



10 September 2018

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

Re: Australia's faunal extinction crisis

To the Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis.

The Society for Conservation Biology Oceania Section (SCBO) is the peak professional group for conservation biology in Australia, with 500 members that include conservation scientists, policy-makers and managers. Our role is to provide scientific information for management and policy decisions about the long-term sustainability and future of ecosystems and their dependent organisms, recognising the importance of ecosystem services for humanity and based on the best available science.

Our submission is structured around the following key messages and recommendations related to terms of reference (TOR) a, d, e, h, j and k:

- 1) Evidence of the decline of Australia's threatened fauna.**
- 2) Strengthen environmental legislation.**
 - i) Environmental policy and legislation should be amended to include a specific, fundamental objective of preventing the extinction of any species.*
 - ii) The EPBC Act should be amended to make it mandatory that recovery plans are developed for all threatened species.*
 - iii) The EPBC Act should be amended to make it mandatory for critical habitat to be formally listed for all threatened species and that the protections are extended to all land tenures.*
 - iv) The Commonwealth should establish an independent environment commissioner role.*
- 3) Provide adequate funding.**
 - i) Direct spending on threatened species conservation should be increased to a minimum of \$1.2–1.5B per year.*

The SCBO welcomes the opportunity to provide further information or to discuss our submission in more detail.

Yours sincerely,
Dr Vanessa Adams
President, Society for Conservation Biology Oceania Section
School of Technology, Environments and Design
University of Tasmania, Sandy Bay TAS 7005
vm.adams@utas.edu.au

Prepared by:

Dr Tim Doherty

Secretary and Policy Committee member, Society for Conservation Biology Oceania Section

Centre for Integrative Ecology, School of Life and Environmental Sciences

Deakin University, Burwood VIC 3125

tdohert@deakin.edu.au

Dr Kylie Soanes

President, Greater Melbourne Chapter of the Society for Conservation Biology

School of Ecosystem and Forest Science

The University of Melbourne, Parkville VIC 3010

ksoanes@unimelb.edu.au

Message 1) Evidence of the decline of Australia's threatened fauna. Relevant TOR (a)

Australia has one of the world's worst rates of biodiversity decline and extinction. There are 449 bird, mammal, reptile, fish, frog and invertebrate species listed Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered under the EPBC act¹. There has been an increase in the number of threatened species over the past five years for invertebrates, birds, mammals, reptiles and fish². Globally, Australia is second only to Indonesia in terms of countries with the worst decline of mammal and bird biodiversity between 1996 and 2008³.

At least 30 endemic mammal species have become extinct since European settlement (one-third of the global total)⁴, as well as four frog and 22 bird species or subspecies¹. Three species have become extinct as recently as 2009–14: the Christmas Island pipistrelle *Pipistrellus murrayi*, the Bramble Cay melomys *Melomys rubicola*, and the Christmas Island forest skink *Emoia nativitatis*⁵. A further 10 bird and seven mammal species are predicted to become extinct in the next 20 years unless current management efforts and approaches are significantly enhanced⁶. These figures highlight the urgent need to significantly improve Australia's policy, legislation, funding and management for threatened species.

Message 2) Strengthen environmental legislation. Relevant TOR (d, e, j, k)

Protecting Australia's biodiversity and preventing further extinctions requires stronger environmental legislation and adequate resources for its enforcement. Here, we focus on four key points:

¹ <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/sprat.pl>, accessed on 10 August 2017.

² Cresswell I & Murphy H (2017) Biodiversity, Australia state of the environment 2016: biodiversity. <https://soe.environment.gov.au/theme/biodiversity>

³ Waldron A et al. (2017) Reductions in global biodiversity loss predicted from conservation spending. *Nature*, 551, 364–367. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature24295>

⁴ Woinarski JCZ et al. (2015) Ongoing unraveling of a continental fauna: Decline and extinction of Australian mammals since European settlement. *PNAS*, 112, 4531–4540. <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/15/4531>

⁵ Woinarski JCZ et al. (2017) The contribution of policy, law, management, research, and advocacy failings to the recent extinctions of three Australian vertebrate species. *Conservation Biology*, 31, 13–23. <https://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cobi.12852>

