



Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

2012/14627

Ms Sophie Dunstone
Committee Secretary
The Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Dunstone,

Further to your invitation of 7 November 2012, I am pleased to make this submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee regarding: *The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia.*

As identified in the State of the Environment report released by the Australian Government in December 2011, the Australian environment is facing a wide range of complex and evolving threats that are increasing pressure on many species and ecological communities. As a federation, environmental protection in Australia is delivered by the combined efforts of local, state, territory and Commonwealth governments along with the actions of landholders, communities, the private sector and non-government organisations.

The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Populations and Communities (the Department) is committed to working in partnership with the states and territories, as well as a range of other government and non-government land and sea managers, to provide protection and conservation for threatened species and ecological communities, and importantly the ecosystems on which they depend. The Department, on behalf of the Australian Government, manages a range of statutory and non-statutory measures that have effect across all land and sea tenures.

Relevant measures implemented under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) include:

- identification and protection of threatened species and ecological communities as 'matters of national environmental significance';
- increasing use of landscape wide strategic assessments and bioregional planning to identify important areas of habitat for threatened species and communities as part of the development assessment process;
- conservation of important areas of threatened species habitat as part of the protected area system including the National Reserve System, national and world heritage places and wetlands of international importance (Ramsar wetlands); and

- collaborative development of recovery plans, threat abatement plans, conservation advices, and other management plans, to provide national guidance for the protection and conservation of individual species, ecological communities and important habitat areas (for example Ramsar wetlands or heritage places).

The Department, on behalf of the Australian Government, also administers a range of non-statutory measures that collectively play a major role in the conservation of species and ecological communities, including those identified as threatened under the EPBC Act. These measures include:

- national policy such as the Australian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and the National Wildlife Corridors Plan that aims to build resilience in the landscape by promoting connectivity, habitat conservation and restoration;
- major funding initiatives such as Caring for our Country and the Clean Energy Futures Biodiversity Fund;
- environmental research through the National Environmental Research Program;
- supporting the expansion of the National Reserve System and other protected areas (and managing the vast majority of the marine conservation estate);
- management and scientific effort in Australia's Antarctic territories; and
- environmental watering in the Murray Darling Basin and other measures under the Water for the Future initiative.

The Department continually seeks to review and improve its approach to biodiversity and threatened species management in light of improvements in knowledge and feedback from the community and experts. On 24 August 2011, the Australian Government released its response to the *Independent Review of the EPBC Act* (the Independent Review), including a broad package of reforms for Australia's national environment law. A prominent theme of the Independent Review, and the Australian Government's response, is that biodiversity conservation requires a strategic approach that focuses on conserving ecosystem function and important areas of habitat at a landscape scale. The Australian Government is increasingly enhancing a strategic landscape and ecosystem approach to environment and heritage protection, while still maintaining strong protection for individual species.

More detail on the above matters is included in Attachment A. The Director of National Parks will also make a submission outlining the activities of Parks Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written submission.

Yours sincerely

Dean Knudson
A/g Deputy Secretary
17 December 2012

State of the Environment and Threats to Biodiversity

The 2011 *State of the Environment Report* (SoE 2011) states: “Much of Australia's environment and heritage is in good shape, or improving. Other parts are in poor condition or deteriorating...Our changing climate and growing population and economy, are now confronting us with new challenges”.

The most significant threats to Australia's biodiversity—such as harvesting, land clearing and fragmentation of habitat, invasive species, inappropriate fire regimes, grazing, changes in hydrology and climate change—operate at a landscape scale.

The *State of the Environment Report* states that “the consequences of our past environmental and heritage management are reflected in a number of environmental indicators that continue to cause concern. Introductions of feral animals and weeds, widespread land clearing, the drainage of wetlands, intensive harvest of fish stocks and a host of other past actions will continue to exert pressures on our environment, regardless of environmental policies and management that now prohibit or minimise such actions, and regardless of our management of the drivers of climate change, and growing population and economy.” This is colloquially known as the ‘legacy effect’.

The full *State of the Environment Report* is available at:
www.environment.gov.au/soe/2011.

