

# Conondale Range Committee

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... still watching over the Conondales and Mary Valley.



Formed in 1976 to press for a significant National Park in the Conondales, the Conondale Range Committee has worked with successive state governments on the Conondales Consultative Process, the Agricola Mine Rehabilitation Process, the South-east Queensland Forest Agreement and the recent establishment of the Conondale Range Great Walk. In 2004, we published "Walking on the Wilder Side .. in the Conondales" and our work has been recognised with two Sunshine Coast Environment Council awards.

**The Committee Secretary**

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communication

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Parliament House

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**Comments to Inquiry re EPBC AMENDMENT (retaining federal approval power) BILL 2012**

We of the Conondale Range Committee have witnessed two extinctions in the Conondales in the last few decades though none at the time, neither ourselves nor the wider scientific community, realized it.

The Gastric-Brooding Frog *Rheobatrachus silus* and the Southern Day Frog *Taudactylus diurnus* have not been reported for some time and are now thought to be extinct.

This experience has made us acutely aware of the need for considered and effective action for species when there is some advance warning of their continued existence being threatened.

Such is the case with several federally-listed species in the nearby Mary River, and the vital role that federal EPBC legislation played in coming to their defence, in 2009, against the Queensland Government project, the Traveston Crossing Dam.

This organisation joined many others in opposing the dam. Although our initial charter had been to press for improved protection of the impressively biodiverse forests of the Conondales, we could not stand to one side while a proposal with drastic impacts for the river at the center of our catchment, was actively promulgated.

We were deeply grateful that the federal EPBC legislation provided a third party to examine the impact of the proposal on federally-listed threatened species.

One should, of course, be able to have faith in state-based agencies to do a scientific and impartial assessment but we found this not to be the case.

We found in the lead-up to the federal assessment that many state government reports (that contained information damaging to the proposal) became "unavailable". It was only the holding of a federal Senate Enquiry that forced the tabling of these documents, and made them available for public scrutiny.

Many statements in the dam's EIS were shown to be flawed or misleading and we were grateful that the process allowed an opportunity to bring these to the attention of a "third party", the federal Environment Minister.

**This would not have been the case had the federal power been devolved to the state.**

There was an incredible conflict of interest at the state level. The State Coordinator General was charged with advancing the project and simultaneously assessing its environmental impact.

(It should be pointed out that this situation is even more critical in Queensland with its unicameral parliamentary system and the absence of any house of review.)

Many of the environmental conditions applied by the Coordinator-General in his approving the dam included novel, untested, and quite possibly unworkable solutions for species survival (the effectiveness of the Paradise Dam fishway springs to mind, initially touted as “state of the art” and the model for Traveston, but by the time of the EIS, and due to its shortcomings, the condition was made that a “suitable” fishway be constructed).

Once again we were grateful that the legislation allowed the opportunity to highlight this to the federal minister and his department.

It is plain that this current push to “cut green tape” favours speedier delivery of projects, as well as the delivery of some, that, like Traveston Dam, might not otherwise proceed.

**There is absolutely nothing of benefit in it for the threatened species that the legislation is intended to protect.**

Given the frenzy of large-scale coal mining and coal seam gas projects, as well as their associated infrastructure demands, and given that state governments are actively advancing these, there is an even stronger case against devolving federal approval powers.

Mooted changes to “cut green tape” amount to little more than a form of “queue-jumping” and it is important the federal legislation remains as robust as possible in the interest of threatened species.

By not approving Traveston Dam and by embarking on drawing up a “whole of river” recovery plan, the federal government certainly lived up to its charter for the protection of threatened species. It effectively granted a reprieve for the Lungfish, Mary River Turtle, Mary River Cod and the Giant Barred Frog, from a development that was widely acknowledged as ‘ill-considered’.

We strongly request that the federal government retains its approval powers under the EPBC Act and does not devolve them to state governments.

Ian Mackay  
(President)