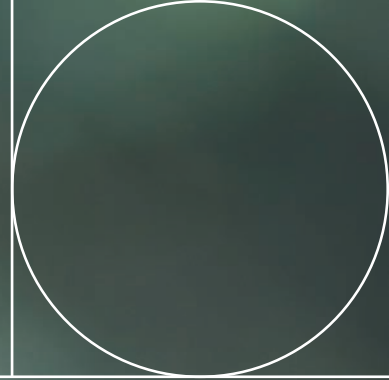




**Biodiversity
Council**



Safeguarding nature: Priorities for the next Australian Government

Biodiversity Council

Feb 2025

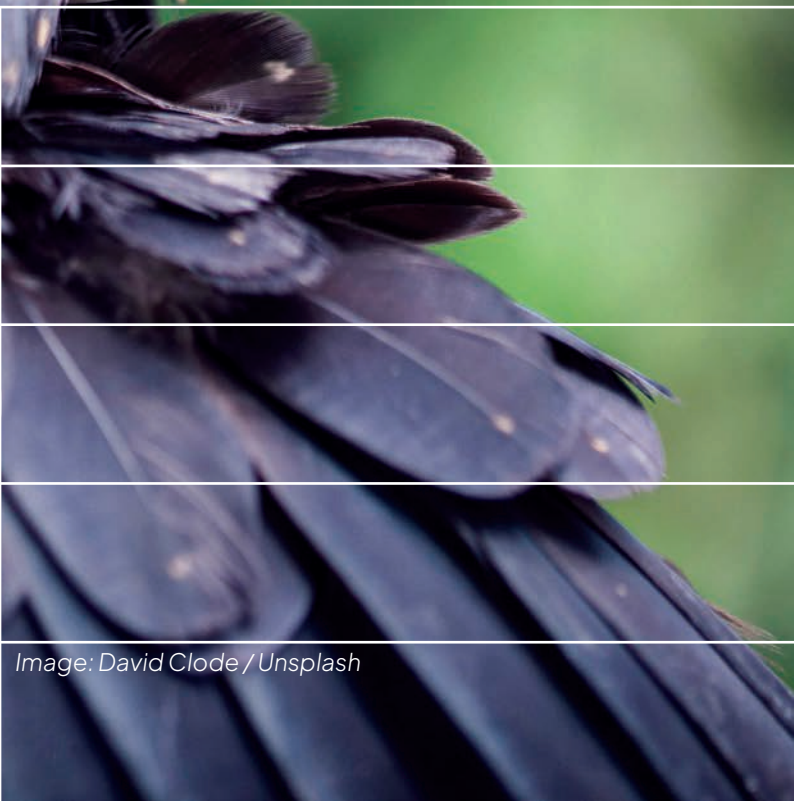


Image: David Clode / Unsplash

Acknowledgement

The Biodiversity Council acknowledges the First Peoples of the lands and waters of Australia, and pays respect to their Elders, past, present and future and expresses gratitude for long and ongoing custodianship of Country.

About the Biodiversity Council

The Biodiversity Council is an independent expert group founded by 11 Australian universities to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. Our mission is to be a trusted expert voice communicating accurate information on Australia's most pressing biodiversity issues to the community, businesses and governments to ensure biodiversity and Country prosper. Our 39 Biodiversity Councillors are leading Australian experts, in science, Indigenous knowledge, law, policy, economics, behaviour change and communications.

Further information

For more information

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Business as usual is causing the rapid decline of nature in Australia.

Current rates of biodiversity loss jeopardise the long-term sustainability of human health, food production, water supply, the economy, climate resilience and our Australian way of life.

Reforms needed to safeguard and restore nature:

**Strengthen Australia's
Environmental laws**



**Empower Indigenous
Australians to manage
Country and benefit from
Traditional Knowledge**



**Increase investment in
the protection and
restoration of nature**



**Ensure nature is central to
decision-making across
business and government**





Critically Endangered spotted handfish. Image: David Clode

Strengthen Australia's Environmental laws

Key policies needed

1. Implement robust national environmental standards to ensure decisions deliver absolute improvements for every matter of national environmental significance.
2. Establish a truly independent and strong EPA with an appropriately qualified board and board-appointed CEO. The new EPA must operate transparently with full accountability to the Environment Minister and Parliament.
3. Create a legal mechanism for the listing of species and ecosystems of significance for Traditional Custodians as Culturally Significant Entities.
4. Establish legal frameworks to ensure critical habitats for threatened species are mapped and protected across all land tenures.
5. Reform environmental legislation so that it is not trumped by Regional Forest Agreements which undermine the protection of forest-dependent threatened biodiversity.
6. Legislate the requirement that developments avoid or mitigate all impacts before biodiversity offsets may be considered. Enact lists of 'matters that are able to be offset', based on scientific evidence, and matters that may never be offset.
7. Prepare and resource the implementation of streamlined and effective recovery strategies and threat abatement plans.

