

Arid Lands Environment Centre, Inc.



Office 90 Gap Rd, The Gap
PO Box 2796 Alice Springs
Mail NT 0871 Australia
Phone +61 (08) 8952 2497
Fax +61 (08) 8953 2988
E-mail info@alec.org.au
ABN 50 100 640 918

Australia's Strategy for Nature 2018-2030: Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Submission by the Arid Lands Environment Centre

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) is central Australia's peak environmental organisation advocating for the protection of nature and ecologically sustainable development in the arid lands since 1980.

ALEC is actively engaged in land management and conservation programs to preserve biodiversity through invasive species management and climate change adaptation planning.

Australia 2018; An Extinction Crisis

More than 1,800 plant and animal species and ecological communities are at risk of extinction in Australia. The most recent Australian *State of the Environment Report 2016*¹ states that the declining trend of Australia's biodiversity is an issue of particular concern.

The number of species listed as threatened under the EPBC Act continues to rise. Since 2011, the number of species listed in the critically endangered category has increased by 31, and 2 species have been reported as likely extinct. Overall pressures on biodiversity have mostly increased since 2011, and the status of biodiversity has mostly decreased.

The main pressures facing the Australian environment include climate change, land-use change, habitat fragmentation and degradation, and invasive species.

Australia's Strategy for Nature 2018-2030 must address land clearing rates, weak protections under the EPBC Act, cuts to environment budgets, poor monitoring of species, poor coordination between federal and state governments, the lack of legislation to fund recovery actions for listed species, the lack of accountability measures, mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Central Australia; Threatened Species, Ferals, Weeds, Vulnerable to Climate Change

Biodiversity loss is a key concern for arid Australia with increasing threats from land degradation, invasive species and climate change.

Climate change predictions see a hotter, wetter Central Australia with more extreme weather events. The challenges of managing weeds, pests and fires will be an ongoing problem that will require significant strategies and resources.

¹ <https://soe.environment.gov.au>

Buffel grass is recognised as a key threat to native biodiversity in Australia's arid heartland. As an aggressive coloniser it is rapidly transforming the arid landscape causing significant losses of native flora and fauna and it negatively impacts on Indigenous cultural practices, including the availability of bush tucker.

There are 145 threatened amphibians, birds, invertebrates, mammals and reptiles in the Northern Territory (NT)². Small mammals are particularly at threat in arid Australia from feral animals including cats and foxes³.

Investment is needed in more Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas for the long term to manage environmental issues. Collaboration between pastoralists, indigenous land managers and government agencies is urgently required to develop a coordinated approach to prevent further biodiversity loss.

Australia's Strategy for Nature 2018-2030; Lacking commitment to preventing biodiversity loss

A national strategy for biodiversity conservation is vitally important in facilitating cross-jurisdictional collaboration and resourcing large-scale conservation projects.

Unfortunately **Australia's Strategy for Nature 2018-2030** is a vacuous and abstract document that fails to provide any semblance of a proper program for taking substantive action to reverse the dramatic decline in Australia's biodiversity.

The plan fails to incorporate baseline, scientifically informed best practice process for the conservation of nature. This includes a framework for identifying at risk species, monitoring changes, developing targets and tracking progress on those targets. In short there are no clear objectives that relate to specific actions with demonstrably positive biodiversity outcomes. Australia has clear legal responsibilities under the *Convention of Biological Diversity* to take effective action on reducing the decline in biodiversity. Our international reputation concerning environmental protection is already fragile and this plan further undermines our commitment to international environmental responsibilities.

The draft Biodiversity Conservation Strategy must be completely revised and reconstructed to outline the foundations of an effective conservation strategy. This includes: clearly listing objectives, factors affecting the achievement of those objectives, strategic guiding principles, processes for evaluating progress and finally a list of national priority threatening processes and their corresponding actions.

