



Australian Government

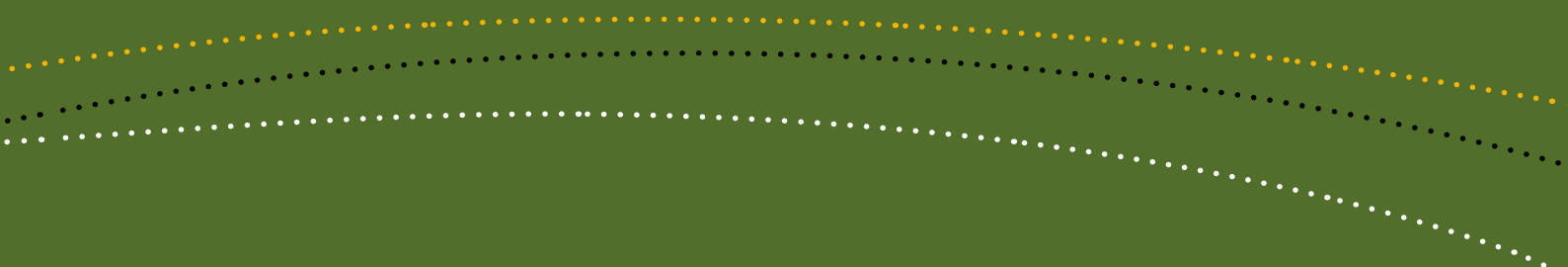
**Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities**



AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT BIODIVERSITY POLICY

Consultation draft

A healthy natural environment, now and always



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Photo credits

FRONT COVER (L-R)

Yellow water lagoon (John Baker), Snow gum (Trevor Preston), Whale shark (GBRMPA), Green and golden bell frog (Frank Lemckert), Ranger with flatback turtle hatchling (Kerry Trapnell).

BACK COVER (L-R)

Butterfly on iron grass (Andrew Tatnell), Eurobin Creek (Trevor J Ierion), Coral cod on the Great Barrier Reef (GBRMPA), Long-tailed pygmy possum (Mike Trenery), Yellow water lagoon (John Baker).

About this document

This Australian Government Biodiversity Policy will deliver a more integrated approach to tackling the challenge of biodiversity conservation in a changing climate. This document describes the role of the Australian Government and the principles that will guide the design and delivery of its policies and programs related to biodiversity.

This policy reflects our international obligations under the Convention on Biodiversity, and underpins the Australian Government's role in delivering Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2030 jointly with state and territory governments.

This document should be read in light of Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2030, existing Australian Government policies and legislation and relevant international conventions.

Why biodiversity matters

What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the full range of plants, animals and micro-organisms, the genes they contain and the ecosystems of which they are part. This living wealth is the product of hundreds of millions of years of evolution. Biodiversity is a word that implies neither a particular place nor a particular set of organisms, but encompasses all living things and, importantly, the functions and processes that link and sustain them.

Biodiversity is the foundation of our health and wellbeing.

It underpins our economy and life itself. It is the vast ecological infrastructure that is the foundation of our primary production industries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Through these industries, biodiversity sustains both our lives and much of our quality of life by providing valuable ecosystem services such as nutrient and water cycling, maintenance of healthy soils, and plant pollination, and as a direct source of raw materials and food.

Australia's natural environment is core to our national and cultural identity. Our biodiversity provides us with inspiration, and places to relax and experience nature. Biodiversity is fundamental to Indigenous culture, and traditions that are inextricably linked to land and sea country.

Despite a significant global decline in biodiversity, Australia still has more unique animals and plants than almost anywhere on Earth. We have a truly vast array of land and freshwater ecosystems, from the tropical north to the cool/temperate south, and our seas are equally rich in a variety of species and habitats.

Our Australian experience

The planet is experiencing a significant and unsustainable loss of biodiversity.

Biodiversity decline includes the reduction in extent and condition of habitat, a drop in the number and ranges of species in particular regions, a loss of genetic diversity within species, and a loss of abundance of animals.

More than 50 species of Australian animals are believed to have become extinct in the past 200 years, and many others are 'functionally extinct'—no longer living in their former Australian mainland range, but only as small, isolated populations, often on islands.