Australia's national environmental law, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, needs urgent overhaul. The 2021 State of Environment Report shows that Australia's environment is poor and still deteriorating,¹ and 17 Australian ecosystems from the tropics to temperate regions are showing signs of collapse.² From 2000–2017, more than 7.7 million hectares of threatened species habitat have been destroyed, affecting 1,390 (85% of all) terrestrial threatened species. The majority of this clearing (93%) was unregulated under national environmental law.³ Since the Act was established, threatened species populations have been declining by approximately 4% a year.⁴

An independent review of the Act (the Samuel Review), released in 2021, found that it has been failing our threatened plants, animals, and ecological communities, and needs fundamental reform.⁵ Without substantial environmental law reform and greater enforcement, the Great Barrier Reef, koala, Maugean skate, spotted handfish, Eyre Peninsula southern emu-wren,⁶ Western Australian peatlands,⁷ and other ecosystems and species are in severe danger of collapse and extinction.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) focusses on bureaucratic processes, rather than delivering environmental outcomes. Decision-makers have broad discretion to consider economic or political factors unrelated to conservation needs. Implementation and enforcement are weak. It is not surprising that many in the community do not trust the EPBC Act to provide the safeguards that our biodiversity needs.⁸

A key shortcoming of the current law is that the negative impacts of native forest logging are exempted from the provisions of the EPBC Act. Regional Forest Agreement forestry operations are not subject to the EPBC Act at all,⁹ despite the documented evidence that native forest logging has significant adverse effects on a wide range of Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered species¹⁰ and on threatened ecological communities and ecosystems.¹¹ It is also clear that the current reserve system is inadequate to protect biodiversity.¹²

Forestry operations should not be exempt from national environmental law. Image: Jaana Dielenberg



To provide clearer guardrails for decision-making and to ensure that positive environmental outcomes are delivered, the Samuel Review recommended strong, legally enforceable National Environmental Standards, the removal of the exemption for RFA forestry operations, and the establishment of an independent EPA to serve as an 'honest cop on the beat'.¹³ Four years have passed since the review, and no progress has been made by either Coalition or Labor governments in implementing its recommendations.¹⁴

Strong new institutions are needed to create trust in the administration of the EPBC Act. A well-resourced and independent EPA is needed to ensure decisions are consistent with the national standards and not subject to political interference.¹⁵ The EPA must have strong governance to ensure transparency and accountability. This includes having a CEO who is appointed by an independent board that properly represents interests and stakeholders across the community.

A new EPA alone cannot cure the shortcomings of the current EPBC Act. Stronger legal protections are also needed to limit the ongoing habitat loss for terrestrial species and ecological communities listed under the Act. Critical habitats are the areas where a threatened species lives that are fundamental to its survival, conservation, and recovery.¹⁶ Australia has a national framework for listing, protecting and managing critical habitats on Commonwealth land, but it is ineffective because it does not require listing and protection on other land tenures. Consequently, only five critical habitats have been added to the Federal Register of Critical Habitat in 23 years, with the last being added in 2005.¹⁷ To prevent further extinctions, all areas that are critical habitats for threatened species must be protected from all activities that would destroy or degrade them. Areas of critical habitat must be identified in publicly available maps with clear information about what activities are prohibited from occurring within them.¹⁸ The recent decision to facilitate the destruction of known habitat for the

*Habitat loss is the greatest threat to koalas and exacerbates the impact of other threats like climate change and attacks from domestic dogs.
Image: Douglas Lima*



Eyre Peninsula southern emu-wren,¹⁹ a species with probably fewer than 1000 individuals, would never have proceeded if that habitat had been listed as critical habitat.²⁰ The EPBC Act must also have strong penalty provisions to deter people from degrading or damaging critical habitats, and all levels of government must undertake adequate monitoring and compliance.

