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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

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Submission to Senate inquiry into 'Australia's faunal extinction crisis'

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Blue Mountains Conservation Society is a community organisation with approximately 800 members working to achieve the preservation of the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains. The Society's area of interest includes the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWHA) covers over one million hectares of natural lands within eight conservation reserves: Blue Mountains, Gardens of Stone, Kanangra-Boyd, Nattai, Thirlmere Lakes, Wollemi and Yengo National Parks and Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve. The Greater Blue Mountains was listed as a World Heritage Area in 2000 in recognition of its outstanding biodiversity, including threatened species.

Fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

Since European settlement at least 423 native terrestrial vertebrate fauna species, including 66 mammals, 251 birds, 71 reptiles and 35 frogs, have been reliably recorded within the GBMWhA. Native fish and many thousands of invertebrate fauna species also occur in the area.

Since European settlement there has been a significant and on-going loss of fauna from the GBMWhA. Some species, such as bettongs and the original Emu population, have long been considered to be extinct in the area. However, too many other species, such as the iconic Gang-gang Cockatoo and Greater Glider, are declining now. At least 71 fauna species recorded in the GBMWhA since European settlement are now listed under state and/or Commonwealth threatened species legislation (28 mammals, 32 birds, 3 reptiles, 7 frogs, 1 invertebrate). Additional fauna species, which are not yet listed as threatened, appear to be declining in the GBMWhA. Examples are the Dusky Antechinus, Peaceful Dove, Rainbow Bee-eater, Grey Currawong, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Mainland She-oak Skink and Southern Death Adder.

The decline of mammal species in the GBMWhA is particularly alarming with almost half (28 species) of the mammals now listed threatened species. Of these, the White-footed Rabbit-rat, is now extinct in Australia, and eight species – Eastern Quoll, Southern Brown Bandicoot, at least one bettong species, Long-nosed Potoroo, Broad-toothed Rat, Plains Mouse, Smoky Mouse and Hastings River Mouse – are probably locally extinct. Over half the native rodent species recorded in the World Heritage Area have become extinct since European settlement. It is not always appreciated that even in extensive uncleared tablelands forest areas like the GBMWhA, the mammal fauna has suffered a substantial decline.

Threatened birds in the GBMWhA include the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater, which sits on the brink of extinction. A worrying number of the threatened birds, including the Gang-gang Cockatoo, Flame Robin, Scarlet Robin and Dusky Woodswallow, were all considered to be moderately common in the Blue Mountains just three decades ago.

A major cause of frog declines in Australia is the chytrid skin fungus. This disease has spread since the 1970s and has particularly affected frogs in montane rainforests, where the cooler conditions best suit the fungus. This fungus is present in the GBMWhA and the six frogs in the GBMWhA most closely associated with rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest – Tusked Frog, Fletcher's Frog, Stuttering Frog, Great Barred Frog, Giant Barred Frog and Red-eyed Tree Frog – are all now extremely rare in the GBMWhA. A number of frogs in the GBMWhA have suffered relatively recent range contractions, especially at higher elevations. Four species formerly known from Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve, and five species known from Kanangra-Boyd National Park, have not been recorded in those reserves this century. Other species, such as the Brown

Toadlet, Green and Golden Bellfrog and Green Tree Frog, have declined at lower elevations. The chytrid fungus is not the only threat to frogs in the GBMWhA.

Of the reptiles, the Marsh Snake has not been recorded in the GBMWhA since 1998, the Mainland She-oak Skink has not been recorded in Kanangra-Boyd National Park since 1998, and White's Skink was last recorded in Jenolan Karst Conservation Area in 1970. Possibly these and other currently non-threatened reptiles are declining.

Management of the GBMWhA

The Australian Government, as a signatory to the World Heritage Convention, has an international obligation to identify, protect, conserve, present, transmit to future generations and, where necessary, rehabilitate the internationally recognised values of the GBMWhA. The Commonwealth Government thus should conserve the threatened fauna of the GBMWhA and ensure that additional species do not become threatened.

