

Executive summary

Australia's conservation estate contributes significantly to the environmental, social, cultural and economic wealth of the Australian community. National parks and other conservation reserves constitute a vital and irreplaceable national and international asset. They perform many different functions, providing ecosystem services, nature preservation, and recreational opportunities for Australians and for a great many international visitors. The reserve system remains a very cost-effective way of conserving biodiversity. The reserve system itself is diverse. It includes over fifty different types of land classification, and comprises land managed by Commonwealth, state and territory governments, conservation agencies, other government agencies, Indigenous traditional owners, as well as private individuals and non-government organisations.

The conservation estate has been growing steadily for many years, and much of the current growth is in the marine reserve system. Planning for the future of the reserve system is based on the aim of creating a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. This goal is underpinned by three processes: the National Reserve System; the Regional Forest Agreements; and the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas.

The reserve system faces many threats to its sustainability and to the quality of its ecosystems. These include fire, feral animals, weeds, climate change, poor management practices and over-use. The marine reserve system also faces special challenges in managing the effects of over-fishing. There is ongoing debate about how fire should be managed; nevertheless, adequate action on the ground, including the utilisation of Indigenous knowledge, is critical. While there was widespread agreement about the threats posed by weeds and feral animals, the committee noted the government was yet to formally respond to its 2004 report *Turning back the tide – the invasive species challenge*. This aside, the committee noted progress in addressing the problem of invasive species, but that progress to date has not matched the urgency and severity of the threat.

The effectiveness of Australia's reserve system relies on a landscape based approach to nature conservation, on good inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional coordination, and on adequate planning and resources for management of parks. The committee heard about successful examples in all of these areas, being impressed by management of, and public consultation on, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park; successful agreements for the management of Indigenous Protected Areas; and the recent rapid growth in private conservation lands being managed by dedicated non-government organisations, particularly in the rangelands and semi-arid areas of Australia.

A recurrent theme throughout the committee's inquiry was that there were insufficient resources available 'on the ground' to ensure adequate management of the conservation estate. This was a particularly strong message when it came to staffing.

Adequate staff numbers are not only needed to look after visitors and maintain infrastructure, but even more importantly to manage the most pressing threats facing parks, particularly fire, weeds and feral animals. Increases in the funding for the Indigenous Protected Area program are needed, in line with the findings of a recent review.

The committee found it difficult to develop an accurate picture of the situation regarding funding of the conservation estate by governments, due to differences in the gathering and reporting of data across jurisdictions. Data should be collected in a nationally consistent form, and should be published regularly. The data available to the committee suggested that the growth in the parks estate has not always been matched by commensurate increases in funding to manage that estate. The committee believes this must be rectified. It also argues that the Commonwealth should consider increased funding to the National Reserve System program and to World Heritage Areas.

Conservation initiatives on private land are expanding rapidly. The committee saw these as valuable adjuncts to public conservation reserves, as well as being essential in a landscape-based approach to conservation. All jurisdictions can assist private conservation by ensuring that conservation covenants can be attached to the title of land, and by ensuring that the laws governing leasehold land do not create barriers to conservation-based land management practices.

Effective public consultation and planning processes are important in maintaining confidence in the park system and its managers. There is room for improvement in these processes, particularly in the adequate and early engagement with stakeholders.

During the course of this inquiry the committee found that, while the issues surrounding the management and funding of the conservation estate are complex, people are passionate about their natural environment. This passion is perhaps especially prominent in a country like Australia that has so many iconic and beautiful places. Despite a diversity of views on particular issues, there is a great deal of common ground in recognising the value of national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas. The committee hopes this recognition will continue to support the successful development and management of a conservation estate of international significance.