

Submission on the Effectiveness of Threatened Species and Ecological Communities' Protection in Australia

To:-

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
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Canberra ACT 2600

From:-

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We acknowledge the Indigenous Nations of Australia as the traditional owners of its land and waters. We thank them for the ecological wisdom they did and continue to pass to us.

We have read and agree with the contents of the two submissions to the Committee:

- from Marie-Louise Sarjeant, Chris Sarjeant, Sonia Hutchinson, John Marsh and Maxine Jacobson;
- from Wendy Radford for BDEC, Stuart Fraser for BFNC and Sara Hill

and wish to take this opportunity to register with the Committee our endorsement of them.

Introduction.

When about 50 years ago we became involved in environmental issues, we never thought that we will be witnessing in our lifetime the degree of environmental degradation we are witnessing now.

The rate at which the degradation is now occurring is very alarming, as given that global warming and loss of biodiversity exacerbate each other, there is a real possibility that unless we act now, this positive feedback cycle will escalate beyond our ability to prevent it from resulting in the collapse of our life supporting natural ecosystems.

Over the last 20 years that we lived on a property in the forest near Bendigo we personally witnessed the progressive local extinction of the swamp wallaby due to road kills, loss of habitat to development, degradation of the Greater National Park due to fuel reduction burns and weed infestation, including invasive plants escaping from ornamental gardens, replacement of native trees in Bendigo's streetscapes with exotics and escalation of a thriving population of Indian mynas - and all this, in spite of the biodiversity strategies, environmental protection legislations and scores of submissions, Panel and VCAT hearings.

Why is it then that we are failing to provide effective protection to our biodiversity?

In this submission we will list some of the reasons for this failure.

Evidence of the ineffectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia.

The ineffectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection is evident from the Natural Heritage Trust's "Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment 2002" report and from the successive "State of the Environment" reports which show that all the important environmental indicators are getting worse.

The reasons for this ineffectiveness are:-

- **Promotion of populations growth**

Concerns about the unsustainability of population growth and its impact on the natural environment is very well documented (Bartlett 1998, Catton 1982, Lowe 2005, p 59, Suzuki 2010, pp 20 and 21) and yet population growth continues to be supported and promoted by politicians (Creighton 2012) and business, while the wide spread misconceptions about it still persist without effective challenge (Lowe 2012)

We submit that the Committee recommends that an ecological limit to population growth is determined and implemented into our policy and decision processes

- **Failure to recognize the role apex, or top-order, predators play in the conservation of Australia's biodiversity.**

The failure by Euro-Australians to recognize the apex terrestrial predators function in sustaining a balance of species that is viable in the long term and in keeping the numbers down of introduced feral species, has and continues to contribute to the decline of Australia's biodiversity and adversely affects the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities protection.

In the case of the avian apex predator, the Wedge-tail Eagle (*Aquila audax*), the recognition and acceptance of its value to the environment and to farmers took number of years after CSIRO published its research results in the second half of last century.

Unfortunately, in the case of the mammalian apex predator, the dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*), until recent years "dingoes have rarely been studied to reach a larger understanding of our place in the Australian environment. **Dingoes have mainly been studied so humans can maximize the efficacy of control efforts, capitalize on available resources and increase short-term economic gain**" (Purcell 2010, p. 117), with the obvious consequent enforcement of people's misconceptions and detrimental treatment of the dingo.

The adverse effects of the current management under the Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy as detailed in Marie-Louise Sarjeant et al Submission of 23-11-12 to this Committee and of the mainland controls, especially by aerial baiting (Bullen 2012, Purcell 2010, p. p 3, 116,

137) on the dingo population and its culture as well as on livestock, show the urgency with which the current research (De Bias 2009, Johnson et al 2007, Purcell 2010, Wallach and O'Neill 2008, Brook et al 2012, Wallach and Johnson) needs to be taken seriously, supported by funding and implemented.

We stress here that unlike domestic dogs, cats and foxes that breed twice a year, dingoes breed only once a year, like wolves do, are self-regulating (Purcell 2010, pp 10 and 113) and do not breed during droughts (Purcell 2010, p 24); they form small packs with hierarchical structure with only the alpha pair reproducing. The alpha pair teaches its offsprings about the packs territory and what and how to hunt, especially how to hunt kangaroos. These characteristics and not its coat colour, skull shape or genetic "purity" makes the dingo so important to Australia's ecology (Purcell 2010, pp 39, 40, 101). Our disturbing its pack structure and culture is what causes the problem (Purcell 2010, pp3, 116,137). After all, the dingoes coexisted with Aboriginal people for thousands of years without being a problem to humans or ecology. Because their diet consists mainly of kangaroos and rabbits and not as popularly believed livestock (Purcell 2010, p 50), dingoes, like wedge-tailed eagles, are also beneficial to farmers.

We therefore submit that the Committee recommends that in order to improve the effectiveness of threatened species protection, management of key threats to listed species and of recovery plans, the dingo needs to be reclassified as protected, the new research be funded and its findings implemented into management and recovery plan.

We also submit that given the Indigenous Peoples' knowledge of the dingo, its role as the apex predator, the interdependence of species and the importance of maintaining balance (Parker 2007, Rose 1987, Rose 2000, Rose 2011), the Committee recommends that the object 3(2)(9)(iii) of the EPBCA 1999 be taken seriously and Indigenous Peoples' role in and knowledge of the dingo and its part in the conservation of biodiversity be implemented into the management of the conservation of species and ecological communities.

- **Failure to address our cultural maladaptations, especially our culture of exuberance.**

"The culture of exuberance seemed to impute almost supernatural capabilities to Homo sapiens. It prevented us from seeing that the process of "creating our own habitat" might be a trap, the technology might come to enlarge our resource appetites instead of our world's carrying capacity" (Catton 1982, p 122).

