



House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Climate Change, Environment and the Arts
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA
ccea.reps@aph.gov.au

20th July 2011

Submission to inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate.

Since the early 1980s, EEG has worked as a regionally based NGO with a keen interest in the local and wider environment. We represent over 700 members and supporters.

In the last 30 years we have been taking an active role in surveys for threatened species and witnessing the destructive impacts on our biodiversity of government policy and land management.

Australia has a mega-diverse range of species, many of which are still to be described.

Australia's biodiversity

Only seventeen 'mega-diverse' countries are recognised on Earth. These countries collectively hold around two thirds of the world's biodiversity. Australia is one of these countries. Further, it is one of only two developed nations of the 17 mega-diverse countries in the world (along with the USA), and is the only one with a relatively low population.

Australia has an unparalleled opportunity for conserving a significant part of the world's biodiversity. Australia is the only mega-diverse nation on Earth – the only country with a high level of economic ability for biodiversity protection, without the population pressures that could compete with biodiversity protection for land use.

We have more species of higher (vascular) plants than 94% of countries on Earth, and more non-fish vertebrate animals than 95% of the world's countries.

We have more species of mammals than 93% of countries, more birds than 79% of countries, more amphibians than 95% of countries, and more reptiles than any other country on Earth.

Even more telling is the number of *endemic* species in Australia – species which occur nowhere else on Earth. Australia has more endemic plants than 98% of the world's countries, and more endemic non-fish vertebrates than any other country on Earth.

We have more endemic mammals than any other country, more endemic birds than 99% of the world's countries, more endemic reptiles by far than any other country, and more endemic amphibians than 97% of the world's countries. There is no other refuge for them when their habitat is threatened.

Since European settlement, 83 species of higher plants have become extinct, and we have the worst record for higher plant extinctions of any country on Earth. We have also sent extinct 43 animal species. We have the worst record of mammal extinctions on Earth – the 19 mammal extinctions make us worse than any other country or continent. We have also sent 21 species of birds and at least 4 frogs extinct. In total, we have sent 126 species of plants and animals out of existence in just 200 years.

The species which are listed as rare, threatened or endangered are also in their hundreds if not thousands since the last biodiversity census and we easily outdo the rest of the world for reptile and amphibians in danger..

With this shameful record, we welcome the enquiry into biodiversity and climate change. Having taken part in many inquiries in the past and have found they are mostly little more than public relation exercises. We hope this one is serious. The challenge for Australia in the 21st Century is huge and diabolically urgent.

However we have only about 7% of our land mass protected from exploitation, and much of this has been chosen due to its low value for other human uses.

Continuing population increases and the associated demands on the environment is directly responsible for the dire situation the country's ecosystems and species are in. The rate of species loss is hundreds of times more than the normal rate of extinctions. Every loss is like popping another rivet on an aeroplane. Each species is part of an intricate ecological mechanism inside and interlinked to other complex systems. As the saying goes, "extinction is forever" and we have been responsible for enough losses to do us for many more centuries. Australia must put more effort into protecting the habitat of our most vulnerable species.

Current policies and legislation, state commonwealth and international

Despite having various state and commonwealth legislation that recognises and lists our most threatened species and communities, these lists are extremely conservative. The political will and the funding to update these lists is an extremely low priority for all

governments. The will shown and the resources offered to carry out protection or restoration of these listed species is even more abysmal.

The Victorian FFGA and the EPBC Act are totally inadequate to deal with the many urgent actions necessary to protect those species lucky enough to be recognised as endangered. We fully believe this is deliberate to ensure there is no conflict with development. With the existing governance arrangements so poorly funded and designed to be ineffective, there is absolutely no ability or desire for the government to now add climate pressures into the picture. This is an inexcusable situation.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is an international legally binding treaty. In 2002, Australia and other parties adopted the 2010 Biodiversity Target. It was to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss at all levels. Australia has failed to achieve its commitment to the 2010 Biodiversity Target. This is due to lack of political will and subsequent lack of funding.

At the 10th Conference of the signatories in Japan in late 2010, Australia agreed on a new Strategic Plan and a strategy for financial resources mobilisation.

The Plan included 2020 targets to incorporate biodiversity values into national accounting, prevent the extinction of known threatened species, and to increase land and marine protected areas.

It spells out clearly that by 2020 there should be more protected ecosystems to ensure secure carbon storage and ecosystem resilience and that it must cover at least 15% of the identified degraded areas.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) was recently reviewed by Dr Allan Hawke and found to be lacking in many areas. The Government has not made formal commitments to the recommendations but has suggested informally that many of the necessary improvements won't be made. The government must respond to this report as a matter of urgency. Two years is too long to wait for a reply on such a critical matter as entire species survival.

Other Strategies, Frameworks and Statements have come and gone as glossy publications, full of impressive goals and objectives, but now gathering dust. Nothing has been done due to the same lack of interest, will and necessary funding.

The missing link - FUNDING

The public are cynical about yet more announcements and documents with pretty images on the cover. What is needed is decent funding. The recently announced \$1 billion over 6 years is a start, but this must be increased 10 fold if the government is to meet its legal obligations. With the impacts of climate change, floods, huge fires and drought, we have an ever increasing crisis of our biodiversity and ecosystems – on all levels, not just those which are rare or endangered.

Decent funding will not just assist plants, animals, rivers and the climate, it will assist people, communities, businesses and employment.

Climate action must acknowledge the natural environment as a major player

The government must accept the role that natural ecosystems play in climate mitigation and moderation; forests being the most obvious example. The recent report by various scientists from numerous countries has shown that forests play a much greater role in carbon capture and storage than has ever been recognised. The evidence is overwhelming but deliberately overlooked by governments as a major part of climate mitigation. While the government is going through major political trauma to find ways to reach a 5% reduction by 2020, the protection of natural forests can reduce our emissions by 20% immediately. Natural systems are cheap, effective, work hard and do their job well. They don't need years of R&D before they can begin. They need to be protected.

The recently announced Biodiversity Fund is a win-win method that will have a 'double whammy' - to conserve biodiversity as well as to capture and store carbon.

We would suggest that to oversee the Biodiversity Fund, board members have relevant scientific qualifications in conservation and climate change, and to put it plainly, not be tame political appointments. The board should use processes that are publicly transparent and accountable.

As well as monitoring and auditing, the priority must be genuine on ground action to start protecting ecosystems as soon as possible – both land and ocean.

We congratulate the government on this difficult first move towards taking action to reduce carbon pollution. Building the resilience of healthy ecosystems is an underestimated part of the work that's needed. We hope that this fund and its operation also remain resilient.

EEG and our supporters will be delighted to see the beginning of the restoration of what has been damaged and neglected for so long.



Jill Redwood
Coordinator