

Biodiversity Council Year 1 Impact Report

Dec 2023

Image: Melbourne's Critically Endangered Basalt plains grassland. Photo by Libby Rumpf

Australia is one of the world's few mega-diverse countries. The continent is home to an extraordinary diversity of species, most of which are found nowhere else on Earth. Since European colonisation impeded First People from fulfilling their role as custodians of Country, Australia has become the world leader in the extinction of mammals, and we are ranked second for the overall loss of biodiversity. We have had three animals declared extinct since 2009, there are 19 Australian ecosystems showing signs of collapse and our national list of threatened species and ecological communities has exploded to more than 2000 with the status of many more species currently unclear and threats to biodiversity left largely unchecked.

Biodiversity loss is both a major existential threat to life on earth and also an economic time bomb. The World Economic Forum has identified biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse as the fastest accelerating risks to the global economy and among the top ten risks for the next decade.

Nature in Australia is in crisis. Our native plants, animals and ecosystems are being decimated by a range of threats, the most serious of which are: habitat destruction and modification, invasive species, inappropriate fire regimes, pollution, and climate change related impacts.

The Biodiversity Council was established to mobilise world-leading expertise within Australian universities along with experts from the broader conservation sector and First Nations knowledge holders to address Australia's biodiversity crisis.

Our mission is to be a trusted expert voice communicating accurate information on all aspects of biodiversity to the Australian people, to ensure biodiversity and Country prosper.

As outlined below, our first year has been a big one - where we have grown the council and built a national organisation - to shape the discourse on major biodiversity policy matters across the country.

And whilst a lot has been achieved in our first year, there is much more to do. Nature and Country need voices like the Biodiversity Council to champion evidence based solutions and build awareness within the general public of the threats and opportunities facing nature in Australia. And we couldn't do the work we do without the backing of our partners, supporters and donors.



The council has vocally called for action to conserve Melbourne's Basalt Plains grasslands. Without them there is no hope for self-sustaining populations of dependent grassland species like the newly rediscovered grassland earless dragon. Image: Nick Clemann



Biodiversity Councillor Brendan Wintle on ABC TV discussing the importance of saving Victoria's grasslands. Image: ABC

Impact by the numbers:

- **11.5 million people reached** through Biodiversity Council media and engagement activities
- **1,800+ media articles** generated by the Biodiversity Council.
- **23 media releases** covering diverse issues from insects in the Australian Alps, to conservation strategies for our most imperilled mammals, government spending on threatened species, community support for nature conservation and culturally significant species..
- **10 formal submissions** to governmental policy processes, ranging from the establishment of a nature repair market, to NSW law reform and amendments to the national Water Act.
- **14 reports and fact sheets** ranging from the key actions everyday Australians can take to protect nature through to major reports on the reform of national environmental law (forthcoming)
- **37 interdisciplinary councillors** with a wide variety of backgrounds and cultural knowledge
- **150+ early career researchers and emerging leaders trained** on effective environmental communication
- **1 Senate Inquiry appearance** by Lead Councillor Professor Ross Thompson who was quoted throughout the final inquiry report
- **97% of Australians want to see stronger action for nature** based on Biodiversity Council's inaugural Biodiversity Concerns Survey (and yet only 34% understand that we are in an extinction crisis, highlighting the urgent communication challenge in front of us).

Driving evidence-based policy change by mobilising and amplifying experts

A key value of the council is that we draw together leading experts in ecology, law, policy, social science and Indigenous knowledge from across institutions nationally and support them to collaborate in order to identify and raise awareness of key limitations of Australia's environmental policies and government programs. We are nonpartisan and work with decision makers and lawmakers across the political spectrum to promote evidence-based policies and solutions that will help halt nationwide biodiversity loss and restore nature in Australia and the region.

In our first year we have coordinated 10 submissions to formal government policy processes that have been influential in shaping the discourse on major policy matters - whether it be the development of a national nature repair market, reform of our national environmental laws, the protection of the Lake Eyre Basin or reforms to the Murray Darling Basin Plan.



Coverage in the Australian of the Biodiversity Council's submission on the need for protection of Lake Eyre Basin.



Professor Ross Thompson from the University of Canberra giving evidence to the federal Senate Inquiry on the Restoring our Rivers Bill as a Biodiversity Council representative.