Another key weakness of the current Act is that it enables habitat to be cleared provided there is 'compensation' for the destruction, often referred to as offsetting.²¹ The Act does not explicitly mention offsets, but since 2010, 50–85% of approvals under the Act have required offsets.²² Despite their extensive use, offset requirements are only set out in a non-binding policy. The EPBC Environmental Offsets Policy states that offsets should only be used after a proponent has demonstrated that they have avoided potential impacts as much as possible and minimised unavoidable impacts.²³ However, the Samuel Review found that, instead of being the last resort, offsets have become the default approach to addressing impacts on biodiversity.²⁴ This is a problem because they aren't working to reduce biodiversity loss. Multiple audits and reviews have found that offset schemes fail to compensate for biodiversity loss²⁵ and that reliance on offsets actively contributes to net biodiversity loss.

Given all the documented problems with offsets, they should be governed under the EPBC Act, not a non-binding policy. The Act should set out the requirements for offsets, including ensuring that offsets can only be used as a last resort and where it is actually possible to compensate for the impacts on nature.²⁶ Retaining the nature we have left also gives Australia a much better chance of achieving our global emissions reduction commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement, and reversing nature decline by 2030, which we committed to under the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022.

Recovering threatened species and ecological communities and reducing key threats are key priorities. To maximise the long-term survival in the wild of nationally threatened species and ecologically communities, the Federal Government prepares recovery plans and conservation advices.²⁷ These documents include information about species' biology, where it occurs in the landscape and what threats it faces, and the research and management actions needed to protect and recover it.²⁸ Only 9.5% of nationally threatened species have a current recovery plan and fewer still are adequately funded.²⁹ Recovery planning requires urgent reform to ensure each threatened species and ecological community is supported by a contemporary recovery strategy. Recovery strategies must state who is responsible for implementing and reporting each element, and what funding is required. Improved threat abatement plans should be used to tackle major national-scale threats that require proactive management, such as invasive species and 'wrong-way' fire, based on a systematic prioritisation of high-risk threats.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a complex relationship with Country that extends through Lore to kinship (spiritually and physically) with plants, animals, water, and ecological communities and which creates obligations to follow Lore through reciprocal care. This can create additional responsibilities for some species and requires greater recognition of their significance. These culturally significant entities should be protected under environmental law. This would complement Indigenous heritage listing and would need to be accompanied by a realignment of policy and practice to promote the traditional management of culturally significant entities.



Sea Country planning Image: Nicolas Rakotopare

Empower Indigenous Australians to manage Country and benefit from Traditional Knowledge

Key policies needed

1. Invest \$3 million per year over 5 years to establish the National Indigenous Environment Research Network.
2. Invest \$4 million over 3 years to establish the Southern Australian Aboriginal Land and Sea Management Alliance.
3. Appoint a Commissioner for Country to provide a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about management of Country and cultural heritage to the Minister and Federal environment department.
4. Undertake participatory planning that embeds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decision-making and enables holistic management of Country.
5. Ratify the Nagoya protocol and develop a nationally consistent legal framework to ensure that traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources is accessed with free, prior informed consent and that benefits arising from those resources are equitably shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
6. Increase the per hectare spend on Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) to adequately resource conservation and cultural land management objectives, increase support for Indigenous land and sea management organisations including resourcing of operations, business and administrative support and upskilling career pathways for Indigenous rangers, and bolster staffing capacity within government environment agencies to support engagement with Indigenous organisations and the delivery of the IPA program.

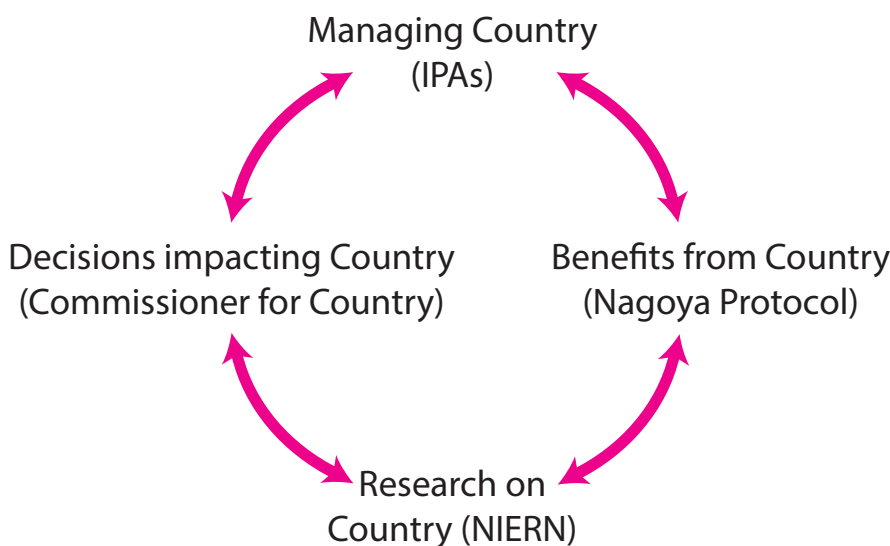
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are custodians of a knowledge system that connects the spiritual and physical elements of Country and describes a detailed understanding of how and why Country should be managed.³⁰ This custodianship supported Australia's high level of biodiversity for thousands of generations. Governments are increasingly relying on the Indigenous Estate and Traditional Ecological Knowledge for monitoring and recovering species, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often do not have a strong voice in the national science agenda, are often not given a real say in decisions that affect them and their Country, and are not adequately resourced to manage Country.