In the new branch of the study of human ecology, cultural maladaptation is defined as those cultural delusions, i.e. ideas and assumptions that are sheer nonsense, lending to behaviours which are equally nonsensical, which result in activities that cause a great deal of unnecessary human distress, or undesirable damage to ecosystems, or both (Boyden 2004).

Our society's most deeply entrenched cultural maladaptation is the delusion that "humanity is apart and above natural world and in command of inexhaustible resources". (Christie 1993)

This cultural maladaptation, or culture of exuberance, which was reinforced by our colonial expansions, technological innovations in food production, harvesting of oceans and access to minerals became the basis of our economy and as such is now fiercely defended and promoted by main stream economists, businessmen and politicians (Catton 1982) making our society more and more dependent on finite resources and responsible for the current unprecedented biodiversity crisis we now find ourselves in.

We submit that the Committee recommends that in order to make it possible to improve the effectiveness of the protection of biodiversity, this cultural maladaptation needs to be urgently addressed as “men who continue to perceive our predicament according to a pre-ecological paradigm simply will not recognize limits imposed by our world’s finiteness” (Catton 1982, p 31).

We further submit that the Committee recommends the development of a program to raise community’s awareness about both the fundamental truth, namely that “the economy is a subset of human society which, in turn, is part of the environment” (ASE 1996, p 5), as well as about the new ecological paradigm (Catton 1998, p 238), so that the most important reason for conserving biodiversity and protecting our natural environment is understood and implemented into our decision processes.

- **The dominance of economy in our decision- making processes.**

“In the short term, of course, financial considerations dominate national decision making. But behind the financial transactions there are real physical processes whose effects accumulate over long periods, and lead to serious environmental problems”. (Cocks 1996/97)

Section 3A(a) of EPBC Act 1999, provides that “decision-making processes should effectively integrate both long-term and short term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations.”

The fundamental truth that we, the human species, are part of and therefore dependent on the environment while economy is of our making and so is part of our society and therefore dependent on both us and the environment, implies that environment needs to be given priority in our decision-making processes or alternatively, the decision-making processes need to be made subject to environmental constraints dictated by ecological sciences in the same way as they are made subject to constraints dictated by physics.

Yet the reality is that economy still continues to play dominant part in our decision-making processes. If this were the case with physics, then our buildings, houses etc would be collapsing and aeroplanes falling from the sky.

We therefore submit that the Committee recommends that in order to ensure the effectiveness of the protection of biodiversity, the decision-making processes should be given priority to the environment over economy and that such justification as “triple bottom line” and “achievement of balance” are no longer relevant in decision-making processes as the environmental bottom line has

been already breached long time ago and the achievement of balance breaches it even more each time it is applied.

- **The emphasis on threatened species and ecological communities in the protection of biodiversity.**

It is now well documented that the conservation of biodiversity including threatened species and ecological communities' protection, depends on the extent of functioning ecosystems and the ecological connectivity such as biolinks, between them (Tepper 1893, Archer 1993, Milburn 1996, Recher 1999). Yet in spite of the fact that we have cleared and fragmented the native vegetation beyond their ability to sustain their biodiversity, we place emphasis on the protection of threatened species and ecological communities while still continue to issue permits to exploit and clear land for various non-ecological purposes and economic gains.

In Victoria, we even found a way to get around the Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy's objective for management of biodiversity goal of ensuring that within Victoria "there is a reversal, across the entire landscape, of the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation, leading to a net gain with the target being no loss by the end 2001", by inventing the habitat-hectare measure and designing an offsetting system which, in the case of medium and higher quality of native vegetation can be shown by simple mathematics to always lead when applied to net loss of the native vegetation's extent.

We therefore submit that the Committee recommends that in order to improve the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection, Prof Harry Recher's recommended most urgent actions to **"end the clearing of native vegetation**, reduce grazing pressure, remove inappropriate fire regimes, control feral and native animals whose abundance threatens native species, and restore functional ecosystems, with emphasis on native vegetation, **to a minimum of 30% of the landscape"** be implemented (Recher 1999) and the restored ecosystems be interconnected by restoring effective biolinks.

The ending of the clearing of native vegetation is very important as it is easier to restore the habitats when remnants are present than when the land is cleared. Also the remnants provide habitat for fauna while restoration is in progress.

Conclusion.

When we are healthy, we tend to be unaware of the presence of our organs in our bodies and of the functions they perform. Only when one of our organs fails and we have to replace its functions by artificial means do we become aware of how valuable and well performed its function was. It seems to us that our attitude to the natural environment is the same as it is to our bodies. The air conditioner, water purifiers and desalination plants should make us aware of the value of the services our natural ecosystems provide us with (Constanza et al 1997 estimated the value of world's ecosystem services as being more than double the global gross national product, remarking that in a

sense it is infinite, as without it economy would grind to a halt). Yet somehow we fail or refuse to see the connection. The danger is that when eventually we wake up to it, it will be too late to stop the consequences of our abuse of the environment.

It is for this reason that we have included the issue of cultural maladaptation in our submission.

Because a number of important issues, including those relating specifically to the Fraser Island's dingo and to Bendigo region as well to the ecological reasons for rejecting COAG's proposal for handing Federal Government's responsibility for environmental approval to the states are covered in the two submissions to the Committee we are endorsing, we have decided not to duplicate them in our submission.

Finally we would like to draw the Committee's attention to two books, "Legacy"(Suzuki 2010) and "Resetting the Compass"(Yencken and Wilkinson 2000, in particular chapter 13, "The four pillars of wisdom"), as they explain in a very comprehensive way the issues we have raised in our submission.

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