

THREATENED SPECIES SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Established under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*

Ms Sophie Power
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Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600.
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Dear Ms Power

Environment and Communications: Legislation and References Committee

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

On behalf of the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC), thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Senate Committee on 15 February. Professor Walker and I appreciated the chance to provide input into this most important matter.

I offer the following response to the question on notice in your email of 18th February 2013: ***Would you say the Threatened Species Scientific Committee's resourcing is sufficient for its workload?***

The TSSC fulfills its statutory responsibilities as efficiently as possible and, while we acknowledge that our budget has been maintained despite the financial strictures facing DSEWPaC, we could do more with additional resourcing (of course). More funding would facilitate meetings where we could discuss matters of method, priorities and strategy, and it would enable the Department to consider additional nominations for listing.

The most critical issue for the TSSC is the efficiency and accuracy of the listing process. The listing process requires the assessment of scientific literature and consultations with experts, both of which are resource intensive. With the aim of improving the efficiency and accuracy of the listing process, the TSSC is committed to exploring a proposal that is relevant both to your question and the Inquiry's Term of Reference (e): **Timeliness and risk management within the listings processes.**

This proposal has been discussed by members of the TSSC out of session and mentioned to our colleagues at DSEWPaC, but needs to be formally considered in depth before the TSSC would be in a position to brief the Minister, especially as full implementation may require some changes to the *EPBC Act*.

As pointed out in several submissions, despite its statutory importance, the *EPBC* list of threatened species and ecological communities tends to be dated and biased in favour of well-known taxonomic groups. Changes to the list currently occur mostly through state partnerships and nominations by the public, however the list has not been systematically overhauled for more than a decade, largely due to a lack of resources.

The resultant problem with the current list was illustrated by an expert-driven review of the current status of native Australian bird species and subspecies according to IUCN (Red List) criteria, conducted by Garnett and his co-workers (Garnett, S. T., Szabo, J. K., and Dutson, G. (2011) 'The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2010'. CSIRO: Melbourne). Garnett *et al.* identified 54 bird taxa that merited listing as threatened but were not listed under the *EPBC Act*; 22 taxa that were listed under the *EPBC Act* but no longer (if ever) merited listing; and 88 bird species listed under the *EPBC Act* and still merited listing (although only 45 of these were assigned the same conservation status category). A parallel process is

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being undertaken for mammals ('The Action Plan for Australian Mammals 2012', by Woinarski, Burbidge and Harrison) and preliminary results suggest that the imperfections in the *EPBC Act* listings are even more marked than for birds.

In addition, like most other national and international threatened species lists, the *EPBC* list of threatened species is biased in favor of 'iconic' species such as mammals, birds, reptiles and flowering plants, while less familiar species, like invertebrate animals and non-flowering plants, are rarely considered in the current listing process. These 'infrastructural' species have a vital role in supporting ecological communities and ecosystems, and are a vital component of 'biodiversity'. Indeed, invertebrate animals are 95 percent of all animal biodiversity, but very few invertebrate are listed as threatened species, even though it is likely that many species would qualify for listing if nominated.

A third problem is that the *EPBC* nomination process is technically demanding and community groups, especially Indigenous peoples, report that they feel disenfranchised as has been pointed out by the Indigenous Advisory Committee. At a recent joint meeting, representatives of the Indigenous Advisory Committee and the TSSC asked DSEWPaC staff to investigate a less-complicated 'Expression of Interest' nomination process for community groups, but the problem remains of resourcing the development of evidence required to assess the case for listing.

All these problems could possibly be efficiently addressed by the Australian government emulating the International Union of the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), by encouraging the formation of specialist, scientific, expert working groups. The IUCN Specialist Groups (see <http://www.iucn.org>), the members of which work *pro bono*, are charged with the task of regularly reviewing the status of species in various ecological or taxonomic groups and developing recommendations for listing as appropriate. In the Australian context, similar groups could additionally be charged with reviewing Expressions of Interest from the public and assembling the evidence required for listing nominated species or ecological communities. We believe that many of our academic colleagues and others with specialist knowledge would welcome involvement in tasks of this nature on a *pro bono* basis, along the lines developed by IUCN.

The TSSC will be working through these ideas in collaboration with DSEWPaC in the upcoming months with a view to the Committee preparing a brief to the Minister. This process would still require departmental resources in the management of any working groups to ensure a consistent approach.

The Committee would also like to confirm its support for the option of 'emergency listing' as recommended by the Hawke Review of the *EPBC Act* (Recommendation 16), noting that this recommendation was supported in principle by the government.

Thank you for your consideration of this proposal. The TSSC would be pleased to offer additional advice if required by your inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Helene Marsh FTSE
Professor

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Chair

25 February 2013

cc. Assistant Secretary Wildlife Branch; Director Species Listing Section Wildlife Branch,
Heritage and Wildlife Division; DSEWPaC

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