

Introduction

As the executive director of 2 large properties (Mt Rothwell, Tiverton) in Victoria that are managed for the protection of threatened species and ecological communities, I appreciate this opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Australia's Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Inquiry "The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia". I make this submission based on our success in achieving a range of significant environmental outcomes and the observations and learning's we have developed during this process.

The Submission Context

Mt Rothwell is a privately owned property with an overarching focus on protecting and breeding threatened species. The property comprises 400 hectares of Victorian Volcanic Plain grassland, woodland and rocky ridges that is enclosed by a ten kilometre feral proof fence. The property is subject to ongoing rigorous pest plant and animal control works. Mt Rothwell (in collaboration from Department of Sustainability and Environment and Zoos Victoria) has established managed breeding programs for the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, the Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby and the Southern Brown bandicoot. Mt Rothwell operates in accordance with an annually updated Management Plan which is endorsed by DSE. The focus on the aforementioned 'flagship' species supports the enhancement of many other native plant and animal species. The Mt Rothwell project was recently the focus of an international BBC documentary titled "Grasslands of the Savannah", and was concluded by host Chris Packham to be a "success".

- Mt Rothwell biodiversity contributions: Mt Rothwell is currently responsible for significant numbers of the State's key endangered species including:
 - In excess of 60% of Victoria's Eastern Barred Bandicoots
 - Approximately 35% of the central sub-species of Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby. We estimate that in two years' time Mt Rothwell will be breeding up 60 Brush Tailed Rock Wallabies per annum which would be over three times the numbers generated by institutional breeding programs.
 - The largest and most successful Eastern Quoll breeding program (peaking at 53 in a season).

Tiverton is an 800 hectare Victorian Volcanic Plains grassland project that is in earlier stages of development than Mt Rothwell. The property hosts many threatened and endangered flora species as well as habitat for a number of bird and mammal species. We have commenced the ecological restoration of this property through weed control and enhancement of native flora. Already we are seeing signs of environmental outcomes as this year Brolgas nested for the first time for example. There is no feral fencing at Tiverton at this stage. Based on the Mt Rothwell success we intend to fence Tiverton in the future (when budget permits) to a significant and required expansion of the habitat (as identified by DSE) for those grassland species most affected by fox and feral cat predation.

Key Factors in Mt Rothwell's Success

- Our evidence is that without the impact of foxes and cats and suitable management of the habitat, native species will generally thrive in these conditions. Furthermore, the native species appear to have significant positive impacts on soil health and therefore weed management (unquantified).
- Another critical factor is the structure of our organisational model to deliver these results cost effectively. The structure is basically a private/public/community partnership model. The private ownership acts as a custodian and ensures effective and quick decisions with a very keen eye on efficiency and costs. Public participation (through collaboration with government departments and zoological institutions) ensures various standards are met and our conservation efforts are aligned with the directions of the State and Federal governments. This also allows us access to grant money to assist with our programs (although on a limited and ad hoc basis?). The community element is developed over time with trust in the structure and processes. This has led to voluntary labour, scientific advice, engineering advice, building assistance etc. All of which assists enormously in cost management but equally importantly provides opportunities for community health outcomes which are recognised to flow from participation in projects like this. The community involvement also acts as a further assurance to us meeting our commitments as this support will be lost without us doing so. These three components are crucial, dependent on each other and provide benefits for each other in that the property owner receives required assistance, the community is able to participate in a 'hands on' way from which they benefit, and the government is involved in the delivery of significant public good outcomes (biodiversity and community health) for minimal cost.
- Mt Rothwell has also been partly funded on the basis of funds that became available through the sale of vegetation credits in Victoria's Bushbroker scheme.

Reccomendations/Suggestions

We offer the following as preliminary recommendations:

- We would like to see more funding available to assist with operational costs and not just infrastructure.
- There is an obvious need for increased funding for research into reducing the impacts of fox and feral cat predation on native species.
- Funding for research to understand what ecological benefits we are losing with the loss of biodiversity.
- We offer our experiences and knowledge to work with government to develop a model for Public reserves which results in more protection of threatened wildlife and communities.
- Our biggest establishment cost (not including property purchase) is the development of the feral proof fencing. Government assistance with this would be of significant help to achieving the environmental outcomes we are pursuing.
- We can breed animals at a significantly reduced cost to institutional programs (i.e. Eastern Barred bandicoot, Mountain Pygmy Possum and other Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby programs). Government should look closely at the end result of breeding programs which should be measured by a \$\$/animal bred metric.
- We believe there is a need for governments to encourage species recovery teams and community interests to embrace privately owned conservation efforts.
- The significant outcomes generated at Mt Rothwell (i.e. EBB program and active managed volunteer program) have been achieved with funds largely sourced from the property owner and through the Bushbroker scheme. However, it has been recognised by various authorities (including the Productivity Commission) that when significant public good outcomes are generated that an equitable cost sharing model between public and private funds should be developed. We believe that Mt Rothwell and Tiverton provide an excellent balance between private, not-for-profit community, and government funding contributions and would like to see recognition of this model. Perhaps in the establishment of a dedicated funding scheme for private conservation projects.