Some of the Biodiversity Council reports and factsheets released in 2023

Our team works tirelessly behind the scenes to shape the decisions that matter - engaging directly with Ministers, their staff, parliamentarians and senior public officials to ensure that the best case is put forward for genuinely nature-positive reforms. The Council's work has been referenced in speeches to parliament and relied upon in inquiries by the Australian Senate. We have developed 14 separate reports and factsheets including a landmark survey measuring the Australian communities attitudes towards nature.

The Biodiversity Council is well regarded by governments across Australia and has quickly established a reputation of providing independent, trustworthy, pragmatic, evidence based insight into biodiversity matters of key national significance. Our advice is sought out by parliamentarians across the political spectrum on nature related matters. We were invited by the South Australian Government to provide recommendations on how they can become nature-positive and meet their obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Professor Ross Thompson, Chair of Water Science, Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra

“As a councillor, one of the most profound benefits of the Biodiversity Council to date has been support in developing and submitting submissions on policy. We are all aware of the importance of this process to support high quality, evidence-driven policy, but all too often competing demands on time mean that submissions are hurried or deadlines are missed. The Council has had an essential role in sharing with the universities the timing of submissions, coordinating academics across universities and providing a high level of expertise in preparing submissions.”

Honorary Associate Professor Peter Burnett, ANU College of Law

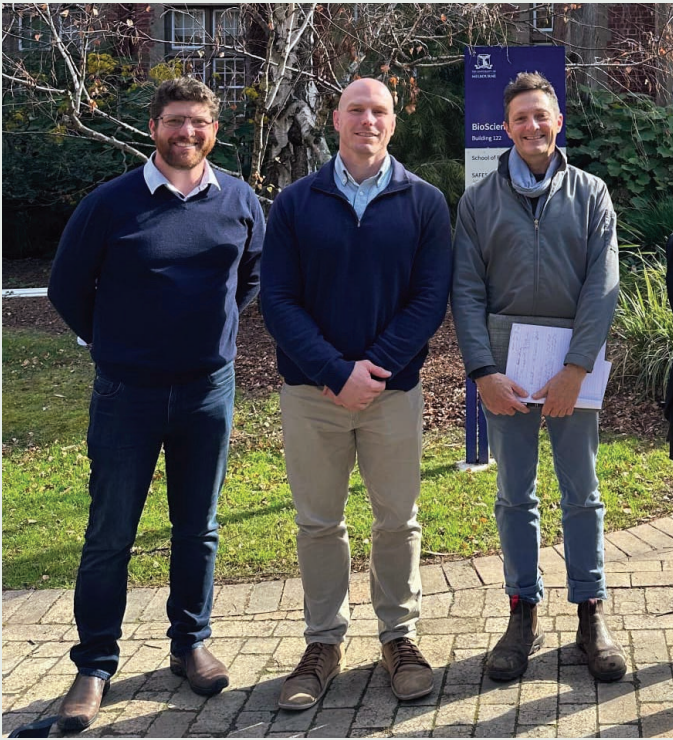
“Membership of the Biodiversity Council has proven invaluable for my interdisciplinary work on environmental law and policy. Although still young, the council is already well respected and tapping into council networks has opened new channels for me to share knowledge and work on new ideas.”

Dan Rogers, Principal Advisor, Biodiversity Science and Knowledge, Department for Environment and Water, South Australian Government.

“As part of the South Australia’s State of Environment report for 2023, the SA Government commissioned the Biodiversity Council to write an independent paper on the state of native biodiversity, and recommendations for policymakers to address biodiversity decline. We chose to partner with the Biodiversity Council due to the exemplary reputation of its Councillors, who speak with independence and backed by scientific rigour. I hope that we can continue to work together on matters of biodiversity policy and strategy in the future, and continue to draw on their advice and expertise.”



The Biodiversity Council was commissioned by the South Australian Government to provide recommendations on what conservation interventions are likely to deliver the greatest benefit for biodiversity in South Australia in a changing climate, considering available resourcing.



