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Submission

to

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Populations and Communities**

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on

**The Draft
Australian Government Biodiversity Policy**

Compiled for Clarence Environment Centre
by John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
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Submission on the Draft Australian Government Biodiversity Policy

Introduction.

The Clarence Environment Centre has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for over 22 years, and has a proud record of environmental advocacy, particularly relating to biodiversity conservation.

The Biodiversity Policy opens with the following assertion, informing us that:

“The number of species becoming threatened continues to increase, and many common plants and animals have lost genetic diversity through reduced population sizes and localised extinctions. The decline of biodiversity is most obvious in the decreasing populations of vertebrate animals, loss of extent of habitat, and the fragmentation and degradation of forests, rivers and other ecosystems. The drivers of decline lead to the simplification and fragmentation of our natural ecosystems, which has progressively weakened their resilience and adaptability.”

For this statement to be made after 11 years of environmental protection under the EPBC Act, is an appalling indictment of the complete failure of that legislation to protect matters of national environmental significance. This is particularly damning when we see the original **“National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity”** which prints an almost identical statement, claiming: *“In the face of significant and continuing reductions to our biological diversity, there is a pressing need to strengthen conservation activities across Australia.”* It is very clear that a review of the Act was an imperative.

Therefore, we applaud the latest statement that : *“Our commitment is to provide national leadership in conserving Australia's biodiversity and maintaining healthy functioning ecosystems, consistent with the roles of different levels of government in our federal system”*, and: *“We commit to working with all levels of government, industry, business, and the community to conserve Australia's biodiversity and maintain healthy functioning ecosystems”*.

Before getting too carried away however, we point out the following statement, which also comes from that original Strategy, claiming: *“The Goal is to protect biological diversity and maintain ecological processes and systems”*.

Can we be confident that this time around things will be different? That question aside, we now look closely at the latest vision for Australian biodiversity conservation and where it might lead.

Assessment of key points in the Draft

1. It is better to prevent biodiversity decline before it happens.

Although it is hard to find any direct quote in the Draft, we get a clearer indication from Minister Burke's National Press Club launch, where his vision for the future appears to be focused on “landscape” and “big picture”, Kakadu – Daintree type protection. The Minister's reference to instances where protection of matters of national environmental significance is akin to *“driving the ambulance to the bottom of the cliff”*, further adds to the our unease that future efforts at environmental protection will see areas where significant damage has already occurred through human development abandoned in favour of these “big picture”, legacy leaving protection projects.

Without detracting from the importance of those visions, we cannot avoid a cynical view that those areas are easier to protect because there is little development proposed for those areas, other than mining, and less toes to be trodden on during the process.

This perception was supported shortly after the press club address, when the Minister announced that a large portion of the West Kimberley would become a World Heritage Area, but at the same time made allowance for one of the world's largest gas mining operations and processing plants to operate in that same fragile region.

From this it is clear that the Government is highly unlikely to have the strength to stand up to 'big money', and mining will be allowed to occur unchecked wherever minerals are discovered. Already there is serious speculation about off-shore gas exploration in highly sensitive marine ecosystems, gas mining already occurring in dedicated conservation reserves in NSW's Pilliga region, and a proposal in the Clarence Valley to mine highly polluting antimony within the regional water supply catchment upon which more than 130,000 people rely. None of these projects are likely to be rejected by the Federal Government.

2. Biodiversity should be valued according to its real worth.

This is something we, and all conservationists have been calling for. The full value of ecoservices provided absolutely free by forests should be costed. How much would it cost, for example, to mechanically remove the carbon from carbon dioxide to provide us with life giving oxygen? How much would it cost to filter all ground water, something nature currently does free of charge? How much would it cost to design fire resistant nest boxes for wildlife, install a dozen or more, and maintain them for perhaps 200 years in the way a single hollow-bearing tree does naturally. Only when these values are fully realised, and that cost passed on to those who wish to destroy it, will these forests be protected. We urge the government to pursue this as a matter of urgency.