The Department notes that abating all threats affecting threatened species is not always feasible or an efficient use of scarce conservation resources. A key example of a threat that is not easily managed is the growing impact of climate change on species and ecological communities, where global efforts are needed to abate the threat. Another is the collective impact of historic vegetation clearing associated with early settlement which has significantly reduced the habitat available for some species. In addition, threats typically interact in complex, cumulative and unexpected ways.

Nonetheless, the Australian Government is addressing the impacts of these systemic pressures on biodiversity through a number of measures. Importantly, the Department has responsibility for administering the new Clean Energy Futures Biodiversity Fund (Biodiversity Fund) to build resilience and restore habitat connectivity, as well as help manage threats that can have a compounding impact with climate change, such as invasive species.

Overall, the Department is pursuing a strategic, prioritised and multi-pronged approach to mitigate threats to species and biodiversity, as outlined through the various measures below.

Statutory Protection Measures

Both the Australian and international community expect the Commonwealth to ensure that nationally significant environment matters are effectively protected and the key vehicle for achieving this is the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Threatened species (critically endangered, endangered and vulnerable) and ecological communities (critically endangered and endangered) are listed under the EPBC Act as ‘matters of national environmental significance’. As such they are given protection under national environment law and actions likely to result in a detrimental significant impact upon them must be referred for assessment and approval. The intent of the approval process under the EPBC Act is to determine whether a proposed action is acceptable and avoid significant impact where possible,

or mitigate/reduce significant impacts, or offset adverse impacts when unavoidable. This regulatory protection is supported by strong compliance measures.

In addition, threatened species also receive protection under the EPBC Act through other landscape-level matters of national environmental significance such as ecological communities, Ramsar wetlands, Commonwealth marine areas, national heritage places and world heritage properties. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park also became a separate EPBC Act protected matter in 2009, giving extra protection for its associated threatened species.

More information on the EPBC Act and matters of national environmental significance is available at: www.environment.gov.au/epbc.

In recent years, the Department has accelerated listing of threatened ecological communities at a landscape or ecosystems scale and this provides additional protection for component species. For example, the listing of the *Littoral Rainforest and Coastal Vine Thickets of Eastern Australia* ecological community in 2008 provided additional habitat protection for over 60 threatened plants and animals, including the southern cassowary and Proserpine rock wallaby. More details on progress with protecting threatened ecological communities are provided below.

Also in recent years, the Department has overseen several landscape-scale heritage listings that provide substantial extra protection for many threatened species, including for those species on the Ningaloo Coast, in the Australian Alps and in the West Kimberley. Work is continuing to assess other large areas for potential listing which provide vital habitat for many species, including the Tarkine.

There are a total of thirty-two places listed for natural heritage values on the National Heritage List, including sixteen on the World Heritage List. Of recent listings, the West Kimberley is the largest terrestrial listing on the National Heritage List, at 19 million hectares, approximating the total landmass of Victoria. The Ningaloo Coast, listed among other values for its threatened species, and comprising over 700,000 hectares, was entered into the National Heritage List in early 2010. A slightly smaller area of over 600,000 hectares was included in the World Heritage List in June 2011.

More information on heritage protection is available at: www.environment.gov.au/heritage.

Progress with Listing, Threat Abatement Plans and Recovery Planning

In 2007, amendments to the EPBC Act required that nominations for threatened species and ecological communities be prioritised annually and specific timeframes be set for the completion of assessments to determine eligibility for listing. In addition, in recent years the Department has developed partnership agreements with most jurisdictions to streamline EPBC Act listing of species that have already been assessed by state departments or scientific committees. For these reasons there has been acceleration in the protection of threatened species and ecological communities.

For species, 119 have been listed since the amendments came about in February 2007. For ecological communities, 25 have been listed since 2007, compared to 14 in the previous 7 years since the start of the EPBC Act in 2000 (20 were also carried over from previous legislation). There are now 59 threatened ecological communities listed under the EPBC Act, most of which are part of the strategic move to a landscape or systems-level protection for many threatened species, including the first ever marine community (Giant Kelp Forests). The current national list of threatened ecological communities represents more than 150 ecological communities (or

equivalent) recognised as threatened by states and territories; and over 4.6 million hectares of 'protected' environment.