Case study: Building ambition within government and parliament for stronger national environmental laws

The Biodiversity Council has played a central role in providing scientific and evidence based advice to the government on environmental law reform, being a central member of the government’s standards working group through to June 2023 when the process completed. Following this the council has continued to make the case for stronger national environmental laws, meeting with Minister Plibersek’s office and department at the University of Melbourne

and briefing a range of parliamentarians and their staff on major reform proposals. The council was a part of the launch of the first ever Parliamentary Friends of Conservation, which will be a cross-party body that aims to build ambition for conservation efforts nationally.

In December 2023 the council released a landmark report ‘Delivering on nature positive: 10 essential elements of national environmental law reform to inform the public and legislators on the key changes needed needed to fix Australia’s broken environmental laws to stop the rapid loss of nature.

*(Top left) Meeting Senator David Pocock at UoM.
 (Top right) Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek with Executive Director James Trezise at the launch of Parliamentary Friends of Conservation
 (Below) Meeting with Minister Plibersek’s Office and DCCEEW in Melbourne.*





Advocating new models for protecting culturally significant species

Effective inclusion of First people’s expertise and perspectives is fundamental for the Biodiversity Council.

A key area of policy advocacy by the council this year has been calling for a mechanism for the protection of species and entities of cultural significance under national environmental law.

Our national legislation only provides protection to species that have declined to the point that they are threatened with extinction. This leaves many species and places of cultural importance without significant protection and makes it difficult for Traditional Custodians to fulfil their cultural obligations to care for Country.

Dr Jack Pascoe, Biodiversity Council Co-chief Councillor and Yuin man, University of Melbourne

“Indigenous people need a way of being able to care for Culturally Significant Entities. The species and place are integral to our cultural practice. Having the Biodiversity Council advocate for this shift in policy has shone a light on the issue and we hope this will contribute to seeing it realised.

“Through its commitment of a 30% Indigenous membership, the Biodiversity Council provides



Yuin man and Co-chief Councillor Dr Jack Pascoe

a platform for a range of First People’s voices. Working directly with the council as whole, the Indigenous members are able to ensure that all of the council’s positions are based on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and the best available Western Science. Together, these knowledge systems will provide the most effective solutions for Caring for Country.”

Top image: Gurrandji painting of Gurawal leading people away from rising sea level. Image: Back to Country. The council used the story of Gurawal the whale to illustrate the failure of current environmental laws to support Traditional Custodians to fulfill obligations to care for culturally significant species and places.

We are raising community awareness and support for action through the media

The Biodiversity Council's media and social media activity has reached more than 12.5 million people to enhance community understanding of the biodiversity crisis and to drive support for evidence-based solutions.

We are now established as a trusted conduit for journalists to find relevant experts and evidence for stories.

Our experts help the community understand the significance of the biodiversity events of the day, through accessible analysis and public commentary.

We actively build demand for biodiversity news topics and create new media opportunities for important but otherwise unreported topics. For example, the council generated the only Australian coverage of:

- Environmental law reforms needed to support Traditional custodians to care for culturally significant species and places.
- Australia's internationally poor performance in undertaking conservation assessments of endemic plant species, leaving many unique Australian species at risk.
- The Totemic Species in Schools program which combines conservation action, Indigenous knowledge and meets science curriculum requirements.
- Climate impacts to Australia's alpine invertebrates

Our newsletter communicates the latest science and analysis is opened at twice the industry average rate and many recipients have replied to say that they feel better informed as a result or to offer support.

Professor Sarah Legge, Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University

"The Biodiversity Council has been incredibly helpful and effective at generating and amplifying media coverage for my research and commentary on biodiversity issues. The coverage has included high profile, national audience opportunities, such as the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald, and a segment on the 7.30 Report. The council has also been extremely nimble, responding very rapidly to public interest in specific topics by repackaging relevant findings from past research."

Lead Councillor Sarah Bekessy meeting with Melbourne Lord Mayor Sally Capp and her team to discuss the importance of urban wildlife

Cairns Post
We're for you

Aussies want nature saved

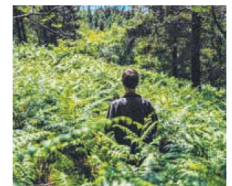
Almost all Australians want more action to protect nature, new research reveals.

Ninety-seven per cent of Australians agree that more action on biodiversity is needed, and 58 per cent believe "a lot more" or "a great deal more" is needed.

