

Senate Enquiry

The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Submission by Friends of Tootgarook Wetland Reserves.

We are Friends of Tootgarook Wetland Reserves, a community group working towards protection and preservation of this particular site on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria.

As many of the inhabitants of our site, Tootgarook Swamp, are threatened species and ecological vegetation communities this enquiry is of great interest to us and the results may aid or hinder our current efforts.

I think it is fair to say that the view of the majority of conservationists and those involved in the environment that Australia is failing in its obligation to retain that which the right of every Australian, our natural heritage.

I refer to ICUN Red list summary by country for animals,

http://www.iucnredlist.org/documents/summarystatistics/2012_2_RL_Stats_Table_6a.pdf.

According to their findings Australia is number 2, after the USA, on the list for endangered, critical and vulnerable species with a total of 783. When you add to this the fact that our population density is the lowest in the world this essentially places us at number 1 in the world reduction of animal species. Coupled with this most of our mammal species are endemic to this country and not found elsewhere, therefore irreplaceable.

This data speaks for itself when it comes to establishing whether or not the processes currently in place are enough.

As a well-respected influential country in the Asia Pacific region it would appear we have the responsibility to set the example and take the lead in this area. Rather than lagging behind these countries we should be seeking for a solution to the problem of species loss which other neighbouring countries can follow.

With Climate change looming over the world as a huge threat to the natural environments current state now is not the time for Australia to be cutting back funding or saving money at the cost of our countries unique landscape.

Current problems with the processes include the following;

- Under current legislation, (i.e. the Victorian flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 and the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999) not all endangered or threatened species are protected – only those that have been listed.
- There is no automatic process for a threatened species to be listed; listing depends on someone submitting an application. Often the professionals with the requisite

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knowledge to complete the application are so overwhelmed they don't have the time to do it, so an endangered species can remain unlisted for years.

- Once an application has been made for a species to be listed, the process of approval can take years.
- There is no emergency listing process, so a newly discovered species, or one that suddenly becomes critically endangered as a result of a catastrophic event is not protected until the process, no matter how protracted, has been completed.
- After listing, it can take several more years for an action statement/recovery plan to be written, approved and adopted.
- Action statements are generally written by knowledgeable scientists and others but may be poorly constructed so that they do not give effective protection. They can be subject to interpretation and challenged in unintended ways that favour development and exploitation over conservation.
- Governments tend to support development and exploitation over conservation, even though they publicly espouse the importance of biodiversity protection.
- Once the Action Statement or Recovery Plan has been written it may or may not be implemented; funding required for implementation may not be available.
- No one effectively ensures, supervises or monitors implementation.
- No one is held accountable for failure to implement an Action Statement or for failure of an implemented Action Statement to protect the threatened species.
- Action Statements and Recovery Plans are not reviewed and updated.
- In practice the main practical value of Action Statements and Recovery Plans appears to be that they are invoked by vested interests, government agencies and governments to claim that species are protected, even when the intended protection is not effective and the species continues to decline.

From our local level we are seeing the repercussions of these insubstantial processes time and time again as they end up causing a negative flow on effect from the highest level of government right down to the individual landowner.

Good data and good information, lead to a good decision, poor information and poor data will result in poor decision. That is from what we have observed is the biggest issue when it comes to managing our threatened species and preventing others from getting on the list.

Landowners who wish to develop high conservation significant land into housing or other inappropriate usage are expected to commission a report. The report which is written is based on data. If the data hasn't been collected or updated by DSE, Shire or federal

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government than the report will be flawed and the decision to allow a development to occur may end up destroying and reducing threatened species and communities which nobody knew were there because nobody had collected or updated the data. If species are known to occur in the area and no action statements are in place then there is no real reason to prevent the development from going ahead, with the addition of a few offsets (which cannot replace threatened communities) and some species relocation. In extreme cases which we have observed the landowner may resort to land vandalism to reduce offsets and biodiversity values of the land prior to putting in a permit application and unless there is data available to prove what already existed there can be little done about it.

The Local governments approve developments and inappropriate usage of land because the state or federal government databases and action statements are so behind and lacking that they don't know what was worth saving until it's already been lost. Their decisions are based on the information that they can access about the conservation significance of a site, species or vegetation community and its current status according to higher government.

Referrals are made to relevant bodies for approval but again their decisions are based on the information that they have access too. Lack of data leads to approval of land usage, that in many cases, we discover too late that this has led to a loss or degradation of species and communities which has had negative effects on neighbouring areas.

It is unfortunate that in most states environmental departments tend to be the first to be cut back when money's tight. Possibly because it's a common view that these departments spend more money than they bring in and therefore are not budget friendly. We believe this is a short sighted viewpoint given that the retention and restoration of our natural environmental values and heritage will lead to increased tourism. After all it's the environment that sets this country apart.

If state and federal governments took a more long term view of environment protection then there would come a time when it would start being more profitable to all Australians. Unfortunately there is a tendency to rely on short term band aid solutions to the environmental issues which will appease the public until the next election but have no real impact in solving the problem at its source.

In conclusion we see that a more streamlined collaborative shared database between all levels of government and run by the federal government would see better outcomes for Australia's unique environment and enable us to better manage the environment as a whole rather than as separate states. Australia belongs to all Australians and we should be working

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towards preserving it all not just our own little patch. A federally run shared database which could be added to by the public (with supporting evidence), conservations and community groups and other relevant bodies would see an increase in data availability. This data could then be used to monitor species levels so we can learn more about what affects them and be better equipped to react and prevent species from becoming a red list species. From a federal level the database could be used to ensure the states are meeting their obligations in terms of action statements and recovery plans. We should be looking to other countries for solutions to this issue and putting more funding to protecting our country for future generations. Rather than reacting when a species gets on the endangered list we need to be proactive in preventing it from ever getting to that point. A change is needed and soon if we are to prevent this country from having the dishonour of first place on the ICUN red list for most threatened species.

Jessica Durrant

Secretary



Friends of Tootgarook
Wetland Reserves