The National Indigenous Environment Research Network has been initiated and developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to foster self-determination in environmental research.³¹ The Network has been designed as an Indigenous-led strategic organization to ensure 'right-way science' (best practice partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and researchers) and to influence research priorities, design, implementation and funding.³² The Network is in its early stages and requires government investment to become established.³³

To improve outcomes for Country, Indigenous knowledge and research must influence decision-making. A Commissioner for Country would be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who provides a voice for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples about the management

of Country and cultural heritage to the Federal Government and the general public.³⁴ The Commissioner would support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as land managers and ensure that decision-making processes for the natural environment and cultural heritage are culturally appropriate and co-designed with Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should benefit from their Traditional Knowledge and its economic value. The Closing-the-Gap reports show failures to improve economic and social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.³⁵ Despite this, Australia lacks national legal frameworks to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities benefit when they share their traditional knowledge and it leads to commercial products,³⁶ including foods, medicines, biotechnology and cosmetics.³⁷ The *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization* is a global agreement that aims to share the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way.³⁸ Australia signed the Nagoya Protocol in 2012 but has made little progress in implementing it.³⁹ In the absence of nationally consistent protective measures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in most Australian jurisdictions are dependent upon goodwill for benefit-sharing when their knowledge is utilised.⁴⁰ The government should facilitate the establishment of an independent National Competent Authority that supports local and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander



The policy changes proposed address four key areas that are important to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to manage Country and benefit from Traditional Knowledge.

An Indigenous ranger inspecting a Tjakura (great desert skink) site after a cultural burn. Anangu Country image: Jaana Dielenberg. Tjakura inset image: Nicolas Rakotopare



communities to control and make decisions over local access and benefit sharing arrangements and indigenous knowledge.⁴¹

For over 20 years, the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Ltd (NAILSMA) has assisted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in northern Australia to manage their country sustainably for future generations. NAILSMA provides Indigenous leadership in the delivery of large-scale and complex programs that meet the environmental, social, cultural and economic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across northern Australia.

The Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA), which began approximately 10 years ago, performs a similar function as NAILSMA in Australia's desert country. IDA is focussed on ensuring that Aboriginal peoples are enabled to collaboratively manage Australia's desert country and through this, to realise their social, cultural, environmental and economic aspirations. There is growing interest in developing an organisation for southern Australia that is similar to NAILSMA and IDA.

The Southern Australian Aboriginal Land and Sea Management Alliance (SAALSMA) is a newly formed non-profit organisation dedicated to advocating for, facilitating, and brokering collaborations and knowledge exchange among southern Aboriginal communities and key stakeholders. SAALSMA's mission is to advance southern Aboriginal environmental and economic priorities. SAALSMA needs support to develop and grow.

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) cover 90 million hectares of land and 6 million hectares of sea, representing over 50% of Australia's National Reserve System.⁴² Studies evaluating the performance of the IPA and Working on Country programs have highlighted the success of the programs across a broad range of outcomes.⁴³ A 2016 evaluation found that between 2009 - 2015 investment of \$35.2 million from government generated environmental, economic and social benefits of \$96.5 million.⁴⁴ The government should fund the creation of new IPAs and increase investment to resource existing IPAs adequately.

All of Australia's marine turtle species are threatened and culturally significant.

Indigenous Rangers play a vital role in their survival through a range of activities, such as controlling invasive species like feral pigs and foxes which destroy nest and eat turtle eggs, and collecting ghost nets.

