



SAVE THE BILBY FUND



Submission to the Australian Government Senate Environment and Communications Committee for the 'Inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia'.

a) Management of key threats to listed species and ecological communities

Threats to listed species and ecological communities are

- the increasing human population;
- competing demands for the use of land, water and marine areas;
- climate change
- clearing of vegetation
- inappropriate grazing regimes
- inappropriate fires regimes
- weeds
- changed flow regimes and reduced water quality
- introduced predators
- introduced competitors
- changes to fire frequency and intensity

Existing regulations and other initiatives are helping to moderate the impacts of many key threats and can be seen as keeping 'common' things common. I won't dwell on these points as I am sure submissions from various levels of government will outline in detail how they believe themselves to be adequately addressing threats.

There are dishearteningly few examples of threats to an existing threatened species being mitigated to the extent that they no longer have a negative impact on that species. In fact the only example I can describe is that of removing the harvest pressure on crocodiles and the associated population recovery that has occurred.

All forms of governments over many years have needed to do more to address the feral animal explosion across Australia. However this is an example where the problem is seen as so big and intractable that most NRM and conservation professionals have given up on the idea and now perceive those species impacted by cats, foxes and feral dogs as 'unrecoverable'. The lack of policy traction on the matter of feral cats is most particularly offensive as there are solutions that could be trialled but governments appear to be held to ransom by a nameless faceless 'cat lobby' that refuses to countenance ideas such as biological control.

If however, government is to throw its hands in the air and walk away from existing introduced species issues that are threatening species to the point of extinction, it should be clear and

accountable about these decisions. It should be made plain to the community of Australia that governments are not acting to mitigate the effect of introduced predators on endangered species for example. Similarly it should be stated that we are not interested in managing the spread of agriculturally valuable introduced species such as buffel grass, that has such a catastrophic effect on endangered species like the Bridled Naitail Wallaby and the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat.

And then there is the matter of new introduced species. The degree of impotency and apathy that is accompanying new and potentially catastrophic introductions of diseases and environmentally damaging species is outrageous. In the past two years, governments have thrown their hands in the air on the matter of myrtle rust and yellow crazy ants, citing that they are 'uncontrollable' and there is no use in trying to eradicate them to prevent them having significant impacts on species and ecosystems. This may well be the case, however information is not provided to the community regarding the potential impact of that decision so that the democratic process can apply pressure if society wishes for a different outcome.

What can be done:

I am recommending that a national summit is established for each of the key threatening processes that are known to have an immediate and critical impact on critically endangered species. These summits will be charged with the task of addressing policy triggers and researching effective mechanisms for beginning to make real progress in reducing the impacts of these threats. In the first instance renewed focus needs to be provided to the issue of managing the impacts of feral cats in Australia.

b) Development and implementation of recovery plans;

Recovery planning has traditionally been an ineffectual tool to stimulate action towards recovering species. This is not a problem with the idea of recovery planning per se but a reflection on some failings in how the process has occurred to date.

Recovery plans often do not clearly identify a targeted definition of what 'recovered' would look like. This makes the plan more often a 'prevent extinction' plan rather than a recovery plan. A model of planning, whereby milestones or performance indicators are set that will step a species back to a lower level of listing or landscape scale recovery is required.

If it is considered that a species and its accompanying suite of threats can not be acted on to achieve at least viable populations at key managed sites, a recovery plan should not be developed for that species. Another kind of plan needs to be developed for those species where the best we can hope for in the medium to long term is to prevent extinction. This will then constitute a clear and transparent statement about the future of that species and can be separated out from a perceived failure of recovery planning.

Secondly, recovery plans need to deal more effectively with the issue of funding. At the moment, plans are required to be 'costed' so that it is clear how much recovery of a species will cost. In future they also need to consider how that money will be sourced and outline where existing money is being deployed by signatories to the plan and where extra funding needs to be scraped together. This will then invite action by communities and philanthropic investment because they can see where the shortfall in the recovery program is and choose to act in that space as it suits them. This method will also provide a transparent statement by all levels of government regarding the degree of investment in a particular species and allow the democratic process to work regarding where communities and society believe money should be spent.

The failure of recovery planning more generally is that the whole recovery process has been massively under resourced. In other words, it doesn't matter what sort of plan you do...if you don't have the money to do the things in it, it will not work.

