



## **GREG. P. AND VAL. A. CLANCY**

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### **SUBMISSION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THREATENED SPECIES AND ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITIES' PROTECTION IN AUSTRALIA INTRODUCTION**

As an ecological consultant and scientist I am trained to observe the natural world and what is happening to it. What I see alarms me as the impact of humans on the ecosystems of Australia is severe and on-going. The enactment of the Threatened Species Conservation Act in 1995 in New South Wales gave me some heart. We finally had legislation to seriously protect our threatened species. The situation is certainly better than it was prior to the Act but still unsuitable developments are approved, habitat is destroyed and threatened species populations decline further. As Tim Flannery and others have recently discussed in the media Australia is facing its second great vertebrate fauna species extinction. Why is this happening despite the good legislation and the multitude of great on-ground projects being funded by the commonwealth and the states. The problem cannot be solved by politicians alone as politicians respond to the community and to the three or four year electoral cycle. Funding for the management and protection of threatened species and ecological communities has to be long term and not cater to whatever is the 'flavour of the month or year'. Planting a billion trees may be great but if it happened while billions of trees are being bulldozed then we have a net loss of biodiversity. Stands of trees are also not a suitable replacement for complex ecosystems that we are losing. It is easier to get funding if you are a community group prepared to 'work' for the government for nothing. The funding usually only covers expenses for such things as fencing and signs to say how wonderful the government is. Rarely, if ever, can the qualified scientists, who need to lead the projects, get any funding. I am not against governments funding volunteers but it should not be the only model adopted. I have given countless hours to the conservation of biodiversity as a

volunteer but am also a professional in the field who needs funding support to continue my research on threatened species. There was recently a call for applications for funding for shorebird management by Birdlife Australia. I was hoping to apply for funding to assist in my monitoring and banding/flagging of threatened shorebirds. When I checked the conditions of the grant I realised that there was no point in me applying as the fees/salaries of scientists and consultants are not covered. My costs are my time and my vehicle expenses.

Governments are reacting also to the perceived community attitude that social and economic factors are more important than environmental. It is alright to protect the environment as long as it doesn't affect humans' lives and their wealth. I believe that governments should be leading the way in changing community attitudes as they have access to the scientists which the everyday person does not. The problem is that many politicians aren't committed to biodiversity conservation either and therefore it gets even less attention than global warming and there are still the global warming sceptics in parliament. People need to be educated to the fact that if the environment is not adequately protected then people's social and economic situation will also decline. We need to abandon the growth economy and replace it with a sustainable economy. You can't keep growing economies on a planet with limited resources. The population of the planet needs to be reduced by family planning and removing stupid incentives like the family bonus. Although Australia has a relatively small population it is already too large for it to be sustainable. We are clearing important areas of habitat to build more and more houses. Most ecologists believe that we should have a population no larger than 15 million people in Australia. I support this figure. The problem we have in Australia is that much of the continent is relatively inhospitable and human populations cluster around the coastline. Governments need to be commissioning research to determine the carrying capacity of Australian urban and rural areas.

A major problem with threatened species legislation is that it usually relies on whether or not there is likely to be a 'significant impact' on threatened species. The problem is there is no clearly defined definition of 'significant impact' and consultants, developers and government officials usually interpret it to suit their own situation. The loss of small areas of threatened species habitat may not be significant in themselves but added to all of the other losses around the country may well add up to a serious decline in threatened species habitat and the species themselves.

Recovery planning in New South Wales evolved from a single species approach to communities and has now morphed into the 'Priority Action Statements' which review a species distribution and abundance and then determine which are the most viable populations left so that funds can be channelled into that population. This is a response to limited funding and if threatened species management was given the support that it should have then these decisions would not have to be made. All populations of threatened species are important and the loss of any of them can mean that the gene pool becomes very small and the species won't survive in the long term.

The system for nominating a threatened species of ecological community can be drawn out and frustrating. In 1997 I nominated remnant vegetation on the floodplain in northern NSW as an endangered ecological community. My nomination was sent back to me after many months stating that I would have to nominate a specific vegetation community. This I did but it still took many months before the vegetation on the floodplain was listed and this was after the further loss of important remnants. This is not a criticism of the scientific committee of NSW who I believe does a valuable job but the system is slow and ways to expedite nominations should be explored. Veto powers of certain members of the Committee do however stop legitimate species from being listed. *Sauropus hirtellus* is a small herb found only in Spotted Gum forests of the Clarence Valley. It has been nominated for listing and I understand that the Forests NSW representative on the Committee has objected to its listing as it may hamper logging operations. The official position is that more data are needed to

assess the nomination. I have provided all of my records to the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage Wildlife Atlas and it is blatantly clear that it is threatened and needs protection.

The problem with the regulatory function of the NSW government is that there are so many small infringements that are not worth the time and resources to pursue but they all add up to biodiversity loss. It is difficult to obtain the necessary evidence in many cases to obtain a conviction. An increase in staff and funding may allow more successful prosecutions. However in New South Wales government jobs are being reduced not increased.

It is clear that if the loss of biodiversity and the second great extinction is to be stopped or slowed down significantly more funds will need to be allocated at all levels of government. The scientists often know what the problems are or at least what needs to be studied so they need to be consulted. I know that unlimited funds can't be allocated in an ad hoc manner but significant targeted funding is required if we are going to reverse the trend towards extinction of many species.

The historical record of the NSW state government has, overall been good with respect to biodiversity conservation. Both major parties have contributed in the past to the establishment of a world class system of national parks and reserves. Threatened species conservation on private lands has been addressed to some degree by the Threatened Species Conservation Act and the Native Vegetation Act. Both of these have their problems but they are attempts at improving the conservation outcome for vegetation and threatened species in the state. Unfortunately the present state (O'Farrell) government has reversed many of the great achievements of earlier governments by allowing recreational shooting, trials of grazing and logging in national parks and the hunting of waterfowl on private property. None of these actions are assisting in stopping biodiversity decline, in fact they will be adding to it.

I would like to personally address the committee on these and other aspects of the terms of reference if the Committee decides to hold public hearings on the NSW North Coast.

Yours faithfully  
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Ecologist and Birding-wildlife Guide