

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee**

Answers to questions on notice
Environment and Energy portfolio

Question No: 45
Hearing: Budget Estimates
Outcome: Outcome 1
Program: Biodiversity Conservation Division (BCD)
Topic: Article published in the Conversation
Hansard Page: 65
Question Date: 22 May 2017
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Whish-Wilson asked:

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Sure. I note the terms of reference of the Threatened Species Commissioner. One of your roles, Mr Andrews, is to lead efforts to report on outcomes of conservation activities for prior threatened species, including the effectiveness of specific investments and achievements. So I understand why you would respond. That is perfectly understandable from my point of view. One of your other roles is to work collaboratively with scientists; that is next. I think in this case those two things are contradictory. We have been contacted by the scientists, who felt very intimidated by this particular exchange. Finally, perhaps you could—you can take it on notice—let the committee know what was erroneous about that article. I understand you still have not communicated that.

Mr Andrews: I would be delighted to say what is erroneous about it. It made an assertion—I cannot remember the exact number—that only 20 or 17 plants were being saved. That is the first. They actually said—and I accepted—that the projects were good projects.

CHAIR: So, Mr Andrews, you did have the offer to take that question on notice.

Mr Andrews: Sorry.

CHAIR: You have already corrected yourself once, if not twice, in this answer. If you are not quite sure of all the facts, it might be better to be accurate and take it on notice so that we do not have to go back and clarify it later.

Answer:

The Conversation Article *Government needs to front up billions, not millions, to save Australia's threatened species*, published on 21 March 2017:

- Wrongly asserts that the Australian Government is “outsourcing conservation investment and responsibility” through the Prospectus and wrongly implies that the Government is hoping for a “delay” in securing funding.

The Australian Government is taking unprecedented responsibility and actions to protect and recover our threatened species. In 2014, the Australian Government appointed Australia's first Threatened Species Commissioner to focus national attention and mobilise support for threatened species. In 2015, the Government brought together all of Australia's states and territories and key players at Australia's first ever Threatened Species Summit and launched the landmark Threatened Species Strategy. The Strategy is Australia's first national policy to drive conservation efforts in the fight against extinction. The Australian Government has backed the Strategy with over \$228 million to resource over 1,000 projects in support of threatened species. The Strategy has measureable and time-bound targets, with regular reporting milestones to ensure accountability.

The Threatened Species Prospectus extends this action and is already generating investment support. Since its launch in February 2017, the Strategy has mobilised commitment of more than \$2.7 million for Australia's plants and animals. San Diego Zoo Global has committed to fund a \$500,000 project to completion to support the platypus and at least five threatened freshwater fish species. Organisations like Birdlife Australia, the Foundation for Australia's Most Endangered Species and World Wildlife Fund Australia are partnering with the Australian Government through the Prospectus to mobilise significant philanthropic contributions. The Australian Government has also promoted crowdfunding as an opportunity for individual citizens to contribute. Some \$86,000 has been raised by Birdlife Australia and Parks Australia to establish an insurance population of the Norfolk Island Green Parrot.

- Wrongly counts that the Threatened Species Prospectus aims to raise only \$14 million a year.

The Threatened Species Prospectus does not have an annual fundraising target. The total value of the 51 projects in the Prospectus is \$50,230,800. The Prospectus is not time bound.

- Wrongly counts that the Threatened Species Prospectus covers only 1 per cent of Australia's threatened plants.

Two hundred and eleven of Australia's threatened plants are represented in, and will benefit directly from, projects in the Prospectus. That represents 16 per cent of the total number of plants listed as threatened. The *Safeguarding Australia's Threatened Gum Trees* project alone will directly benefit 75 species of threatened eucalypts. This represents 5.9% of Australia's threatened plants.

In addition to the 211 threatened plants that will be supported directly, hundreds more plants and ecological communities will benefit from the Prospectus indirectly through prioritised umbrella impacts of these projects. Umbrella benefits are where more species than those directly targeted - and in many cases entire ecosystems - enjoy beneficial outcomes. The *Ensuring Safe Passage for Cassowaries* project, for example, will increase cassowary survival, improve habitat connectivity and tackle threats like feral pigs and fires. The cassowary is a major seed disperser of up to 180 rainforest plants, 45 of which are almost exclusively dispersed by the species. It plays an important role in maintaining the diversity of the habitat it shares with other species. Protecting the cassowary helps support 83 threatened plants that share its habitat. Similarly, the *Boosting Numbats for the Future* project will grow populations of these important termite eaters which help keep endangered woodlands and the threatened plants that grow in them healthy.

