#) calling for urgent action and investment from governments to improve the resilience and protection of the Area. Those measures have also been incorporated into our soon to be released Wet Tropics Climate Adaptation Plan (2020-2030).

The Authority has contributed to the submission lodged by the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee, and we endorse the important issues raised in that submission. We also would like to reiterate, from our previous submission, the importance of engaging First Nations People and providing real opportunities for their participation in threatened species management and the broader responses associated with that such as invasive species management, habitat restoration and climate change responses.

We trust the information that we provided in 2018 and this updated information will be of value to the Environment and Communications References Committee's inquiry. Please contact our Principal Scientist Dr Sandra Abell if further information is required.

Yours Sincerely

SIGNED

Mr Scott Buchanan
Executive Director
Wet Tropics Management Authority