Of course, species extinction is only one measure of biodiversity loss, and does not capture the breadth and scale of biodiversity decline. The number of species becoming threatened continues to increase, and many common plants and animals have lost genetic diversity through reduced population sizes and localised extinctions. The decline of biodiversity is most obvious in the decreasing populations of vertebrate animals, loss of extent of habitat, and the fragmentation and degradation of forests, rivers and other ecosystems. The drivers of decline lead to the simplification and fragmentation of our natural ecosystems, which has progressively weakened their resilience and adaptability.

Many of our actions to protect biodiversity over the years have been reactive; we have treated the symptoms only after decline has become obvious. Programs to protect a threatened species—for example, by breeding captive populations for release into the wild—are expensive and last-resort measures. They also have low success rates.

We need to now move beyond reacting to the symptoms of biodiversity decline, and tackle the underlying drivers of biodiversity decline in an integrated way.

We can achieve much more by understanding the underlying causes of decline, such as pressures that lead to loss of habitat, and then addressing these problems on a broad scale. This can be done, for example, through strategic assessments, and by effective regional environment planning, which seeks to balance the needs of nature with the need to continue the development of our economy and society in a sustainable and proactive way.

The Australian Government's role in biodiversity conservation is significant. The role of the states and territories is equally important, as they are responsible for environmental management in their jurisdictions. But there is a limit to what government can do. Business and the community can all contribute, particularly when fully informed and where common interests are identified. Our biodiversity is fundamental to a sustainable and prosperous future.

Biodiversity—a healthy natural environment—is everyone's business.

Our vision

Australia's biodiversity is healthy and resilient to threats, and valued both in its own right and for its essential contribution to our existence (Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2030).

Our commitment

Our commitment is to provide national leadership in conserving Australia's biodiversity and maintaining healthy functioning ecosystems, consistent with the roles of different levels of government in our federal system.

We commit to working with all levels of government, industry, business, and the community to conserve Australia's biodiversity and maintain healthy functioning ecosystems.

The role of the Australian Government

The Australian Government's roles and responsibilities in ensuring effective biodiversity conservation are based on:

- giving effect to our international obligations to protect, conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and the environment under the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international instruments
- providing national leadership in tackling large-scale threats to biodiversity—including those posed by climate change, habitat loss and invasive species—and creating opportunities for effective cooperation and partnership between all levels of government, business and the community
- ensuring that legislated matters of national environmental significance are protected and conserved
- protecting and advancing Australia's national economic interests through policies and programs that foster sustainability, and maintaining and recovering our ecological infrastructure and the ecosystem services it provides
- recognising the contribution that a healthy and resilient natural environment makes to human health, our quality of life and our national identity, and acting accordingly
- protecting and managing those parts of the natural environment under our direct control such as Commonwealth reserves, Commonwealth lands and the Commonwealth marine area
- working in partnership with the states and territories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, industry bodies, local and regional agencies, researchers, non-government organisations and communities in pursuing our objectives and applying this policy framework.

The foundations of our approach

In applying the following principles, the Australian Government builds the foundations for a strategic and integrated approach to tackling the challenge of biodiversity decline.

1. It is better to prevent biodiversity decline before it happens.

It costs less to avoid damage than to restore the functions of ecosystems after damage has occurred. In most cases, these natural assets are irreplaceable. We can't afford to wait until species or ecosystems are threatened before we act. The answer lies in preventative action.

Applying this principle requires a deliberate shift in the focus of investment and effort from only treating the 'symptom'—those species and ecosystems that are most degraded or at risk—to focus on causes that reduce the health of biodiversity on a landscape scale. It means taking a more strategic approach to planning and managing our natural resources. It means adapting the various tools available, such as regulation, investment, planning and financial incentives to be more proactive in preventing biodiversity decline.

Adopting this principle integrates the protection of threatened species and communities into ecosystem-based, landscape-scale approaches that will maximise ecological and investment effectiveness.

2. Biodiversity should be valued according to its real worth.

Policies and markets have not accounted well for the value and benefits of biodiversity and ecosystems, often resulting in poor choices about how we use biodiversity. As a consequence, the costs of biodiversity decline are generally not borne directly by users, but by the entire Australian community as public costs. Making the value of biodiversity visible is critical to ensuring that these costs are directly factored into decision making, and will help ensure a fairer distribution of the costs and benefits of biodiversity use.

