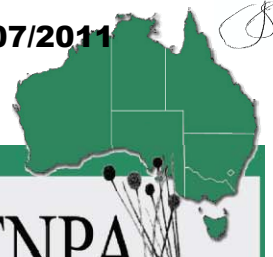


National Parks Australia Council



Working together for nature conservation areas



The Secretary
House Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts
Parliament Of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate

The National Parks Australia Council (NPAC) would like to make a submission on the above inquiry because our members are deeply concerned that governments of all persuasions across Australia are not adequately protecting our unique biodiversity even as the threats from climate change, land clearing, invasive species and human development increase exponentially. There has been considerable focus in the current climate change debate on its impact on human activities, assets and expectations. However there has been very little government attention paid to its impact on plants, insects, animals and ecosystems.

NPAC is a cooperative body of state and territory national parks associations and environmental groups in all states and territories (except the Northern Territory) working to deliver biodiversity outcomes across national landscapes and across individual jurisdictions and their borders. The total number of people in member groups exceeds 10,000. Through NPAC, members bring local, regional and state/territory information, expertise and advice to work at the national level on issues affecting national parks, protected areas, marine parks and sanctuaries. Members' experience and expertise ranges from scientific and specialised knowledge to general community involvement and participation.

The first point we would wish to make is to register our extreme disappointment at the lack of support across Australian governments for the International Year of Biodiversity in 2010. This event presented an excellent opportunity for governments to discuss with their constituencies the threats facing our biodiversity and to develop innovative ways of addressing those threats. Instead we got a fairly lacklustre re-badging of the usual environmental grants and events which achieved nothing. It is understandable that this wasted opportunity has convinced many environmental groups that Australian governments are not interested in protecting our biodiversity.

As importantly, the last few years have seen a wave of antagonism to protection of biodiversity hotspots, both marine and terrestrial. Several state governments are winding back previous levels of protection, eg the Victorian government's attempt to re-introduce cattle into the alpine national parks; the NSW government is not only de-listing key marine protected areas and halting the marine parks roll-out but contemplating opening up national parks to recreational shooting.

However, NPAC is encouraged by the Committee's Inquiry and welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the debate. A strong federal presence is required to protect and conserve our national biodiversity in the face of a rising tide of demands from sectional interest groups. Recent statements from the Hon Tony Burke MP

National Parks Australia Council



Working together for nature conservation areas

Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities have outlined a plan for how we as a nation can leverage our network of national parks, protected areas and sanctuaries by linking them to corridors where priority is given to private conservation measures which are in turn linked to local pathways and conserved private areas supported by NRM networks. This is an inspiring vision of interactive national and state programs and policies working together to protect our biodiversity and assist with adaptation to the impacts of climate change. It requires strong, clear national leadership if we are to have any hope of achieving it.

Connectivity between ecosystems and across landscapes

National parks and protected areas are at the heart of Australia's efforts to protect its biodiversity. The recent report *What works for threatened species recovery? An empirical evaluation for Australia* by Martin Taylor, Paul Sattler, Megan Evans, Richard A. Fuller, James Watson and Hugh Possingham examined associations between population trends for 841 nationally-threatened terrestrial species in Australia, and different measures of conservation effort. The study found that the species with greater distribution through protected areas had proportionately more populations that were increasing or stable. Conservation measures in disturbed or mixed-use landscapes showed no positive associations with stable or increasing trends for these listed species. Recognising this special role and vigorously defending protected areas as places where conservation takes precedence over human activities, is critical to protecting our biodiversity.

However the functioning of natural ecosystems takes place at a much larger scale than that at which protected areas can operate. A small stand of trees in a paddock can be of critical importance to migrating species moving between protected areas. Birds which move down for the ACT's mountain ranges in winter face predation from uncontrolled feral and domestic cats in Canberra's suburbs. Few eco-systems exist in isolation from larger water drainage systems. The connectivity is there right across natural and human landscapes whether humans pay attention to it or not. The issue for us is: how do we work with this connectivity rather than against it?

What is required is a whole of nation approach which recognises the interrelationships of individual eco-systems and which establishes broad community responsibility for maintaining and protecting those interrelationships. Changed land use because of agriculture, urban development and mining are the greatest threats to biodiversity. Measures must be established which mitigate their impacts and build natural resilience into their surrounding landscapes. For two centuries we have blindly accepted that changing land use excuses the land manager from any further responsibility for the natural environment. Creation of formal 'conservation corridors' will only have limited success unless all land managers accept responsibility for their part in landscape scale conservation. We speak of a national economy, national defence policies, national education and national health priorities but do not yet accept that we live within a national, interconnected environment both on land and in our oceans.

We will not attempt to add to the debate on the impacts of altered biodiversity on human communities but we strongly support the submission from the World Commission on Protected Areas which takes a more environmentally focussed approach to the role of biodiversity in sustaining the ecosystems on which we all depend.