By agreement between the Commonwealth and NSW governments, the state-based NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) within the Office of Environment and Heritage carries out day-to-day on-ground management of the GBMWhA. Nevertheless, the Commonwealth government should ensure that the GBMWhA is appropriately and effectively managed to protect its World Heritage values. The Commonwealth provides no funding for the on-ground management of the GBMWhA, although several other world heritage areas do receive such funding from the Commonwealth. Importantly, both the NSW and Commonwealth governments have an obligation to ensure that the NPWS is adequately staffed and resourced to properly manage the GBMWhA.

Concerns of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society is concerned about the magnitude of the decline of the fauna in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. A number of fauna species already appear to be extinct in the GBMWhA. The loss of fauna is on-going - too many fauna species in the GBMWhA are now declining in abundance and/ or their ranges in the area are contracting. The growing number of threatened species in the area is a matter of grave concern. Clearly, current protection for fauna in the GBMWhA is inadequate.

Our particular concerns include:

1. The on-going impacts of climate change. Urgent and effective action on climate change is immediately required. Local patterns of decline suggest that species such as the Greater Glider and Gang-gang Cockatoo are already succumbing to a warming environment. The number of such impacted species is likely to increase. The unfolding impacts of climate change are a matter of concern for all fauna;

2. The impacts of on-going loss of fauna for World Heritage listing of the GBMWH. The current on-going loss of fauna (and other biodiversity) in the GBMWH is degrading the listed values of the GBMWH;
3. The adequacy of current management of the GBMWH. In recent years funding for and resourcing of on ground management of the biodiversity of the GBMWH has been drastically reduced. The Blue Mountains Conservation Society applauds the work of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) staff in the area. However, it is imperative that funding and resourcing of the NPWS be sufficient to allow NPWS to properly manage the biodiversity of the area. Rather than continued funding and staffing cuts to NPWS, increased funding and staffing is urgently required to enable and restore adequate day-to-day management of the area.

Given the deepening impacts of climate change, increasing bushfire risks associated with climate change, and other threats to the GBMWH fauna, coupled with the obvious current on-going faunal losses in the GBMWH, the local NPWS requires increased funding and relevant resourcing rather than continued cuts. Recent trends in staffing levels, including on-ground staff, of all NPWS district offices in the GBMWH should be investigated. The adequacy of current funding (particularly funding relevant to the conservation of fauna) of the NPWS should be investigated. The GBMWH is a vast area and well staffed offices and work depots are required throughout the area. A strong and well resourced team of naturalists and wildlife researchers should be based in the area.

Adequate funding to prevent future loss of fauna in the GBMWH should be guaranteed by both the NSW and the Commonwealth governments

4. The adequacy of existing monitoring practices in relation to the threatened fauna assessment and adaptive management responses in the GBMWH. Resourcing of the NPWS should be increased to enable comprehensive long term monitoring of the fauna as well as long term research to guide future management of the fauna. There are species in the World Heritage Area that may be declining, for example the Rose Robin and Grey Currawong, but without comprehensive monitoring we cannot be sure. Populations of other species may well be quietly dwindling in the area, unnoticed. Cuts to the NPWS have seen the loss of many experienced staff and hence expertise from the area. Such a loss of expertise is unacceptable.
5. The adequacy of Commonwealth environment laws, including but not limited to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, in providing sufficient protections for threatened fauna and against key threatening processes. Many of the fauna species of the GBMWH are mobile and depend on resources both within and outside of the GBMWH.

It is thus imperative that habitat outside of as well as within the GBMWA be adequately protected. The fauna of the GBMWA is a 'matter of national significance' and as such needs to be protected from the adverse impacts of surrounding land uses. The current incremental impacts of activities outside the GBMWA, such as mining, clearing of vegetation, and severe overgrazing by domestic stock coupled with the current drought, can be controlled under federal legislation if there is the political will to do so. There is a need for both the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to review what impacts on the fauna can be "offset" and what are simply unacceptable if the current rate of fauna loss is to be curbed.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society thanks you for the opportunity to make this submission. We are happy to comment further on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Madi Maclean
President
Blue Mountains Conservation Society