



Coastwatchers

*Eurobodalla's environment and
climate action group*

The Secretary
House Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts
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SUBMISSION TO HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND THE ARTS

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S BIODIVERSITY IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Introduction

The Coastwatchers Association is a community organization that has served the Eurobodalla for almost 30 years. We act as an environmental watchdog for the area, in close co-operation with the wider community to help protect the health, beauty and biodiversity of this very special coastal region.

Our group monitors inappropriate coastal development and is concerned about many issues that impact adversely on the coastal environment. We actively participate in local, regional and state planning strategies.

A major concern of Coastwatchers for many years has been the threat of climate change and the impact of sea level rise on the coastal environment and our unique coastal ecosystems and how these impacts may flow on to local communities.

We appreciate the opportunity to bring our concerns to the attention of this inquiry, recognising the importance of wider, not just parochial issues.

Our submission is prepared in response to the terms of reference, as detailed below.

Terms of reference

- Terrestrial, marine and freshwater biodiversity in Australia and its territories
- Connectivity between ecosystems and across landscapes that may contribute to biodiversity conservation

- How climate change impacts on biodiversity may flow on to affect human communities and the economy
- Strategies to enhance climate change adaptation, including promoting resilience in ecosystems and human communities
- Mechanisms to promote the sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services in a changing climate
- An assessment of whether current governance arrangements are well placed to deal with the challenges of conserving biodiversity in a changing climate
- Mechanisms to enhance community engagement.

The issues

As a nation, we have been careless in our management of biodiversity due to the exploitation and mismanagement of our natural resources, which has led to the degradation of our marine, terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity.

This has come about because of over-clearing of our land for urban development, the overgrazing of pastoral lands, the destruction of native forests for logging, the loss of connectivity of habitat, the overfishing of our oceans, the over-commitment of ground-water resources, the erosion and salinity of our soils, but most of all because of our failure to follow ecologically sustainable principles.

Governments seem to be fixated on achieving prosperity through economic growth and a conviction that this can be achieved through increasing the human population whilst ignoring the fate of other species.

Conservationists have long been warning of the consequences of not protecting the biodiversity of our unique continent. But, as a society we have become high users of new technologies that are dependent on unsustainable high-energy use, which contributes to our high per-capita carbon footprint, contributing in turn to accelerating climate change that could have disastrous consequences for future generations.

The possible impacts of climate change on biodiversity

Rare and threatened species and those with small geographic ranges will be particularly vulnerable to the additional stresses from climate change, such as high temperature extremes, increased and more intensive bushfires and changes to rainfall patterns. Rising sea levels, more extreme storm events and flow of saltwater into wetlands and lakes are likely to affect lowland ecosystems in the coastal zone.

Warmer temperatures will influence species distribution patterns, interactions between species, such as predation, pollination, seed dispersal, weed invasion and disturbances such as more intense and frequent bushfires and extreme storms.

Our oceans are increasingly under threat from pollution, over-fishing and ocean acidification, but could be pushed to the brink by global warming with losses in marine biodiversity, including species not yet discovered. We are facing the loss of entire marine species and ecosystems if action is not taken to protect them.

As the climate warms, water availability is expected to become even more unreliable due to higher rates of evaporation and post-bushfire sedimentation of water catchments and the loss of environmental flows of the main river systems due to changes in rainfall patterns and the likelihood of increased drought.

Climate change stresses will add to the pressures already placed on biodiversity by human population growth and the expansion of urban development, both in our region and throughout Australia.

What needs to be done to ensure the survival of Australia's unique biodiversity

If our threatened wildlife is to survive, then real action is needed to prevent further habitat destruction, together with careful management of the impacts of climate change, together with minimisation of the effects climate change and careful management of adaptation to the impacts of climate change.

Resource based industries, such as mining, forestry, fishing, agriculture and tourism need to be much better managed to prepare for the consequences of global warming, partly by decreasing the usage of non-renewable resources and increasing the ability to store carbon.

The preservation of our marine and freshwater and coastal terrestrial biodiversity is especially important to our coastal community, including our endangered wetland ecosystem and our abundant coastal native vegetation and fauna communities.

We are particularly concerned about the impacts of sea level rise on our dunal systems and the significance of the dynamic ecosystem that offers them stability and protection.

We believe that this ecosystem will play an important role in mitigating the impacts of sea level rise and the flow on effect to coastal communities, tourism opportunities and local economy.

Some vital measures to conserve biodiversity for future generations could be:

- Cease broad-scale clearing for development partly by limiting development outside existing developed or developing areas
- Limit the current over-use of our natural resources, by introducing better management policies
- Increase the amount of marine protected areas and national parks to limit human activities in pristine and degraded locations
- Link marine and national and state parks and reserves to ensure greater protection of marine and terrestrial biodiversity.
- Cease all logging of native old growth forests especially for wood-chip and biomass production
- Encourage the planting of more native trees and other vegetation to act as carbon sinks
- Provide even greater incentives to the big polluters to reduce their carbon emissions
- Limit future population to ecologically, environmentally and economically sustainable levels
- Limit controlled burning of native vegetation as a means of bushfire protection to conserve habitats
- Re-establish connectivity of native biodiversity habitat corridors
- Encourage involvement of local communities in dunecare and landcare activities to maintain natural resources
- Provide additional funding opportunities to volunteer organizations, such as Landcare/Dunecare to carry out natural resource management.

Conclusions

Ours is probably the last generation with enough time to deal with the problems of future biodiversity loss.

Climate change and its likely impacts on Australia's unique biodiversity needs to be addressed and actions taken immediately, or it will be too late to save some endangered and currently threatened species and the richness and diversity of our unique ecosystems.

A successful strategy will depend on strong political leadership and the will to take appropriate action to limit the rate of climate change before it is too late. Otherwise Australia's unique biodiversity could be lost forever.

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