Essentially, the role of this strategy must be to translate motherhood statements into an operative work program.⁴ Until the strategy progresses beyond idealistic abstractions it will remain powerless.

The aspirations of the strategy ring especially hollow considering funding for conservation and land management programs has been steadily declining since 2013.⁵ Unless there is a concerted

² <https://nt.gov.au/environment/animals/threatened-animals>

³ 2012 Action Plan for Australian Plan for Mammals

⁴ Paul Selman, "Implementation of a National Conservation Strategy: The Case of Australia" (1988) *The Environmentalist*, 8(1)7-18.

⁵ Australian Conservation Foundation Media Brief, 'Funding for environment in drastic decline – MYEFO set to make things worse', 14 December 2016, available at: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/1526/attachments/original/1481681664/Federal_nviro_spending_brief_14-12-16.pdf?1481681664

change in funding priorities it is difficult to see the principles of the strategy leading to positive outcomes in biodiversity conservation.

The draft strategy lacks any contextual basis. It fails to acknowledge that Australia is experiencing a rapid decline in species richness and diversity. We have some of the highest rates of extinction in the world, and a huge list of threatened species, which is acknowledged by the Commonwealth.⁶ This should inform the basis of the direction of the plan, however the scientific realities of the current state of the environment is completely ignored. At the very least the strategy must explicitly commit to reducing the severe rate of species decline.

Unless the strategy explicitly identifies the key threatening processes in Australia it will be unable to provide positive environmental outcomes. Clearing of native vegetation, invasive species and climate change are the key threats to biodiversity but recognition of this is lacking in the plan. The only realistic way the plan can provide federal leadership on biodiversity decline is to investigate the dynamics of the key threatening processes and identify appropriate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

There is no discussion on the operation of the current Commonwealth legal framework. This strategy needs to include an explicit recommendation to investigate a model for the next generation of environmental laws.

It is clear Commonwealth frameworks are not working as originally intended as biodiversity continues to decline. A significant revision of our current Commonwealth environmental regulations is necessary. Robust controls must be incorporated into federal guidelines to ameliorate the impact of native vegetation clearing, invasive species distribution and climate adaptation and mitigation actions. At the least, the strategy should include a process for reviewing the current framework and addressing the low rate of enforcement under the EPBC Act.

The Commonwealth plays a fundamental role in facilitating inter-jurisdictional collaboration on biodiversity conservation. This role should be clarified by outlining clear processes for knowledge development and sharing. Re-establishing the biodiversity advisory committee would provide the necessary forum for this collaboration to occur. It could also enhance public participation and a place for the input of scientific expertise to guide the strategic direction of conservation actions.

A few aspects of the plan provide a positive vision for the future of environmental protection in Australia. It is positive to see that the plan acknowledges the importance of human-nature experiences in valuing nature. Encouraging people to experience nature will hopefully inspire them to consider their place in the natural world. This is fundamental to increasing the public's interest in preserving biodiversity. The value of the plan however, ends there.

In its current form the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy is not supported by ALEC and other environmental non-government organisations. It fails to provide any practical process for addressing biodiversity decline. The strategy demonstrates a lack of political and policy will to acknowledge the serious decline in biodiversity in Australia. Unless the plan is completely revised with a view to developing substantive priorities and objectives it will be powerless to protect nature.

⁶ <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species>

Recommendations

1. The strategy must include key biodiversity conservation targets and measurable objectives.
2. The strategy must outline processes for measuring progress on those targets and objectives.
3. The strategy explicitly commits to reversing the decline in biodiversity.
4. The strategy recommends investigating Commonwealth environmental laws with a view to introducing the next generation of environmental laws.
5. The strategy acknowledges native vegetation clearing, invasive species and climate change as key threatening processes.
6. The strategy outlines a plan for increasing funding for conservation and land management activities aimed at improving biodiversity.
7. The strategy incorporates region specific action plans, which would include increasing funding for Indigenous Ranger groups in remote Australia.