*Image: Bethany McCarter
CC BY 4.0 / Wikimdia*



Feral pigs in Bladensburg National Park, Qld. Threats like climate change, invasive species and changed fire patterns do not stop at park boundaries. Conservation areas need to be actively managed to benefit native biodiversity. Image: Danicalockett CC-BY-NC/iNaturalist

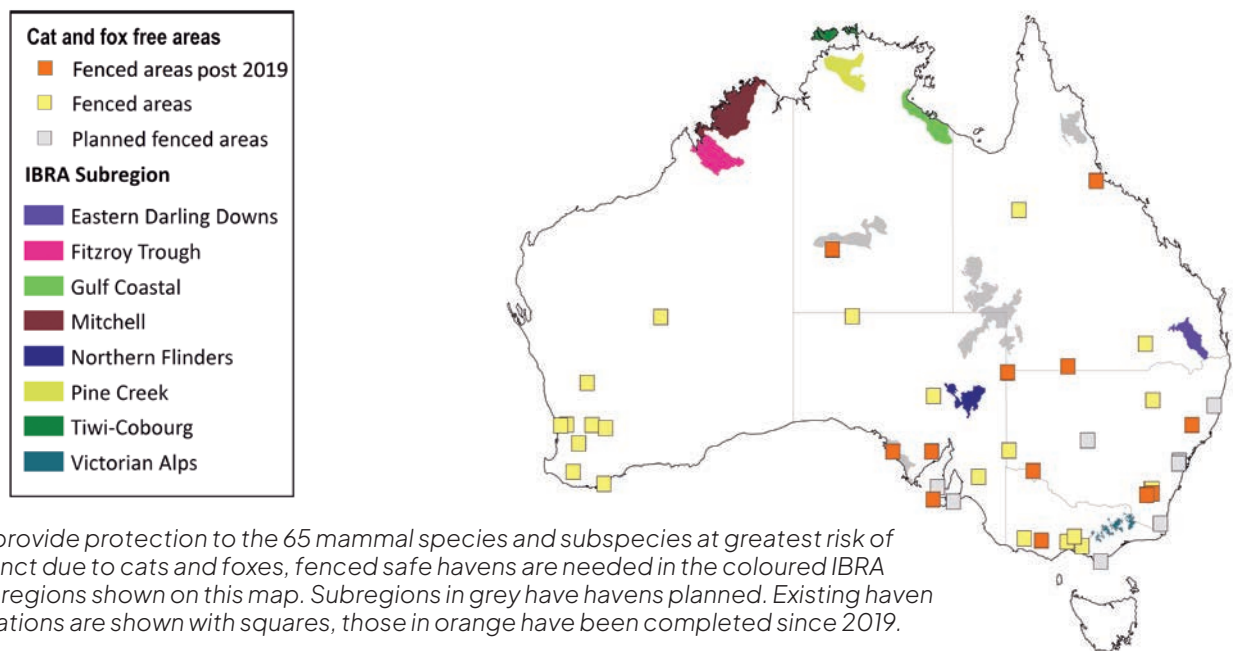


Increase investment in the protection and restoration of nature

Key policies needed

1. Commit to investing at least 1% of current government expenditure in nature protection and restoration, including:
 - a. \$2.5 billion per year to address the extinction crisis by tackling major threats, such as invasive species, and restoring and protecting threatened species on land and in our oceans.
 - b. \$1 billion per year over 5 years to protect and manage 30% of land by 2030. This should include right-way fire management and control of priority invasive species.
 - c. \$2 billion per year over 30 years to restore 13 million hectares of degraded land and ensure that all of Australia's degraded terrestrial ecosystems have 30% vegetation coverage.
 - d. \$500 million per year over 5 years to develop and begin implementing a roadmap to restore marine and coastal ecosystems.
 - e. \$500 million from 2027 over 10 years to remove constraints to environmental water delivery in inland river systems
 - f. \$200 million per year for restoring nature to Australia's towns and cities, with a focus on climate resilience and urban biodiversity restoration.
 - g. \$200 million per year to build the resilience of the natural environment and climate adaptation.
 - h. \$20 million to expand the safe haven network in priority locations.
2. Increase funding for biodiversity research, including:
 - a. \$20 million per year over 10 years for experimental threatened species management research testing out conservation inventions by recovery teams.
 - b. \$20 million per year over 10 years to complete the identification and listing of Australia's threatened ecological communities.
 - c. \$10 million per year over 10 years to support research on nature metrics that will support the nature repair market.
 - d. \$8 million per year over 5 years to research poorly known invertebrates, reptiles and fish to assess their conservation status.
 - e. \$7 million per year for ongoing monitoring of threatened species and ecological communities through a targeted centre, to provide quality data to guide recovery planning, policy and investment decisions.⁴⁵

Priority locations for future fenced safe havens to prevent mammal extinctions



To provide protection to the 65 mammal species and subspecies at greatest risk of extinct due to cats and foxes, fenced safe havens are needed in the coloured IBRA subregions shown on this map. Subregions in grey have havens planned. Existing haven locations are shown with squares, those in orange have been completed since 2019.