The Biodiversity Council survey of 4 0 0 0 people found that about one in three (36 per cent) said they had a strong relationship with nature.

Most enjoyed spending time in nature (84 per cent), nature was important for their personal recreation and relaxation (79 per cent), they got outdoors whenever they could (76 per cent), nature helped with everyday stress (75 per cent) and most (61 per cent) felt a part of nature.

Eighty-three per cent of Australians agreed that it was important for them to know that nature was looked after.



We are providing an evidence base to underpin accurate public discourse and support advocacy by other groups

In order for the public to be in a position to make good evidence-based decisions about biodiversity they need access to reliable information. A key role of the Biodiversity Council is to increase the accessibility of robust evidence on biodiversity issues and solutions, and to counter misinformation. We saw with the climate crisis that extensive misinformation led to many years of inadequate or ineffective action, something we cannot afford when tackling the biodiversity crisis.

The Biodiversity Council has drawn together scientific evidence and first Nations perspectives on biodiversity topics of key policy or societal relevance, and made it accessible in order to underpin public discourse with robust evidence. The evidence drawn together by the council has been widely cited in the media by environmental advocacy groups, public institutions and interested members of the public. Our landmark 10 simple actions people can take to protect nature has provided a range of pathways for everyday Australians to engage in conservation activities.

Our survey of community attitudes to nature and of support for increased actions to conserve biodiversity are also regularly cited by a wide range of pro-nature groups, such as community and

landcare groups, as providing supporting evidence that everyone has a role to play in caring for nature and that 97% of people want to see more action to help nature.

We are upskilling early career experts and others to increase their impact through the media

The council equips early-career scientists and other potential biodiversity champions with media skills to enable them to raise the profile of their findings, and to increase the diversity of biodiversity experts speaking publicly for biodiversity.

In its first year the council has provided face-to-face formal media training to over 80 early career researchers and other future leaders and to hundreds more online. It also provided individual guidance and coaching to several early career researchers on showcasing their work in the media. The success of these campaigns and the skills that these young scientists gained will provide ongoing benefits as these cohorts grow into tomorrow's leaders.

The council's work has also been pivotal in galvanising local action groups across the country. From the Victor Harbour community association - who were inspired to set up a new local biodiversity group based on the council's Biodiversity Concerns survey through to the multiple local governments and community groups utilising the council's work to campaign for better domestic cat containment policies, the council's work is reaching the grassroots in lots of exciting ways.



Case study: Growing community support for saving wildlife by keeping cats at home

The Biodiversity Council, working with allies, packaged analysis and findings from our lead councillors on the impact of pet cats in Australia and key recommended management strategies. This provided the evidence base through which grassroots campaigns were launched in NSW and WA to improve cat containment laws and evidence through letter to the editor and increasing attention on pet cat containment, including from unusual allies such as the Country Women's Association. The work was amplified by its widespread media coverage, including appearing on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. There is now a NSW upper house inquiry looking into the issue of pet cat containment on the back of this coverage.

The Age and Sydney Morning Herald featured the council's work and Biodiversity Council Communications Manager Jaana Dielenberg on their front pages.



(Above) Council Communication and Engagement Manager, Jaana Dielenberg, providing media training to early career researchers and staff at the University of Canberra. Image: James Trezise



PhD Candidate Tash Harrison shared her research nationally on the ABC TV evening news. Her findings have implications for a common conservation strategy for highly threatened mammals. Image: ABC News

PhD Candidate Tash Harrison, The University of Western Australia

“The Biodiversity Council was invaluable in communicating my research to a wider audience. Their communication manager provided excellent frameworks and support in preparing pieces to share with media (print, online, radio, TV, the Conversation), and helped to increase the reach of these articles.

As someone with very little experience working with media, Jaana took great care in preparing me and advising me what to expect during interviews. As a result, I felt that I could accurately and confidently convey my work to a non-scientific audience, and I was able to share my findings Nationally. Having had Jaana guide me through the experience, I feel more prepared and confident to tackle future media engagement.



The Biodiversity Council was founded by 11 universities including its host the University of Melbourne, with support from The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ross Trust, Trawalla Foundation, The Rendere Trust, Isaacson Davis Foundation, Coniston Charitable Trust and Angela Whitbread.

