



March 2019

Building a world leading protected area system for Queensland

We welcome and support the Queensland Government's commitment to build 'a world-leading protected area system for Queensland'.¹ Fulfilling this ambition will require a substantial shift in policy direction.

Queensland has the lowest proportion of land in protected areas (around 8 percent) of any state or territory in Australia,² well short of the international target of 17 per cent³. In recent years, expansion of our protected area system has been minimal, management is chronically underfunded and existing protected areas are threatened by inappropriate commercial development.

¹ Ministerial Statement (2016) 'National Parks Minister announces significant expansion of Queensland's protected area estate', 30 November 2016.

² In Queensland protected areas include national parks (with five sub-types), conservation parks, resource reserves, nature refuges and coordinated conservation areas. Of these tenures, national parks are the strongest form of protection and form the backbone of nature conservation in Queensland. Other protected land in Queensland includes World Heritage Areas and Indigenous Protected Areas. These protection tools are generally administered by the Australian Government.

³ Convention on Biological Diversity *Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020*, Aichi Target 11.

At the same time, Queensland has also pioneered a new model of national park based around Aboriginal owned land and joint management between Traditional Owners and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. This model has converted existing national parks and added new ones and other protected areas across Cape York and has the potential to be adapted and used elsewhere in Queensland.

We seek your support for the following policy reforms and public investment to address these issues:

Strengthening protection for Queensland's protected areas by

- amending the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* to fully restore the primacy of the cardinal principle;
- passing the *Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018* (Qld) to create a new class of private protected area; and
- proactively phasing out grazing leases in national parks.

Growing and improving management of our national parks network by

- investing \$56 million per year for improved on ground management of conservation values; and
- \$55 million per year for acquisition, with matching increments in funding for QPWS to manage added parks as needed.

Growing private protected areas by

- investing \$40 million over four years in Nature Assist to deliver strategic growth of private protected areas and improved financial and technical support to landholders to better manage their lands.

Supporting Indigenous land management by

- investing in the future success of the Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program by creating 200 new ranger positions over the next ten years.

Restoring land to Traditional Owners, creating new protected areas by

- investing \$50 million over five years (2019-2024) to extend the Cape York Tenure Resolution Program beyond its current end date of June 2019; and
- maximizing opportunities for jointly managed areas and extending the Cape York Tenure Resolution Program model or similar as part of a broader strategy to support Indigenous conservation approaches.

Funding our protected areas by

- increasing capital funding for protected areas to a level more consistent with their important contribution to Queensland's economy, environment and lifestyle;
- allocating \$150 million over 3 years* from the waste levy to contribute to the implementation of the Queensland Protected Areas Strategy; and
- exploring options for raising additional revenue through mechanisms such as a bushland preservation levy.

Implementing these practical recommendations presents a unique opportunity for the Palaszczuk Government to deliver on its commitment to create a world-leading protected area system.

Benefits of protected areas

National parks and other protected areas provide a wide range of environmental, social and economic benefits. These benefits are available to and enjoyed by Queenslanders.

Protected areas are widely recognised as one of the most effective approaches to the conservation of nature. They provide legal protection for wildlife, ecosystems and landscapes and are central to providing refugia for threatened species and preserving ecosystem function.⁴ Protected areas provide a generous return on public

⁴ Dudley, N. (Editor) (2008). *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. x + 86pp.; Stolton, S., P. Shadie and N. Dudley (2013). *IUCN WCPA Best Practice Guidance on Recognising Protected Areas and Assigning Management Categories and Governance Types*, Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 21, Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.

investment by supporting tourism, public health and recreation benefits and other ecosystem services like clean air and water.⁵

Queensland's national parks are a powerful drawcard for locals and tourists from Australia and around the world. They generate approximately \$5.6 billion in spending by tourists every year, \$952 million of which come directly from people visiting national parks.⁶ This expenditure has a positive direct impact on local businesses providing services and supplies.