What can be done:

Recommend that a recovery plans are maintained as an important tool to coordinate species recovery but that changes are made as outlined above.

c) Management of critical habitat across all land tenures;

Critical habitat is almost never identified at the state level. Generally speaking the levels of survey and monitoring of most threatened species is so low, that effective habitat models can not be built. This means that it is often only the known sites or 'records' of species that are offered any level of protection by state protective mechanisms. For example, as a key contributor to the conservation of the Greater Bilby in Queensland, the Save the Bilby Fund has not had experience of governments identifying and declaring critical habitat for that species.

National Parks make a significant contribution to the protection and management of critical habitat for threatened species in Qld and the majority of these species have been recorded on the protected area estate. This is a great result. However the management of the park estate is also plagued by insufficient funding and it can sometimes be hard to manage multiple threatened species that have competing needs. For this reason, critical habitat also requires management on private property and other state lands.

Lastly, there is often not much critical habitat across any land tenure. Many species in Qld are endangered due to the degree of impact on their critical habitat that has historically occurred. So for recovery of these species, it is not management of existing critical habitat that is the greatest problem, but how we provide new and recovered habitat to these species.

What can be done:

Survey and monitoring and habitat modelling needs to be completed for all endangered and vulnerable species and critical habitat identified and protected by all levels of government.

d) Regulatory and funding arrangements at all levels of government;

Investment in threatened species is woeful. Prioritisation is the buzz word these days as a normal and understandable reaction to an ever growing list of species requiring intervention and an ever decreasing pool of government funding to achieve outcomes. Caring for our Country, whilst a very large funding bucket, appears not to have prioritised actions from recovery plans, and therefore created a whole new schema for threatened species whereby funding and effort were drawn away from existing established species experts, programs and agreed recovery actions.

The recently announced Biodiversity Fund does more of the same.

Most governments across Australia are now hopeful that they will secure philanthropic funding into threatened species programs however I find it bizarre that we are now reliant on corporate sponsorship to deliver core public benefits such as preventing the extinction of fauna species such as the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat. Similarly corporate sponsors and non-government organisations such as WWF and trusts and societies like the Save the Bilby Fund are spending more money on threatened species recovery outcomes at times, than governments are.

One of the most critical shortfalls in funding is that provided for systematic survey and monitoring for all species but in particular threatened species. Many threatened species could potentially be de-listed completely if we set our minds to the task of securing access to private land and the funds to send survey teams out across our landscapes. At the moment, it appears that governments are having a constant struggle to do the barest minimum of monitoring threatened species populations on the National Park estate. For example, the Save the Bilby fund is funding research into better and cheaper methods of survey for the Greater Bilby as governments appear unable to secure resources that provide consistent and reliable information. Similarly, the failure of monitoring systems to pick up feral cat increases and associated bilby decreases within the feral animal enclosure at Currawinya is a reflection that more resources need to be channelled towards survey and monitoring. Not at the expense of actually doing things though...but as well

as and as an important tool to start reporting to society the outcomes that threatened species investment has delivered.

What can be done:

Ensure that grants packages and funding are aligned with recovery planning processes for endangered species. Ensure that grants packages and funding maintains support to critical and established programs that often take some years to deliver desirable outcomes.

Establish a means to fund survey and monitoring of threatened species to establish robust and accountable reporting to governments and society regarding the status, trend and progress on recovery of threatened species.

e) Timeliness and risk management within the listings processes;

The listing process in Qld is far superior to that managed under the EPBC Act simply because it manages to get through more than 10 species per year. The process of listing at the federal level is grindingly slow and therefore those things listed under EPBC are a tiny proportion of what would be listed if the process was sped up. It would be advantageous if those things that have been assessed in Queensland historically, and that are endemic to Queensland are automatically listed as a similar category under EPBC.

What can be done:

Support state listing mechanisms where possible as they are quicker and more comprehensively across the range of species in Australia than that administered by the Australian Government.

f) The historical record of state and territory governments on these matters;

I would like to point out that we have, in just a short 200 years that white people have been occupying our country, earned the distinction of having one of the world's worst extinction records with at least 23 species of mammal gone forever. You will be aware that there are an untold number of species facing the same fate. This disaster is now being accelerated at a frightening speed mainly because of the great seasons our country has enjoyed over the last 4 or 5 years and the subsequent explosion of feral predators associated with 'good times'.

The list of threatened species continues to grow, but most alarmingly, the list of those things presumed extinct is also growing.

Frank Manthey OAM

Co-Founder of Save the Bilby Fund