More information on threatened species and ecological community listing is available at: www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened.

There are now 473 recovery plans in place covering 754 threatened species and 23 ecological communities. In addition, there are another 109 plans currently in preparation covering 172 threatened species and 23 ecological communities.

Recovery plans set out the research and management actions necessary to stop the decline of, and support the recovery of, listed threatened species or threatened ecological communities. They provide a planned and logical framework for key interest groups and responsible government agencies to coordinate their work to improve the plight of threatened species and/or ecological communities. Not all entities are recommended for a national recovery plan when they are listed. However, since the last EPBC Act amendments in 2007, all threatened species and ecological communities not covered by a recovery plan (or with one in preparation) now have a conservation advice. These conservation advices outline priority research and conservation actions and are made available at the time of listing. Both recovery plans and conservation advices are taken into account in EPBC Act project approval decisions.

Recovery planning is also developing more strategic approaches to allow better integration of recovery and threat abatement planning with regional and other planning initiatives. There is increasing emphasis on regional, multi-species and ecological community recovery plans. Regional recovery plans in place include those for the Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges in South Australia, King Island in Tasmania and Border Ranges of New South Wales and Queensland. It is recognised however that such regional landscape approaches will not always be appropriate for the recovery needs of some species and therefore individual recovery plans will continue to be developed for particular species as appropriate.

The implementation of recovery actions is generally the result of collaborative investment in, and participation by, all levels of government, non-government organisations, research organisations and community groups. As the majority of recovery plans under the EPBC Act are adopted state and territory recovery plans, their implementation is largely facilitated by the relevant jurisdiction. Implementation for many recovery plans is overseen by a recovery team comprising representative stakeholders.

The Commonwealth also currently has 14 threat abatement plans in place. The purpose of a threat abatement plan is to reduce the effect of a key threatening process that has been declared under section 183 of the EPBC Act. A threat abatement plan establishes a framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the impact of a key threatening process. A threat abatement plan must provide for the research, management and other actions necessary to reduce the key threatening process concerned to an acceptable level in order to maximise the chances of the long-term survival in nature of native species and ecological communities affected by the process (section 271 of EPBC Act). Threat abatement plans are underpinned by strong science and are important tools for raising public awareness about key threats to biodiversity, and best practice strategies and techniques to abate those threats.

The proposed amendments to the EPBC Act envisage a more flexible approach to threat abatement planning, particularly to allow for their development and implementation at regional scales. The Department is also moving to develop threat abatement advices which will complement threat abatement plans by providing immediate guidance upon the listing of a key threatening process, and which can be updated as needed to reflect the most recent research outcomes and best practice in on-ground management.

Recovery plans and threat abatement plans are binding on the Australian Government and the government is responsible for implementing the plans to the extent to which they apply in Commonwealth areas. Under section 268 of the EPBC Act a Commonwealth agency must not take any action that contravenes a recovery or threat abatement plan. While the EPBC Act places no direct obligations on states and territories to implement recovery and threat abatement plans, the plans provide a prioritised framework to guide investment and effort by governments, researchers, land managers and other stakeholders. In addition, approval of an action that will have a significant impact on listed threatened species or ecological communities must not be inconsistent with a recovery plan.

While no specific Australian Government funding program exists for the sole purpose of implementing recovery and threat abatement plans, the funding of on-ground conservation measures consistent with identified recovery and threat abatement plan actions comes from a range of Australian Government programs including Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund. These programs are further complemented by state and territory government funding programs which contribute to the conservation of threatened species and ecological communities by supporting actions identified in national recovery plans. Therefore, the investment of funding in recovery and threat abatement plans varies from year to year against a range of other competing conservation priorities, the activities of other relevant organisations and the status of the plan (i.e. development, implementation, review).