Queenslanders love their national parks: a recent Galaxy poll in Queensland found most people (84%) believe that more land should be protected in national parks and reserves, with 75% of people surveyed stating that 20% or more of the state should be protected in national parks and reserves.⁷

With growing evidence that access to natural environments improves health and well-being, prevents disease and aids recovery from illness, national parks are vital in contributing to state and national health policy objectives. Low key, nature-based recreation and immersion in nature are encouraged in national parks.

Humans are a part of nature and rely on ecosystem services to provide clean air and water, pollinate crops, break down wastes, and regulate climate. Ecosystem services generated by protected areas create significant economic and social benefits beyond the protected area boundary, and contribute to our survival and wellbeing.

Protected areas also safeguard diverse cultural heritage values and provide opportunities for Indigenous involvement in planning and land management activities.

Strengthening legal protection

Queensland's protected areas are underpinned by the *Queensland Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NCA). The NCA provides for the creation of national parks and other protected areas, and for the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their management where they have an interest under Native Title, other legal interest in the land or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander tradition or custom.

However, amendments to the NCA in 2013 substantially weakened the protective status of national parks by allowing the construction of tourist facilities and the establishment of special management areas to override the cardinal principle for their management. That principle established in the Act provided for protection of natural and cultural resources to the greatest possible extent and it was the primary objective in the management of national parks. The amendments allow for the potential of incompatible activities such as commercial grazing and plant harvesting to be authorised by declaring a special management area. This needs to be rectified by restoring the relevant provisions in the NCA that existed prior to the 2013 amendments.

While tourism provides tangible social and economic benefits, and the conservation sector strongly welcomes national park visitation, tourism and recreational use should not come at the expense of their natural values. On the contrary, a tighter regulatory framework and return to the cardinal principle will ensure our national parks are properly protected and managed for future generations.

As Queensland's population grows and changes to our landscape are likely to continue, the importance of adequate protection of our natural places will only increase. A long-term view is required. In the 110-year history of national parks in Queensland prior to now, because of the proper application of the cardinal principle, no

⁵ Commonwealth Government (2010) *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-2030*.

⁶ Ballantyne R et al (2008), *Valuing Tourism Spend Arising from Visitation to Queensland National Parks*, Sustainable Tourism CRC.

⁷ Polling conducted by Galaxy Research in November 2017 (1,000 respondents).

tourist resort accommodation has been constructed inside any mainland national park. This reflects a consistent prioritising of natural values during the life of our national park system.

Queensland has some of the most spectacular and iconic protected areas, particularly national parks, and privately owned protected areas in Australia. While the NCA has enabled these areas to be designated for conservation, their effectiveness is hampered by the failure of the Act to protect against demonstrable threats undermining their integrity.

Private protected areas declared under the Act are currently unprotected from mining, logging and grazing. This concern is partially addressed by the proposed establishment of special wildlife reserves on private land that has high conservation value, currently before Parliament.⁸ The declaration of such reserves is strongly supported.

To appropriately manage the threats to Queensland's national parks and other protected areas, the NCA requires further reform to return pre-2012 protection to the estate.

Recommendation 1

Strengthen protection for Queensland's protected areas by

- (a) amending the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* to fully restore the primacy of the cardinal principle;
- (b) passing the *Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018* (Qld) to create a new class of private protected area; and
- (c) proactively phasing out grazing leases in national parks.

Strategic growth and improved management of protected areas

Growing and improving management of our national parks network

We welcome the Queensland Government's commitment to expanding the protected area estate to 17 per cent of the state.⁹ Fulfilling this ambition will require sustained investment in building and effectively managing the state's national park network.

Recommendation 2

The budget for national parks be increased by

- a) \$56 million per year for improved on ground management of conservation values and
- b) to at least \$55 million per year for acquisition, with matching increments in funding for QPWS to manage added parks as needed.