At least half of Australia's GDP (49.3% or \$892.8bn) is dependent on nature and its services.⁴⁶ Therefore the economy is a subsidiary of a healthy environment, not the other way around. However, Australia has consistently underinvested in the protection and recovery of nature, relative to other developed nations and relative to its importance to our economy.⁴⁷ In 2024, only 0.1% of the Federal budget was spent on nature protection,⁴⁸ and the majority of Australians want far more to be spent.⁴⁹ The Australian Government can afford to fund environmental protection and repair, just as it funds other high priorities.⁵⁰ It cannot rely on business and philanthropy to address funding shortfalls, because economics and experience demonstrate that, in the absence of government intervention, too little is done to conserve it.⁵¹

The government must provide sufficient, sustained funding to recover our threatened species. Currently, more than 2,200 species and ecological communities are nationally listed as threatened with extinction.⁵² Studies show that targeted investment can stop and reverse declining trajectories of wildlife, with the United States having delisted 39 species due to well-funded threatened species recovery programs.⁵³ Annual spending on threatened species programs is currently only 15% of what is needed to avoid extinctions and recover threatened species.⁵⁴ We need a dramatic increase in public investment in conservation and threatened

species recovery, noting that this spending will not only prevent avoidable extinctions but will uplift many regional communities.

Additional investment is also needed to ensure we complete the National Reserve System. Australia has committed to the global target of protecting at least 30% of land, inland waters and marine areas by 2030.⁵⁵ To achieve this goal, it is not enough to simply reserve cheap, available land or reserve parts of the sea where few resources are being extracted. To effectively halt biodiversity loss, the protected areas must represent all natural diversity, be of sufficient size and well-connected with other parks and reserves, and be effectively managed.⁵⁶ The government should establish a new dedicated fund to purchase land of high biodiversity importance to create new public, privately owned or Indigenous Protected Areas.

The government should also continue to expand the network of safe havens in two ways. First, ongoing expansion of predator-free islands and mainland sites with predator-exclusion fences, to protect more threatened species from introduced cats and foxes. Research has provided guidance on priority regions that would expand protection across the set of over 65 mammal species and subspecies most at risk of extinction from cats and foxes.⁵⁷ This information, combined with input from conservation managers, should be used to shape investment in new havens. For example, new havens in northern Australia could offer protection to several species

that are currently not, or minimally represented in the existing network. Second, the safe haven concept should be expanded to include animal species and subspecies affected by invasive species other than cats and foxes. Recent research has identified these critical safe haven requirements.⁵⁸

It is also not enough to simply protect intact vegetation parks and reserves; if Australia is to put biodiversity on a path to recovery, it must strategically restore degraded ecosystems in ways that are responsive to climate change. Further, many ecosystems are degraded from the impacts of invasive species, such as rabbits, tramp ants, pigs, trout, foxes, cats and myrtle rust; integrated management of invasive species over large landscapes should be part of the restoration effort. Without high-quality restoration, the ecosystem services provided by our soils, vegetation communities, water systems, and faunal communities will be impaired⁵⁹. The government should commit to restoring 30% of native vegetation in areas with extensive clearing to maintain species diversity and ecosystem function,⁶⁰ and should develop similar targets for freshwater and marine ecosystems.

There needs to be substantially greater investment in the conservation of marine species and ecosystems. New research has identified that the cost of preventing extinctions and recovering threatened marine species listed under the EPBC Act is over \$300 million per year. This does not include broader restoration of threatened marine ecosystems, such as coral and shellfish

reefs, seagrass meadows and estuaries. These ecosystems provide valuable services - they protect our coasts from erosion, sustain and maintain culture of indigenous communities, harbour commercially important fish species, store carbon and support tourism.⁶¹ Research shows that restoration of Australian estuaries alone would cost \$450 million but would be returned in less than 5 years.⁶² There are many projects being undertaken to trial and refine techniques to restore seagrass, shellfish reefs and kelp forests, but they require further funding to scale-up. Australia should develop a roadmap to transition from small-scale projects to landscape-scale approaches to coastal and marine restoration.⁶³