Recovery and threat abatement plan implementation is a long term process and it may be many years before any significant and long-lasting improvements are observed. However, there are examples where investment in and participation by government and the community in recovery programs to date is leading to improvement in the conservation status of species. These include species as diverse as the northern hairy nosed wombat, humpback whale, western swamp tortoise and threatened plants on Kangaroo Island.

More information on recovery and threat abatement plans is available at: www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery and www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tap.

Improved Protection through EPBC Act Reform

Since the EPBC Act was introduced more than ten years ago, environmental management has evolved and the economy has continued to transform. Reform is needed to ensure this important legislation continues to work effectively in a modern Australia.

The Government's response to the *Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the Independent Hawke Review) is built around four key themes:

- A shift of focus from individual project approvals to strategic approaches including new regional environment plans;

- Streamlined assessment and approval processes to improve the efficiency of the processes without reducing the environmental protections provided by the Act;
- Better identification of national environmental assets, including through a new provision under the EPBC Act to list 'ecosystems of national significance' as a matter of national environmental significance; and
- Cooperative national standards and guidelines to harmonise approaches between jurisdictions and foster cooperation with all stakeholders.

The Government's response to the Independent Hawke Review can be found at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/epbc-review-govt-response.html>.

Building on these themes, the proposed amendments to the EPBC Act are aimed at strengthening strategic measures and enabling a shift to a more whole-of-ecosystem approach that addresses key threats at a landscape scale, while still protecting individual threatened species. The reform package represents a major step towards developing a streamlined and harmonised national approach to conserving Australia's environment, with threatened species and ecological communities remaining a major focus of this approach. Amendments to the EPBC Act are proposed to be introduced to Parliament in 2013.

More detail on the EPBC Act Reform process is available at: www.environment.gov.au/epbc/reform.

The Australian Government's reform agenda includes greater use of strategic assessments and regional environment planning to achieve environmental objectives, support sustainable development, help maintain ecosystem services and improve business certainty. The Department has already either completed or begun several strategic assessments to address threats affecting species and ecological communities at a landscape scale. Importantly, these strategic assessments allow for cumulative impacts on threatened species and ecological communities to be more effectively dealt with, as well as encouraging protection considerations earlier in planning processes. Approaches to the use of this mechanism are continually being refined.

As part of the Australian Government's environmental legislation reform agenda, the Department released the EPBC Act environmental offsets policy in October 2012. The policy outlines the Government's approach to the use of environmental offsets, providing greater transparency regarding the suitability of offsets under the EPBC Act and improving environmental outcomes through the consistent application of best practice offset principles. The offsets policy and associated calculation were underpinned by extensive advice from the scientific community, including those supported by the National Environment Research Program.

More specifically in relation to threatened species, the Australian Government has agreed with the Review's recommendation to implement emergency listings for threatened species and ecological communities. This aims to allow for faster protection of species and ecological communities that are under immediate and substantial threat.

Also consistent with the Independent Hawke Review, the Australian Government has agreed to amend the EPBC Act to protect ecosystems of national significance and ecological communities in the vulnerable category.

Ecosystems of national significance are proposed as a new protected matter. This is aimed at better integrating the conservation of ecosystems into development planning and environmental assessment processes. Ecosystems of national significance are planned to be identified, spatially defined and assessed through one of the following strategic approaches: regional environment plans, strategic assessments or conservation agreements with the states and territories. Protecting habitats through strategic approaches will ensure that measures required to maintain the long-term health and resilience of ecosystems and ecosystem services will be considered in the context of the broader long-term sustainability of the region concerned.

The proposed EPBC Act amendment allowing for vulnerable ecological communities to get full protection as a protected matter, in addition to critically endangered and endangered ecological communities, will provide protection for all listed threatened ecological communities and their component species.

The Independent Hawke Review also noted that there are inconsistencies and inefficiencies between jurisdictions in the listing of threatened species and ecological communities. The Australian Government is committed to addressing this issue and, in its response to the Independent Hawke Review, further noted the need to make the lists of all Australian jurisdictions centrally available. The Department is also currently working with the states and territories to move towards nationally agreed and scientifically robust criteria for listings, which will be consistently and rigorously applied. It is planned to amend the EPBC Act to provide for accreditation of state and territory listing processes that meet national standards. This will not affect the Commonwealth's capacity to assess any species or ecological community. However, any listing by an accredited state or territory that meets the criteria for 'nationally threatened' will not require a separate assessment by the Commonwealth. This should speed up protection for some threatened species, and allow for more efficient use of resources across jurisdictions by minimising duplication of assessment processes.