⁶ Geyle HM et al. (2018) Quantifying extinction risk and forecasting the number of impending Australian bird and mammal extinctions. *Pacific Conservation Biology*, 24, 157–167. <https://www.publish.csiro.au/PC/PC18006>

i) Fundamental objective to prevent extinctions

The continued loss of species in Australia is unacceptable and unethical because it is preventable. Australia has both the capacity and the responsibility to conserve its unique fauna. As a wealthy country, Australia has the resources to prevent further biodiversity loss. Australia is also a hub of research, producing world-leading conservation science. For many species, the causes of their decline and the actions needed to promote recovery are well-understood. In many cases, progress is limited only by our failure to act on the knowledge available to us. Conserving threatened species and preventing further extinctions is well within our power to achieve, and a responsibility that should not be shirked. ***We recommend that environmental policy and legislation should be amended to include a specific, fundamental objective of preventing the extinction of any species.***

ii) Recovery plans

The EPBC Act requires that the Minister not make declarations inconsistent with a species' recovery plan. However, since the Act was amended in 2006, recovery plans are no longer a mandatory requirement for all threatened species, and are now developed at the discretion of the Minister. Instead, there has been a move towards 'conservation advices', which are a weaker tool because the Minister can make decisions that act against them. These documents are often short, vague, and do not contain sufficient information or power to guide the protection and recovery of threatened species. Preventing species extinctions requires clear, detailed information on a species' distribution and ecology, threats and recommended recovery actions to be readily available and transparent to decision makers. It also depends on policy mechanisms that require decision makers to heed this information and be accountable. ***We recommend that the EPBC Act is amended to make it mandatory that recovery plans are developed for all threatened species.***

iii) Critical habitat

The EPBC Act enables the Minister to list 'critical habitat' that is *critical to the survival of a listed threatened species or listed threatened ecological community*. This is a potentially powerful mechanism for protecting threatened species, but it is severely underutilized. To date, only five locations are listed on the Register of Critical Habitat. Further, while it is an offence under the Act to knowingly damage critical habitat, this only applies to Commonwealth land. Land owned privately or by the States/Territories is not considered. This seriously limits the ability of critical habitat to benefit threatened fauna because more than 60% of Endangered or Critically Endangered animal species with recovery plans have critical habitat outside of Commonwealth land⁷. ***We recommend that the EPBC Act is amended to make it mandatory for critical habitat to be formally listed for all threatened species and that the protections are extended to all land tenures.***

iv) Independent statutory body

The Commonwealth does not have an independent statutory body to act as a 'watchdog' over environmental issues, including threatened species conservation. The Threatened Species Commissioner sits within the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy and hence is not independent of Government. That role has been valuable in raising awareness and building relationships amongst relevant stakeholders, and has raised the profile of Australia's threatened species in public discourse. However, it has a limited capacity to critically evaluate Government policy

⁷ ACF (2018) Australia's extinction crisis: Protecting critical habitat. Australian Conservation Foundation. <https://tinyurl.com/y7sv699h>

and advocate for threatened species conservation where it may conflict with other Government priorities. There are existing successful models that the Australian Government can learn from, including New Zealand's Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment⁸ and the Australian Capital Territory's Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment⁹. **We recommend that the Commonwealth establish an independent environment commissioner role to act as a watchdog over environmental issues, including threatened species conservation.**

Message 3) Need for adequate funding. Relevant TOR (h)

The amount of funding available for threatened species conservation is woefully inadequate and this situation has worsened considerably in the past five years. Proportional spending of the Federal budget on Environment and Biodiversity decreased by 35% between 2013/14 and 2016/17, including an almost halving of the amount spent on the Federal environment department as a proportion of total Commonwealth spending¹⁰. Much of these cuts have been to Landcare and associated programs, including \$471 million in the 2014-15 budget⁸. Australia is ranked #38 for the world's most highly underfunded countries for biodiversity conservation (one of only five developed nations in the 40 worst¹¹) and the situation in Australia has worsened since that study was published.

In addition to programmatic funding for threatened species conservation, there is also a fundamental need for a well-resourced Commonwealth Department of the Environment to undertake threatened species assessments and other key functions related to biodiversity conservation. The ability of the Department to perform these functions has been severely undermined by recent budget cuts, including a projected loss of 60 of its ~200 full time staff in the 2018/19 financial year¹².

Analysis by the National Environmental Science Program Threatened Species Recovery (TSR) Hub indicates that Commonwealth spending related to threatened species conservation may be in the order of AU\$45–415M per year (see the TSR Hub submission on adequacy of funding streams). In contrast, the United States spent US\$1.5B (AU\$2.03B) on threatened species conservation in 2016¹³, which is approximately 5–45 times Australia's expenditure. Based on the analysis from the TSR Hub submission on funding streams, **we recommend that direct spending on threatened species conservation is increased to a minimum of \$1.2–1.5B per year to align with spending by other developed western economies.**

⁸ <https://www.pce.parliament.nz/>

⁹ <http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/>

¹⁰ ACF (2018) Background brief: environment spending in Australia. Australian Conservation Foundation. <https://tinyurl.com/yd2ojnvr>

¹¹ Waldron A et al. (2013) Targeting global conservation funding to limit immediate biodiversity declines. *PNAS*, 110, 12144–12148. <http://www.pnas.org/content/110/29/12144>

¹² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-04/environment-department-to-lose-60-jobs-key-to-threatened-species/9722560>

¹³ https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/2016_Expenditures_Report.pdf