Investment in private protected areas

While national parks are the backbone to Queensland's nature conservation efforts, private protected areas are an important complementary part of our landscape-scale protection. The nature refuge program has been highly successful to date, but limited investment in recent years presents a threat to the program's sustainability and future growth. The current level of support available to nature refuge landholders is insufficient to support effective management of existing nature refuges or to provide an incentive for new entrants to the program.

We welcome the Palaszczuk Government's commitment to establishing a class of private protected area (special wildlife reserve) to protect wildlife and their habitats from incompatible land uses, in particular, the proposed prohibition on mining and petroleum development. We also welcome the Deputy Premier's commitment to

⁸ Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 (Qld)

⁹ Queensland Government (2017) *Strategic Plan 2017-2021*, Department of Environment and Heritage Protection.

“support private protected area uptake and management by continuing and expanding the Nature Assist toolkit to support land owners in their management of nature refuges”¹⁰

Recommendation 3

We recommend an investment of \$40 million over four years in Nature Assist to deliver strategic growth of private protected areas and improved financial and technical support to landholders to better manage their lands.

Supporting Indigenous land management

The Queensland Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program provides funding and technical support to Indigenous Rangers in 17 regional and remote communities across Queensland. This highly regarded program is delivering real environmental, social and economic benefits for Indigenous communities, including meaningful employment, positive health outcomes and improved management of feral animals, weeds and wildfires. Ranger programs provide a platform for Indigenous organisations to expand business opportunities, including engaging in the carbon economy through reduced emissions as a result of fire management which limits destructive wildfires.

Increasingly women are taking advantage of ranger positions in positive ways to enhance community and cultural values as well as environment. As local Traditional Owners are best placed to determine allocation of ranger positions including the valuable role of women in land and sea management and government should consult closely with them.

Recommendation 4

We encourage the Queensland Government to invest in the future success of the Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program by creating 200 new ranger positions over the next ten years.

Restoring land to Traditional Owners, creating new protected areas

The conservation sector strongly supports and embraces the growth of nature conservation through Aboriginal-owned and jointly managed national parks, and other models of addressing Aboriginal land justice through conservation. We recognize the potential this offers to create new approaches to protected area establishment, management and maintenance, and welcome the opportunity to be part of developing new and innovative models of Indigenous land protection.

Ten years on from the introduction of the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act, the Cape York Tenure Resolution Program has returned 3.6 million hectares of land to Traditional Owners, including freehold (1.5 million hectares) and Aboriginal owned and jointly managed national parks (2.1 million hectares).

It has been an exceptionally successful conservation and Indigenous development program, and has been supported by key stakeholders including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal organisations, and conservation groups. There is a strong case for (a) extending the Cape York program beyond its expiry date of June 2019; and, (b) investigating the potential for geographical expansion of this program (including land purchase and transfer) beyond Cape York and across parts of Queensland, in consultation with Traditional Owners, native title representative bodies and other key stakeholders.

¹⁰ Letter to the Pew Charitable Trusts and AgForce Queensland, November 2017.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Queensland Government

(a) commit \$50 million over five years (2019-2024) to extend the Cape York Tenure Resolution Program beyond its current end date of June 2019; and

(b) maximize opportunities for jointly managed areas and extending the Cape York Tenure Resolution Program model or similar as part of a broader strategy to support Indigenous conservation approaches.

Funding our protected areas

The current state government capital budget for “green infrastructure” – the strategic growth of national parks – is \$1.4 million.¹¹ It is clearly insufficient and out of all proportion to the economic value of the parks estate, including tourism and ecosystem services. By contrast, the Departmental capital budget is \$49.5 million¹² while the state budget for built infrastructure is over \$10 billion, which is over 7,000 times greater.

A credible allocation from general revenue should be the principal means of funding strategic growth of the protected area system. Investment in protected areas should be proportionate to the public goods and services they provide. Visitors to national parks in Queensland spend about \$5.6 billion a year, at least \$952 million of which can be attributed to the existence of national parks.¹³ Goods and services tax in the order of \$95 million to \$560 million on this spending flows back to Queensland via the Commonwealth grants system each year.