There needs to be substantially greater investment in the conservation of marine species and ecosystems. New research has identified that the cost of preventing extinctions and recovering threatened marine species listed under the EPBC Act is over \$300 million per year. This does not include broader restoration of threatened marine ecosystems, such as coral and shellfish reefs, seagrass meadows and estuaries. These ecosystems provide valuable services - they protect our coasts from erosion, are nurseries for commercially important fish species, store carbon and attract tourists. Research shows that restoration of Australian estuaries alone would cost \$450 million but would be returned in less than 5 years. There are many projects being undertaken to trial and refine techniques to restore seagrass, shellfish reefs and kelp forests, but they require further funding to scale-up. Australia should develop a roadmap to transition

The Arid Zone Monitoring Project combines Traditional ecological knowledge and tracking skills with scientific analysis. Indigenous rangers and Traditional Owners from 33 different Indigenous desert groups, government agencies, non-government organisations and independent scientists participated in the pilot project, which was one of Australia's largest wildlife monitoring endeavours, spanning nearly half of the country.

It collated wildlife sign observations from 5,300 sites revealing new insights into the distributions of native and invasive animals and their interactions and habitat preferences which are valuable to inform management decisions. The pilot project funding ended in 2021 but partners are ready to resume monitoring when funding is available.

*Image: Karajarri Rangers looking for sign.
Photo: Nicolas Rakotopare/Karajarri Traditional Lands Association*



from small-scale projects to landscape-scale approaches to coastal and marine restoration.

Australia is currently investing in delivery of environmental water to improve river systems,⁶⁴ but more needs to be done. There are both physical barriers, such as bridges and river crossings, and operational constraints, such as rules and management approaches, that impede the flow of water within a river and across floodplains and wetlands.⁶⁵ There have been commitments to improve constraints management in the Murray-Darling Basin, but on-ground outcomes are falling short.⁶⁶ Significant additional funding over the next decade is required to achieve improved environmental outcomes.

Further investment is also needed to promote climate resilience. The impacts of climate change are already being felt across Australia. Traditional approaches to conservation and natural resource management will need to adapt to the current and future challenges of climate change.⁶⁷ Climate adaptation is about adjusting to life in a changing climate or preparing for future changes. Despite being one of the most vulnerable countries in the world due to the projected impacts of climate change,⁶⁸ Australia has so far focussed on adaptation research rather than taking action.⁶⁹ Regional plans, strategic assessments and other strategic planning must consider climate change and include environmental adaptation and resilience measures. Ongoing funding is required to support Regional Nature Resource Management and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to undertake climate adaptation planning with community and stakeholders,⁷⁰ to plan for species and community changes in response to changes in threats, such as changing fire regime and disease risks, and to test proactive management techniques such as genetic management of locally native species,⁷¹ and to undertake emergency response for threatened species, such as those affected by bushfires.⁷²

Actions to protect and restore nature must be evidence-based. Without effective monitoring we do not know if species are declining, increasing or stable, if management actions are working, or which are the highest priority species and places for investment. There is currently a large gap in the monitoring of Australia's threatened and near-threatened species and threats that require new government investment to address.

A survey of monitoring programs for threatened species across the country found that one-third had never been monitored and that monitoring of the remaining species was often inadequate to guide management decisions.⁷³ This includes factors such as the monitoring occurring for only a short time in the past, or covering only a small part of the species' range. A lack of monitoring of unlisted species has meant that many species that are declining and at risk of extinction are not able to be listed due to a lack of data to demonstrate that they meet the listing criteria.

There is a strong need to establish new monitoring centres and programs to meet key gaps in the Australian Government's environmental monitoring investments. For example, while the citizen science collected data collated by the Atlas of Living Australia can make a valuable contribution for some situations, it has many limitations, such as citizen scientists not being active across all regions, and not having the required equipment, skills and training to identify and detect all species of interest. While programs such as the Terrestrial Ecosystem Research Network (TERN) field collect and remote sense data on environmental variables (predominantly related to soil, carbon and flora specimens); they do not collect data on plant or animal populations that are suited to the identification of population trends or changes in the area of occupancy.



A Melbourne suburb. Lack of urban tree canopy and poor access to nature has adverse impacts on human health, child development, energy efficiency and climate resilience. Image: Jaana Dielenberg



Ensure nature is central to decision-making across business and government

Key policies needed

1. Reform biodiversity harmful subsidies or eliminate them entirely, and use the savings to fund biodiversity conservation, consistent with Target 18 of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
2. Introduce mandatory disclosures for all large businesses and financial institutions to assess and disclose their impacts and dependencies on nature by 2030.
3. Undertake a review into federal and state tax and financial incentives and barriers to private land conservation.
4. Provide funding and develop policy frameworks to enable scientific institutions to provide knowledge support to businesses and local governments to assess their nature impacts and dependencies, identify actions to reduce impacts, and measure and report outcomes.
5. Establish a National Cabinet Priority to *Halt Biodiversity Decline* with a clear work plan outlining concrete actions and responsibilities of the Australian Government and State and Territory governments to be implemented through intergovernmental Environment Ministers Meetings.