3. We need to take an adaptive approach to building the resilience of biodiversity to climate change.

This adaptive approach is critically important with the onset of climate change, and this is one area where cooperation between all levels of government is crucial. Already we have comprehensive migration corridors mapped and included in a raft of biodiversity management strategies. However, despite the priority conserve and enhance status supposedly applied to these corridors, no protection is provided through Council LEPs or any other legislation. In our region we continually see rural residential development, motorway and other infrastructure construction, and forest logging being approved which, rather than enhancing these corridors, is adding to the fragmentation of habitat.

In our Clarence Valley district, the Pacific Highway upgrade will see approximately 50km of mapped north-south running wildlife corridor destroyed to build a totally separate motorway, something that cannot be justified for environmental, social or economic reasons. Why is this being allowed under the EPBC Act and state legislation that is supposedly in place to protect the matters of national environmental significance, that abound along its length?

4. Effective conservation requires well-targeted investment

Unfortunately it is investment, the economy and jobs growth, that poses the greatest threat to biodiversity today. We believe the true effectiveness of the EPBC Act, and Federal Environmental Department's resolve, is about to be tested. Right now the massive Maules Creek coal mine is proposed for the Leard State Forest near Boggabri. **Of the some 2,000 hectares of forest that the mining operation will destroy, more than a quarter is made up of no less than five Critically Endangered Ecological Communities listed under the Act, Box Gum Woodland; White Box – White Cypress Pine Grassy Woodland; Yellow Box – Blakely's Red Gum Woodland; Plains Grassland, and Derived Native Grassland.**

Burning the coal from that mine will likely have a devastating impact on the planet through its contribution to climate change, but it seems that even that fact will not save any of those critically endangered MNES from total annihilation. The offset approach proposed by the developers will not see that habitat replaced for about 200 years, if ever. **The moment of truth is approaching when**

the Federal Government will be called upon to prove that the EPBC Act is in any way effective in protecting Matters of National Environmental Significance.

5. Biodiversity is a complex issue and a shared responsibility, requiring cooperation and a mix of approaches

We have already pointed out the need for cooperation (#3 above). The recent State Government decision to remove protection for the nationally listed critically endangered Grey Nurse Shark, is another instance where there appears to be no cooperation between State and Federal environment departments to protect threatened species.

6. Solutions need to be at landscape and seascape scale, over time periods that make ecological sense.

This apparent policy of 'giving up' on ecosystems that have already been severely impacted, and concentrating on 'big picture – landscape' opportunities begs the question, what will happen to the NSW northern rivers region which is internationally recognised as one of the world's biodiversity hot-spots, but continues to be one of the fastest growing areas (in human population terms) of Australia? **We urge the Government not to abandon the protection of biodiversity anywhere in Australia. We, and the rest of the world cannot afford further human induced losses.**

7. Biodiversity is a renewable resource, but we must not undermine its capacity to renew itself.

We wholeheartedly agree with this statement, and the identified need to “*work in partnership with other governments, industry and resource managers to promote and integrate the principle of sustainable use of biodiversity into policies.*” However, we remind the Minister that such cooperation and policies are already in place to regulate logging in NSW, and yet we see Forests NSW currently in court charged with illegally logging protected forests in this region, with numerous other cases of similar illegal logging pending. Not even the timber industry believes that what is currently happening is sustainable, yet the Federal Government, which is a signatory to the Integrated Forests Operations Approval, has stood aside and turned a blind eye to the destruction.

The Federal Government must be more proactive in protecting biodiversity

8. Credible information and knowledge is essential for good decisions.

We agree with this statement. However, time and again, credible evidence through peer-reviewed research is ignored or not acted upon. The Murray Darling Basin and marine parks plans come to mind. **Credible information and knowledge is worthless unless it is acted upon.**

9. The conservation estate is the backbone of our efforts.

Agreed. But did we hear a murmur of protest from the Federal Government when the State Government unwound marine park protection at Fish Rock and elsewhere, or against the decision to hold off on protection of high conservation forests at the Yathong and Wilbertroy State Forests for 3 years to allow them to be logged.

10. Commonwealth environmental regulation should be strategic, focused on matters of national environmental significance, and complementary to state and territory legislation.

It should be! **But time and again the role of the EPBC Act reverts to no more than a licensing tool to destroy matters of national environmental significance. For the Act to attain any relevance, it must protect those “matters”.**

We thank the Minister for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards (Honorary Secretary)