Non-Statutory Protection for Threatened Species and Ecological Communities

As previously mentioned, the Department protects threatened species through a combination of statutory and non-statutory measures. The major non-statutory measures are summarised here.

Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2030 (the strategy), endorsed by all states and territories in 2010, is a guiding framework for conserving our nation's biodiversity. The strategy functions as a policy umbrella over other more specific national frameworks including Australia's Native Vegetation Framework (soon to be released), the Australian Weeds Strategy (Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council 2007) and the Australian Pest Animal Strategy (Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council 2007). The strategy outlines national priorities for action to help stop the decline in Australia's biodiversity and outlines ten national targets, including increasing native habitat for biodiversity conservation.

The strategy is available at:

www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/strategy-2010-30.

The Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Populations and Communities released One Land – Many Stories: Prospectus of Investment on 10 December 2012, which sets out the Australian Government's framework for investment in biodiversity conservation and natural resource management through the Environment Portfolio's components of Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund. The Prospectus demonstrates the Government's commitment to identifying opportunities to improve

integration of its involvement across natural resource management 'sectors' such as biodiversity, water and carbon, to maximise protection of environmental assets and maintenance of ecosystem services.

Since 2008, the Caring for our Country initiative has provided funding for activities across all land tenures, including through regional natural resource management organisations. There have been many landscape-scale projects to abate key threats to biodiversity and protect various habitat types as well as various projects aimed specifically at particular threatened species. Examples of the latter include the \$10 million that was committed to work with the Tasmanian government and others to combat the sudden large decline in Tasmanian devils caused by the devastating devil facial tumour disease.

Another good example is the Environmental Stewardship Program component of Caring for our Country that uses a market-based approach to enter into funding arrangements with private land managers to manage matters of national environmental significance listed under the EPBC Act. Since 2008, the Environmental Stewardship Program has resulted in the management and protection of over 58 000 hectares of five nationally threatened ecological communities on more than 580 sites on privately owned land. This includes 40 187 hectares of the critically endangered white box, yellow box, Blakely's red gum grassy woodland and derived native grasslands (known as box gum grassy woodland) which occurs in southern Queensland, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. Ecological monitoring being undertaken by the Australian National University has also identified threatened species on a number of these sites.

Further information on the Environmental Stewardship Program is available at: www.nrm.gov.au/stewardship.

The Australian Government has made a commitment of more than \$2 billion to continue Caring for our Country from 2013–14 to 2017–18. The program will continue to address the protection and conservation of threatened species, ecological communities and other ecosystems of national importance, for example those that support migratory species. To improve integration of its regulatory and non-regulatory functions, the design of the next phase of the program includes an increased emphasis on using formal strategic documents, such as recovery plans, to inform investment decisions.

More detail about Caring for our Country is available at: www.nrm.gov.au.

A more recent initiative promoting environmental resilience is the Clean Energy Futures Biodiversity Fund. This is an ongoing program providing \$946.2 million over its first six years to encourage individuals, organisations and communities to work in partnership to achieve positive landscape-scale biodiversity and carbon outcomes. Under Round One of the Biodiversity Fund, 313 projects valued at \$270 million over six years are underway. As a result of these projects, many threatened species and ecological communities will benefit; through, for example, approximately \$10 million will go to help restore koala habitat.

The Biodiversity Fund: Northern Australia Targeted Investment 2013-14 round was announced on 5 November 2012 to provide \$50 million over four years for on-ground conservation work. Northern Australia is a relatively intact landscape but invasive species, changes to land uses and fire management are having a significant negative impact on many species and communities. This investment will help address these threats before more species become threatened and rehabilitation is more costly.

More detail on the Biodiversity Fund can be found at:
www.environment.gov.au/cleanenergyfuture/biodiversity-fund.