National Parks Australia Council



Working together for nature conservation areas

Current governance arrangements

This inquiry is investigating whether the current governance arrangements are well placed to deal with the challenges of conserving biodiversity in a changing climate. We would submit that they are not, particularly in regard to the management of public protected areas. Feral pests and diseases, fire, drought and flood do not end at our state borders but our planning and management practices do. Protected area managers need to be able to develop and implement strategies which work across artificial borders and to do that they need to be able to measure, assess, plan and act across borders. We also need a system which would allow protected area managers to assess the health of their area of responsibility in the context of the much broader operation of the physical and environmental systems which exist past their artificial borders. Effective adaptive management, which can address the vagaries of climate change, requires much broader thinking than we are currently seeing. The key to achieving these things is an effective national data collection and reporting system.

One good example of how this could work is the cooperative management arrangements for the Australian National Alpine Parks. This low cost, low-key model allows for cooperation across three different jurisdictions across and many different ecosystems without interfering in the actual responsibilities of each jurisdiction. Of particular note is the recent report on this area by Graeme Warboys, Roger Good and Andy Spate. This report has delivered a clear data-based assessment of the environmental health of this extensive area based on its water catchments; it identifies threats and sets out strategies and costings for remedial action. Similar regional reporting systems could be aggregated into a national database which informs management and policy development with sound scientific data.

This report, commissioned by the Federal Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, is in clear contrast to the current move away from public accountability by some state and territory managers of protected areas. For example, in recent years management plans for protected areas have moved to general statements of principles without any data based performance indicators or regular public reporting. In NSW and Victoria in particular specific plans addressing the needs of particular areas and eco-systems are being replaced with broad generic plans as a cost saving measure. This move away from transparent accounting for the health and effective functioning of public protected areas is very disturbing.

On the other hand, joint federal/state management of a national protected area data and reporting system would build an effective governance system for cooperative management of public protected lands. It could be funded and managed by State and the Federal governments along the lines of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare which collects data on public health and social services to inform both state and federal health policy and funding. It is an independent organisation which focuses on building a professional and cooperative approach to managing policies and programs across a wide range of services and programs. This approach avoids the current state of affairs in the environment sector where data collection and public accountability are seen as too difficult and likely to lead to negative political outcomes.

National Parks Australia Council



Working together for nature conservation areas

Promoting resilience in ecosystems and human communities

Nationally consistent data and cross border management systems would also promote greater resilience to the impacts of climate change among endangered species and ecosystems. For example, fire management practices in the south-east of Australia reflect the policies and practices of individual governments and can differ markedly on opposite sides of a narrow forest road. Under the current system it is impossible to tell which set of practices delivers the most effective fire management and protection of human and environmental assets. It is difficult to coordinate fire management activities across state boundaries, let alone review and assess the long term impact of the fire management practices. Good practice and bad are both equally disguised. Inappropriate fire management practices are one of the key threatening processes under consideration under the EPBC Act so it is essential that using sound comparative data and a common review process becomes the standard. Adoption of best practice in fire management across all jurisdictions will increase landscape scale resilience against the impacts of climate change and human land-use changes.

We have only to look at the controversy around the Murray Darling Basin Plan to see that our current dependence on managing natural resources across artificial state borders without sound scientific data is a dangerous business, both politically and environmentally.

Climate change impacts on the economy

In conjunction with this we need a system of national environmental accounts. Governments find it difficult to give any priority to our environmental issues while they remain unreported and unaccounted for. Because of a lack of national data and reporting the general population remains unaware of the possible loss of large numbers of species of Australian animals in the next few decades and of the potential impact on their lives. There is no environmental equivalent of economic indicators such as interest rates, which are reported on so regularly in the media and which generate vigorous political responses. We are aware that some work is being done on developing national environmental accounts but believe that this will not include any reference to biodiversity, an unacceptable oversight. The old adage of "what you measure is what you manage for" sums up the result of ignoring biodiversity in our national accounts. If our the health and resilience of our biodiversity is not measured effectively it will not be managed effectively.

Mechanisms to enhance community engagement

NPAC member organisations are community based. Members of our associations have a strong commitment to their local protected areas as well as to the broad conservation agenda. We promote the value of national parks and protected area in our local and regional communities through Parkcare groups, bushwalks, camps, seminars, conferences and publications each year. We understand the larger environmental issues because we see them at work in our own local bit of bush and in the broader protected areas in which we operate. This promotes a strong sense of stewardship, of responsibility for conserving our biodiversity for future generations. Measures which encourage this local, regional and national commitment and understanding of our natural assets include:

- Consistent and respectful consultation processes which involve the local community at an early stage of proposals and which adequately reflect the local expertise and experience.
- Respecting local and regional skill and expertise through adequately funded advisory groups for specific publicly managed protected areas;

National Parks Australia Council



Working together for nature conservation areas

- Support including advice, tools, training, networking and sharing of information for volunteer groups who wish to contribute to the stewardship of protected areas.
- Consistent funding mechanisms which respect the local contribution of volunteers and encourage long term involvement in conservation programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into this inquiry. It address issues which we believe go to the heart of the survival of our unique biodiversity and our unique way of life. We are happy to assist in any further deliberations your committee may undertake.

Yours sincerely

Christine Goonrey
President
29 July 2011