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse rank as the third highest threat humanity will face in the next 10 years. Approximately half of Australia's GDP is moderately or highly dependent on a healthy environment,⁷⁴ but demand for goods and services is exceeding the ability of the biosphere to sustainably provide them.⁷⁵ This poses a significant risk to nature itself and also to companies, the broader economy, human health and humanity. Biodiversity concerns must be mainstreamed across society, particularly decisions made by corporate boards and government executives for sectors with large impacts and dependencies on nature.

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework states that incentives that are harmful to biodiversity, including subsidies, are an important underlying driver of biodiversity loss.⁷⁶ A first-pass assessment estimated that the total monetary value of Australia's direct and indirect subsidies which are likely to have a medium to high adverse impact on biodiversity, was \$26.3 billion in 2023–23. This is over 50 times larger than the average of \$475 million per annum that the Australian Federal Government has invested in biodiversity over the last decade.⁷⁷ **Redirecting even a third of subsidies that are having an adverse impact on Australia's biodiversity could fund the \$7 billion that the Biodiversity Council recommends is needed to protect and restore nature.**⁷⁸

Along with discouraging activities that are driving biodiversity loss, the Australian Government should provide incentives to encourage conservation action. While there are current state and federal tax incentives for private land conservation, they are not very effective and difficult to access. The Federal Treasury or Productivity Commission should undertake a review into federal and state tax and financial incentives and barriers to private land conservation.⁷⁹

To encourage a shift in the economy to consider biodiversity outcomes in decision-making, businesses should be assessing and publicly disclosing their risks and dependencies on nature. This helps consumers and investors to make informed choices about whether they will buy from, or invest in a company, given its impact on biodiversity or how exposed it is to nature risks.⁸⁰ Over time it is expected that this will encourage businesses to reduce nature risks and impacts, improving outcomes for biodiversity. The Australian Government should introduce mandatory disclosures for all large businesses and financial institutions to assess and disclose their impacts and dependencies on nature by 2030, as is occurring in other countries.⁸¹ This would require legislative amendments and policy frameworks modelled on the mandatory climate disclosures.⁸²

Assessing risks and impacts on nature is more challenging than for climate, in large part because it is difficult to reflect the different components of biodiversity and their value compared to measuring changes in tonnes of carbon emitted.⁸³ Currently, support for businesses to undertake these assessments is fragmented and ad-hoc.⁸⁴ The government should support coordinated scientific advice about assessing nature impacts and measuring nature outcomes for businesses and local governments.

The Australian Government and state and territory governments share responsibility for managing the environment.⁸⁵ The Australian Government is a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity and has primary responsibility for meeting international obligations. However, States and Territories have significant control over policies and programs that impact biodiversity, such as land-use planning, public land management and environmental regulation.⁸⁶ It is essential that the Australian Government and state and territory governments work together to address biodiversity

decline. Unfortunately, there is a risk that 'if everyone is responsible, no one is responsible'. To address this, biodiversity decline should be elevated as a key priority for National Cabinet⁸⁷ with a clear work plan outlining what actions will be taken, which level of government will be responsible for delivering those actions, and by when.



The Endangered greater glider is one of many forest dependent native species that would benefit from the cessation of native forest logging subsidies. Image: Sam Horton CC-BY 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons



Patches of remnant vegetation are essential to the survival of many native species and ecosystems in agricultural regions. Image: Jaana Dielenberg

Endnotes

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Biodiversity Council

The Biodiversity Council brings together leading experts including Indigenous Knowledge holders to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. It was founded by 11 universities: The University of Melbourne, The University of Western Australia, The Australian National University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Sydney, The University of Queensland, Deakin University, The University of Canberra, Monash University, Macquarie University, and The University of New South Wales. It is host by The University of Melbourne. It receives support from The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ross Trust, Trawalla Foundation, The Rendere Trust, Isaacson Davis Foundation, Coniston Charitable Trust and Angela Whitbread.

*People spending time in nature on K'gari, Queensland.
Image: Jaana Dielenberg*