The proper valuation of biodiversity allows us to create more effective and efficient policy responses, including through: market-based approaches for biodiversity protection and management; reforming perverse incentives; and reducing losses through regulation and pricing (for example, by creating a market for offsets). Being able to value biodiversity also encourages appropriate levels of investment in ecological infrastructure as we would invest in other public-good infrastructure.

The Australian Government will take a leadership role in properly valuing the environment, and in creating appropriate policy instruments to ensure these values are appropriately included in decision making.

3. We need to take an adaptive approach to building the resilience of biodiversity to climate change.

Maintaining ecosystem function, and increasing ecosystem resilience to climate change and other pressures, will require a sophisticated and integrated combination of approaches. We will need to monitor our efforts and adapt our flexible approaches as we learn more.

A 'portfolio' approach of measures will maximise the prospects of success by encouraging innovation and spreading the risk of failure. This portfolio of measures should include both on-reserve and off-reserve management of land and aquatic systems for conservation. Wildlife corridors will allow animals to migrate, while the connectivity of vegetation across soil type, elevation and region will build resilience for plant species. Buffer zones and complementary land uses

will increase the capacity of ecosystems to adapt to change, while the strategic control of threats like weeds and pests will contribute to ecosystem resilience.

Taking an adaptive approach means being prepared to experiment, learn and adjust. This requires using a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation and program review. Being adaptive allows us to make better decisions over time by building our knowledge of complex systems and changing our interventions accordingly. The principles of adaptive management are more important in dynamic and unpredictable environments, because they provide a systematic basis to deal with the uncertainties and complexities of biodiversity decline—particularly in a changing climate.

Central to this principle is effective planning that integrates a range of knowledge and values to create the best possible understanding of any given ecosystem, and what interventions are likely to work. It is critical then to monitor the ecosystem for changes and outcomes so we can evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, before revising our next actions based on this new information.

The Australian Government will work in partnership with states and territories, experts, industry and the community to better manage planning and monitoring and to carry out explicit evaluation and program review. The Australian Government will also give priority in investment and regulatory approaches to actions that build ecosystem function and resilience.

4. Effective conservation requires well-targeted investment.

Failure to recognise and value the function of ecosystem services can result in poorly targeted investment in conservation management. Funding decisions for biodiversity conservation have tended to focus on 'symptoms', and have not paid enough attention to strategic approaches or ongoing management needs. Applying this principle means the Australian Government will identify strategic priorities for investment, based on credible knowledge and the likely benefits of the investment over the long term. Applying this principle will lead to greater opportunities to make lasting improvements across the range of biodiversity risks. The Australian Government will continue to invest strategically in biodiversity conservation and building healthy ecosystems. It will do this by leveraging other sources of funding, using its investments to increase participation in conservation activities, and by using and promoting market-based approaches for conservation.

Assigning proper values to biodiversity and supporting this with effective regulation will give rise to biodiversity and ecosystem services markets. As a consequence, further financing mechanisms will emerge.

The Australian Government will work with others to develop innovative approaches for adequate and sustainable long-term financing of biodiversity conservation. Harnessing the shared investments across government and the private sector will be critical.

5. Biodiversity is a complex issue and a shared responsibility, requiring cooperation and a mix of approaches.

Given the array of social, economic and environmental factors that affect biodiversity, an integrated approach to biodiversity conservation is critical. This requires governments at all levels, businesses, communities, researchers, private landholders and non-government organisations to play their part.

A cooperative and comprehensive approach is needed to identify the core issues and underlying drivers, and to apply the right mix of approaches. These include direct investment, regulation, financial incentives, development of markets and supporting the community with information and knowledge. In the process of

raising the standard and effectiveness of our environmental programs, governments will need to better harness the creativity of the Australian community by incorporating and fostering innovative solutions to biodiversity decline. We must recognise and support the effort of volunteers, landholders, farmers and community groups to date and build on their participation to move forward.

The Australian Government will play a coordination role in planning and information sharing to promote collaboration and create synergies, rather than having agencies working independently and out of step. It also means that the Government will promote the consideration of biodiversity in inter-governmental and cross-sectoral policy issues that affect biodiversity.