There are several additional revenue raising options that deserve to be explored, including:

Land Restoration Fund

We welcome the Queensland Government’s commitment to establish a \$500 million Land Restoration Fund, including the following proposed features of the fund: valuing environmental co-benefits of land carbon activities; valuing long-term conservation commitments; and, strengthening critical habitat protection and restoring ecosystems and degraded land.

Prioritising investment in large scale, long term protection of high conservation value landscapes will help to maximise the potential benefits of the Land Restoration Fund. State land transfers (high conservation value state forests and leasehold land) to national park could be restarted with this fund, on the basis of the carbon reduction benefits from ending deforestation and grazing, and allowing natural ecosystem recovery.

Reducing waste, protecting nature

The Premier has committed to reintroducing a levy on landfill waste to stem the rising tide of waste from other states which have levies.¹⁴ If landfill were levied at \$70 per tonne, and the volume of landfill waste fell from 5.5 million tonnes to 2.5 million tonnes per year as a result, this would provide additional revenue of \$175 million per year, providing an opportunity to better resource implementation of the Queensland protected area strategy.¹⁵

There is historical precedent for allocating a portion of revenue from the waste levy to national parks and habitat protection. When Labor introduced the levy in 2010, it was used to add \$12 million a year over five years

¹¹ <https://s3.budget.qld.gov.au/budget/papers/5/bp5-dnpsr-2017-18.pdf>

¹² Ibid

¹³ \$4.43 b total spending and \$749 million directly attributed spending in 2006 adjusted to 2016 dollars from Ballantyne, R., Brown, R., Pegg, S. and Scott, N., 2008. Valuing tourism spend arising from visitation to Queensland national parks. *Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre*.

¹⁴ <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2018/3/20/palaszczuk-government-announces-waste-strategy-for-queensland>

¹⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-20/dumped-waste-levy-recycled-by-queensland-to-stop-nsw-waste/9566254>

for parks acquisition (roughly half of which went to Stradbroke Island) and \$9 million for koala habitat protection.¹⁶

Working with local councils

In Queensland some local governments collect levies from local residents to acquire land for bushland preservation. Many also have “environment levies” which can exceed \$100 per property per year, but which are mostly for waste, pest and urban park maintenance costs.¹⁷

An opportunity exists, as for the waste levy, to work with local councils to develop a uniform bushland protection levy, collected by local councils and used to support the establishment and management of new protected areas (including local reserves, national parks and private protected areas). If the levy were set at \$50 per property, that would deliver over \$50 million a year in revenue from Queensland’s 1.2 million rateable properties.¹⁸

Government could make the new levy more attractive to Queenslanders by offering free park visitor coupons to Queensland ratepayers, in the same way some councils give ratepayers free waste dumping coupons. Coupons would offset charges for vehicles and camping in parks where charges apply (such as under the *Recreation Areas Management Act*). This would also encourage Queenslanders to make more use of their parks.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Queensland Government

- (a) increase capital funding for protected areas to a level more consistent with their important contribution to Queensland’s economy, environment and lifestyle;
- (b) allocate \$150M over 3 years* from the waste levy to contribute to the implementation of the Queensland Protected Areas Strategy and;
- (c) explore options for raising additional revenue through mechanisms such as a bushland preservation levy.

¹⁶ <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2010/6/8/state-government-provides-a-strong-green-budget>

¹⁷ <https://www.dilgp.qld.gov.au/resources/publication/local-government/lg-comparative-15-16-08-separate-special-rates.xlsx>

¹⁸ <https://www.dnrm.qld.gov.au/our-department/news/2017/march/2017-statutory-land-valuations>

* Given that an effective and funded strategy for waste avoidance and resource recovery would reduce waste volumes over time, we have suggested that levy allocations be set for an initial three-year period and subject to review after that date.