The Department oversees development of the National Reserve System (NRS), which is Australia's network of protected areas, conserving examples of our natural landscapes and native plants and animals. The NRS currently protects over 117 million hectares. Since 2008, 44 properties totalling almost 1.3 million hectares have been added to the system, funded through Caring for our Country. In addition, investment in Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) was boosted in 2008 by \$50 million over five years from Caring for our Country. Indigenous communities have declared 25 new Indigenous Protected Areas covering over 15.6 million hectares. Across Australia a total of 51 declared IPAs now cover over 36.4 million hectares of Indigenous owned and managed lands.

The creation of protected areas is critical to the ongoing survival of threatened species and ecological communities. At the same time, threats also need to be managed within the NRS and IPAs. IPA plans of management incorporate Indigenous ecological knowledge together with scientific information.

The Department also implements plans of management for six terrestrial Commonwealth-operated parks, including Kakadu National Park. In Kakadu, we have one of the longest running fire plot monitoring programs in the savannahs environment, which informs improved fire management to protect threatened species, together with a number of other projects that monitor and manage key threats and threatened species at the park level. We also work closely with our neighbours to help manage biodiversity at a landscape level. This provides for cross-tenure and regional approaches, contributing to in-situ and ex-situ species conservation efforts, and on-park and off-park actions for conserving ecosystems and native species. It also provides for investigating the need for and, where feasible, implementation of interventionist programs, such as captive breeding and propagation, for conserving threatened species that are in decline. At Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park for instance, the mala (rufous hare-wallaby) reintroduction program has been running for a number of years. (Further detail on the activities of Parks Australia will be provided in a separate submission from the Director of National Parks.)

Details about the National Reserve System, Indigenous Protected Areas and management of Commonwealth parks are at: www.environment.gov.au/parks.

For marine species and ecological communities, the Australian Government recently announced permanent protection for 2.3 million square kilometres of marine habitat through the proclamation of the world's biggest network of marine reserves. The declaration of these new marine reserves represents a major achievement for the long term conservation and sustainable use of Australia's oceans, and protection of threatened species such as the green turtle, the blue whale, the Australian sea lion and the whale shark.

The Australian Government also released the first comprehensive picture of Australia's ocean environment through the release of four marine bioregional plans. The plans provide regional context to help better manage and protect conservation values in the ocean, including threatened species. Marine bioregional plans, where relevant, are taken into account in EPBC Act decisions.

Details regarding marine parks and marine bioregional planning are at:
www.environment.gov.au/coasts.

The National Wildlife Corridors Plan is a further new landscape-scale initiative and collaborative approach for managing biodiversity. Supported by investment under Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund, it aims to improve the resilience of our landscapes in a changing climate and repair and reconnect landscapes that have become fragmented. It plans for a network of wildlife corridors across the nation, ranging from small corridors created by local communities to large corridors that stretch across many different landscapes. Creating a network of wildlife corridors, with adequate management of invasive species, should contribute substantially to the future protection of threatened species and ecological communities. Linking of the corridors will be done through existing methods of putting land into conservation such as the work of Landcare volunteers, or when farmers have chosen to manage their land for conservation outcomes through recognised programs.

Details about the National Wildlife Corridors Plan are at:
www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/wildlife-corridors.

The Australian Government's initiative, Water for the Future, provides national leadership in water reform. The Department has responsibility to deliver the initiative through a ten-year investment in improved water management infrastructure and arrangements, and a renewed commitment to deliver a range of water policy reforms in both rural and urban areas. Many aspects of the initiative provide benefits to threatened species and ecological communities, including projects to improve the health of rivers, wetlands and groundwater basins. Major focus areas for environmental outcomes include delivering more water for environmental purposes through the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the Great Artesian Basin.