6. Solutions need to be at landscape and seascape scale, over time periods that make ecological sense.

Nationally, we must work at ecologically meaningful scales, looking at entire landscapes, seascapes, regions and ecosystems to deal with longer-term environmental trends, constraints and opportunities. While local problems need localised solutions, these should still be developed in the context of the broader landscape or ecosystem.

The Australian Government will strengthen the use of strategic planning at regional, landscape and seascape levels, providing the most effective opportunity to understand the cumulative impacts of activities and to identify priorities for investment. The Australian Government will seek better engagement with experts and stakeholders, and will work to develop sustainable financing mechanisms for long-term conservation.

7. Biodiversity is a renewable resource, but we must not undermine its capacity to renew itself.

The sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems means ensuring that their capacity to meet current and future human needs and aspirations is maintained. This will require an improved understanding of what is a sustainable use of biodiversity, and better decision making processes that take account of this improved understanding.

The Australian Government will work in partnership with other governments, industry and resource managers to promote and integrate the principle of sustainable use of biodiversity into policies, plans and strategies.

8. Credible information and knowledge is essential for good decisions.

Credible information is necessary for good decision making, because it allows governments and other environmental managers to anticipate changes to the environment, and act early to prevent or minimise impacts.

The Australian Government is in a unique position to work with state and territory governments and other organisations to facilitate credible information gathering and management. In the first instance, applying this principle means making the best use of technological advances in information management, decision support systems that span data collection, satellite imagery and Geographic Information Systems. It also means focusing on the delivery and effective use of information in decision making through information management and sharing agreements. We need to ensure the most reliable knowledge and information from research and monitoring programs feed into this system.

Accordingly, the priorities set for biodiversity monitoring and information gathering should be those that directly support policy and decision making. These would include: the extent and condition of ecosystems; the distribution of species; the trajectories of threats such as feral animals and weeds; sustainable management

and use of biodiversity; predictions for impacts of climate change; and anticipated land use change and urban and rural development.

Australia is an acknowledged world leader in environmental science and related disciplines in economics, technology and communications. We have a great deal of the information and knowledge we need to tackle our most pressing problems. This principle involves developing processes that integrate and channel that knowledge in the most effective way. The National Plan for Environmental Information, announced by the Australian Government in 2010, is a step forward in this regard.

9. The conservation estate is the backbone of our efforts.

Expanding and managing Australia's conservation estate remains a primary strategy for maintaining biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. The terrestrial National Reserve System and the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas make up our formal reserve system, representing the variety of ecosystems and species that span our continent and waters. The National Reserve System also includes our most iconic places, many of which are also of world heritage standing.

On the terrestrial side, the National Reserve System is made up of protected areas managed for conservation by the Australian Government, state and territory governments, non-government organisations, Indigenous communities and, increasingly, private landholders. As we progress landscape-scale approaches, much of the additional high-conservation value areas needed to build the National Reserve System will be privately owned and managed.

Therefore, the Australian Government will focus its resources and effort on landscape-scale conservation by continuing to build a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of formal reserves, as well as further improving the system of off-reserve lands managed for conservation. This effort requires effective partnership with other governments, industries, business, non-government organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and private landholders.

In marine areas, applying this principle means the Australian Government will also continue to work with all stakeholders and state and territory governments to build a representative system of marine protected areas, and to ensure the sustainable management of fishing, mining and tourism activities in these areas.

10. Commonwealth environmental regulation should be strategic, focused on matters of national environmental significance, and complementary to state and territory legislation.

Australian Government regulation of biodiversity will continue to focus on matters of national environmental significance and on Commonwealth land. To give effect to these principles, we need to operate more strategically to secure enduring protection of matters of national environmental significance with the minimum possible burden on business and individuals. This means that Commonwealth legislation should work in a complementary way with states and territory regulation of biodiversity more broadly.

The Australian Government will make more use of landscape-scale approaches such as strategic assessments and regional environment plans, which provide more systematic frameworks for understanding cumulative and longer-term impacts, and encourage proactive approaches to sustainable development. The Australian Government will continue to work cooperatively with states and territories on complementary approaches to environmental regulation.

Applying this approach

The Australian Government will ensure these principles guide the design and delivery of policies, programs and laws related to biodiversity. We will also ensure that all policies and programs that may have a significant impact on biodiversity take account of these principles. A report on the implementation of this policy will be included in each annual report of the department administering the policy.

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