- Wrongly asserts that the Threatened Species Prospectus has a “bias” towards “cute and cuddly” species and that this is a “prejudice” of the Threatened Species Strategy.

Australia’s Threatened Species Strategy and the Prospectus are not biased or prejudiced to “cute and cuddly” species. The Strategy and Prospectus are based on science, action and partnership and conservation and social science-based principles for prioritising resources and effort. The Strategy, which the Prospectus sits under, has four key focus areas: tackling feral cats, improving habitat, creating safe havens for species at risk, and intervening in emergencies to avoid extinctions. The Strategy’s Action Plan has 2020 targets to recover mammals, birds and plants, to tackle feral cats and to improve recovery practices. The focus on improving recovery practices is helping to drive coordinated effort for all our threatened species.

Just some of the species and groups of species that the Strategy and Prospectus support and which are arguably not so cute and cuddly include: the Five-clawed worm-skink; the Greater wart-nosed horseshoe bat; a number of native rats including the Wopilkara, Dayang and Antina; Stoddart’s Helicarionid land snail; the Shield-backed trapdoor spider; Vanderschoors stag beetle; the Border thick-tailed ghecko; Bead glasswort; the Blind velvet worm, the Christmas island spleenwort; the Leafless tongue orchid; the Central north burrowing crayfish; two trees, two orchids, and three daisies that don’t even have names on Norfolk Island; MacGillvray spyridium; and Subtropical and temperate coastal saltmarsh ecological community and the Arnhem Plateau sandstone shrubland complex ecological community.

Actions that drive the Threatened Species Strategy’s mammal, bird and plant targets benefit many more species and entire ecosystems beyond those directly targeted. The Strategy and Prospectus prioritise the conservation-science principle of umbrella action and impacts. For example, the Mallee fowl is a targeted species in the Strategy benefiting from \$4.6 million in Australian Government support and the Prospectus extends this with a \$250,000 *Saving the Iconic Mallee Fowl from Feral Cats* project. The Mallee fowl shares its range with over 500 threatened species across four states. Actions to improve and reconnect Mallee fowl habitat and tackle its threats benefit many of these directly and indirectly. Some of the arguably no so “cute” species that benefit from Mallee fowl recovery include: Hamelin ctenotus; Prickly rasp wort; the Bronze snake lizard; Quartz-loving synaphea; and a native bee and a native shrub both of which have yet to be given names.

Targeting Australia’ mammals for recovery is not based on ‘prejudice’. It is based on good conservation science and prioritisation. Australia’s mammals have endured the highest level of extinctions relative to other taxonomic groups. Indeed, Australia has endured what is perhaps the highest rate of mammal extinctions in the modern world. Further, as relatively high-level trophic scale species, mammals provide important ecosystem services to many species and groups of species below them on the trophic scale. Bilbies, for example, are ecosystem engineers. Each bilby turns over seven tonnes of dirt annually and this helps bilby ecosystems and the individual plants and animals growing in them to stay healthy and resilient. Bilbies compost, nutrient recycle, reduce bush fire fuel loads, help percolation of rain into the water table, and promote plant regeneration. This ecosystem support extends right down to fungi and lichens.

The Prospectus has 25 projects that tackle feral cats which put extinction pressure on 124 of Australia’s threatened species including so-called less cute and cuddly species

like frogs, turtles, geckos, skinks, snakes, native rats, native mice and bats. The Greater wart-nosed horseshoe bat, the Giant burrowing frog, the Ningaloo worm lizard and the White-eyed river diver, for example, are threatened by feral cats and although arguably not so “cute and cuddly”, benefit from the feral cat targets.

The *Kakadu Feral Knockdown* Prospectus project will undertake intensive, targeted feral animal eradication across Kakadu National Park. Culling feral cats, pigs and buffalo in Kakadu, will improve habitat and support at least three threatened plants, four threatened fish, eight threatened reptiles, seven threatened birds, nine threatened mammals and one ecological community. The Bare-rumped sheath-tailed bat, the Plains death adder, and three endangered shrubs that have yet to be given names are arguably some of the not so “cute and cuddly” species that the Prospectus supports in Kakadu.

Finally, making an assumption that the Prospectus’ celebration of Australia’s iconic and beautiful species represents a bias towards “cute and cuddly” species demonstrates limited awareness of how social science and contemporary marketing practice can advance environmental outcomes. The Prospectus intentionally draws upon, promotes and celebrates images of iconic species and ecological settings. Social science, community-based social marketing, and best practice advertising and promotion have demonstrated that successful investment prospectuses are ones that have a strong and clear value proposition which resonates with potential investors. They utilise evocative imagery and uncomplicated messaging to attract and secure investment and community engagement towards achieving strong environmental outcomes.