On 22 November 2012 Minister Burke signed the Murray-Darling Basin Plan into law. The Australian Government has committed to bridge the gap to new Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) set by the Basin Plan, thereby ensuring individuals' water entitlements will not be affected by the recovery of water for the environment. When recent infrastructure announcements are taken into account, over 1500 gigalitres of surface water has already been secured for the environment towards a 2750 gigalitre target by 2019. Water entitlements recovered by the Commonwealth are managed by the Commonwealth Environmental Water holder to protect or restore environmental assets in ways that are consistent with the Basin Plan's Environmental Watering Strategy. Conservation of threatened species and ecological communities and wetlands of national and international significance (Ramsar) are key priorities under the Strategy.

The Plan includes an adjustment mechanism that enables the SDL to be changed in ways that provide benefits to the environment and communities. This allows Basin states to develop projects, such as environmental works and measures, which deliver the environmental outcomes required by the Plan but with up to 650 gigalitres less water.

The Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, has announced a commitment of an additional \$1.77 billion to relax key operating constraints and recover an additional 450 gigalitres of environmental water through projects in ways that entail a neutral or beneficial socio-economic impact. These outcomes are also provided for under the Basin Plan and its SDL adjustment mechanism.

Further information on Water for the Future, including environmental watering, is at:
www.environment.gov.au/water.

Under the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997*, land owners may be eligible for income tax deductions and/or concessional capital gains tax treatment as a result of permanently protecting environmental values of high significance, or quality. The significance of environmental values is determined in a national or regional context through in-perpetuity covenants approved by the Commonwealth Environment Minister as conservation covenants. EPBC Act-listed threatened species and ecological communities would be considered highly significant in a national context. The Department administers the Environment Minister Approved Conservation Covenanting Program. Through this program, covenanting organisations can seek approval of their covenanting programs as Environment Minister approved conservation covenanting programs and land owners can also seek approval of their covenants on an individual basis. Conservation covenants must be registered on title (if registration is possible) and bind successive owners.

It is also important that decision-making regarding the protection of species and ecological communities is backed by relevant up-to-date research. Since December 2010, the Department has managed the National Environmental Research Program (NERP). Through the NERP, the Australian Government has dedicated around \$20 million per year over the period 2011-2015 for research into key environmental issues, including research priorities that aim to better inform the protection and management of threatened species and ecological communities. NERP comprises five large research hubs researching priority biodiversity issues in terrestrial and marine ecosystems across Australia, including Northern Australia, the Great Barrier Reef, Torres Strait and tropical rainforests. There is also funding available within the program for addressing emerging priority information needs, such as identifying the quality and extent of koala habitat, identifying priorities for managing invasive plant species in the Lake Eyre Basin and improving the efficiency of environmental flows in the Murray Darling Basin.

Further information on the National Environmental Research Program is at: www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/science/nerp.

In addition, the Australian National Botanic Gardens and Australian National Herbarium manage living and herbarium collections, including ex-situ conservation and scientific research of threatened native plant species. In this context, the aim of the Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research is to contribute to innovative basic and applied systematics research, botanical teaching, conservation and maintenance of plant diversity, with biodiversity informatics to support national scientific research and conservation efforts, and to produce tangible and acknowledged results to improve management of the environment.

The Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research and Australian National Herbarium are jointly managed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Director of National Parks, and are closely linked to the Australian National Botanic Gardens. Details are at: www.anbg.gov.au.

The Australian Government also provides a national coordinator for the Australian Seed Bank Partnership through the Australian National Botanic Gardens. The Australian Seed Bank Partnership and the Atlas of Living Australia have delivered a database system that makes information on the conservation of native flora seed collections accessible online (www.asbp.ala.org.au). This resource provides information on the status of threatened species held within ex-situ collections and the associated scientific information that is available to support the implementation of such species recovery actions as translocation and reintroduction.

Working with the States and Territories

As responsibility for the environment is shared between all levels of government, effective protection of threatened species and ecological communities requires close collaboration with state and territory governments. Hence, the Department continues to foster partnerships with the states and territories in order to effectively deliver all of the statutory and non-statutory protection measures for threatened species and ecological communities. Key examples of co-operation include through: EPBC Act strategic assessments; streamlined and more consistent listing assessments; recovery plan development and implementation; building the NRS; delivery of Caring for our Country; coordinated efforts in conservation seed banking; and implementing national biodiversity policies and frameworks.