

Arid Lands Environment Centre, Inc.



Office	Lindsay Ave, Cnr Warburton Street PO Box 2796 Alice Springs
Mail	NT 0871 Australia
Phone	+61 (08) 8952 2497
Fax	+61 (08) 8953 2988
E-mail	info@alec.org.au
ABN	50 100 640 918

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities protection in Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate Inquiry. My name is Jimmy Cocking and I am the Coordinator of the Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) based in Alice Springs. ALEC has been operating for more than 30 years in the arid lands of Central Australia and has an extensive history in the biodiversity conservation and threatened species protection space. The Central Australia Conservation Council (founding partner in ALEC) in the early 1990's, flora and fauna surveys were conducted in the West Macdonnell ranges in the lead-up to the national park declaration in 1992. ALEC also hosted the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) funded, Threatened Species Network (TSN) from 1997-2008. The TSN worked across the sector providing community grants and advocacy for greater protection of threatened species in the region. This program ceased nationally in 2008 with the announcement of Caring for our Country (CfoC).

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) does not have the capacity or the ability to perform on-ground works in the landscape, but is working collaboratively across the sector in developing the *Biodiversity Matters* program which seeks to connect community members to biodiversity conservation through participation in on-ground monitoring and management tasks. The first year of workshops were conducted in National Parks and Land For Wildlife properties, the next steps are to develop programs on pastoral and Aboriginal freehold-land and Indigenous Protected Areas. The workshops bring together various organisations involved in land management and biodiversity conservation but also provide an increasingly skilled volunteer workforce to support the chronically under-funded biodiversity conservation sector. This submission has been written following conversations with people working in national parks and also on Aboriginal land - both are seriously concerned by the ecological disaster facing small-medium mammals in Central Australia.

We are failing!

Despite all the good intentions and efforts in protecting ecological communities and threatened species from decline, we are losing at an increasingly faster pace. The key threatening processes of ferals, inappropriate fire regimes and weeds continue to wreak havoc in the arid regions. The shift away from threatened species funding under the NHT towards landscape-scale conservation under CfoC has broadened the scope and scale of land management activities but has failed to slow the pace of species decline. Only this week 44 species were added to the NT Threatened species list. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-12-20/legless-lizard-nt-endangered-species-list/4437646?section=nt>). The current strategies that include the development and implementation of recovery plans is not working. The large amount of time and resources involved in developing recovery plans is essentially wasted when resources are not available to implement them. The system is further hampered by the ever-increasing list of threatened species that require recovery plans rendering the system swamped.

The complex systems of threatening processes is not well understood and in the context of the vast landscapes of desert Australia - success or failure is hampered by an inability to measure the effectiveness of management activities. More resources are needed for research into threatened species and ecological communities with significant resourcing in managing and monitoring key

threats. While CfoC funding has enabled the establishment of indigenous ranger groups to work on country to manage and reduce the impact of these threats of weeds, fire and feral species - the 5-year funding agreements are not adequate.

Long-term funding (minimum 10 years) is needed to ensure that research and on-ground management activities are carried out in an integrated way. Land management in the Northern Territory is not driven by governments but by non-government organisations and Land Councils. There are significant capacity gaps between the landscape-scale problems and the ability to scale up localised management activities (fencing, prescribed burning, weeds and feral management) without continuous and significantly increased resources. The protection of our natural assets and the threatened species that reside in them requires a focused national effort with the prioritisation of stemming the flow towards extinction.

What can be done?

Given that Australia has the world's highest rates of extinction for mammals, we need to ask ourselves as a nation 'are we happy to sit by and watch this extinction crisis unfold?' If we are, then we just keep on doing what we're doing. If we are not happy with this position, then we need to prioritise and resource research into threatened species and ecological communities and managing the threats to these special places. In the arid zone the key environmental threats are feral camels and buffel grass, while the key threat to local species is the feral cat. These threats require focused collaborative research programs to determine the most effective ways to reduce the impact of these species in Central Australia.

National awareness of the extinction crisis is low. Community understanding of threatened species and threatening processes is not improving. The education programs that came out of NHT-funded Threatened Species Networks were not replaced with the introduction of the Caring for our Country program. This creates a constituency that does not value biodiversity and creates myths that National Parks provide sufficient refuge for threatened species or that it is the role of NGO's such as the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Bush Heritage and other organisations to 'save' these species. By prioritising community education on biodiversity and threatened species, Australians will better understand the shared responsibilities of governments and land managers in reducing the threats to species and ecological communities.

The integration of intensive species-scale management to landscape-scale programs is impossible without long-term funding arrangements. Building capacity for communities to manage landscapes and monitor species both in distribution and numbers is no small task, but it needs to start somewhere. Investing in people and organisations that are successfully implementing adaptive management strategies is a good start. Accepting that a national focus is needed and that the Commonwealth must take the responsibility to create continuous flows of investment to research approaches to manage feral species (particularly feral cats). Investment by the Commonwealth can be leveraged for more investment from the private sector to invest in research and adaptive management approaches. The State and Territory governments must also be involved in resourcing, planning and managing across pastoral, the national reserve and Aboriginal freehold lands to ensure that management activities are collaborative, integrated, connected across landscapes and effective.

The road to extinction is paved and lay before us, it is the status quo. The only way we as a nation can move off this paved road and onto the dusty track of species conservation is by having a better understanding of the challenges we are dealing with. The complex interactions of native and feral species in a landscape shaped by fires, floods and drought is not well-known but is better understood each day that someone is working in it. Allocating more funds for research into these complex interactions is necessary for planning and undertaking effective management activities. Changes to the Caring for our Country and Biodiversity Fund is needed to include more research into determining effective management approaches on country rather than simply restoring habitat. Learning by doing and ensuring that this learning is collaborative and shared is key to understanding and then taking on the challenges that lay ahead.