

Submission to:

Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2017

By:
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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2017.

I am first and foremost a lover of wildlife and our beautiful native bushland. I completed a degree in Animal Science at James Cook University, and worked as a Ranger / Tourist Guide at the Billabong Sanctuary. For the past 11 years (& ongoing) I have had the privilege of stewarding ~56,000 acres of State Forest Land, together with my husband, whose family purchased this lease in 1962, and whose great uncle pioneered the forestry operation on this land in the 1930s.

My primary desire is to see REAL OUTCOMES achieved for conservation.

I will begin with comments on the statement made in Steven Mile's speech introducing this amendment (1):

"Nature refuges have been enormously successful..." Have Nature Refuges really been that successful? Not if you talk to the caring landholders who have stepped forward to show leadership in protecting their land. Many of them are very frustrated with the experience, to the point of wanting to withdraw from the program (2). Some issues with landholder-led conservation were explored by Dr Neil MacLeod: "Landholders... feel that any benefits from their management actions and capital outlays will go to others. ... The general conclusion from this project is that there are limited prospects for wide-scale private adoption of the conservation principles in the absence of significant public support. It's now a question of to what extent the landholder should bear the public cost of conservation, and vice versa. ... We just have to be more creative to trying to break down the barriers and solve some of the problems. ... reward private landholders' efforts to provide environmental services for the wider community. ... Farmers are happy to discuss contentious issues, once their point of view is respected. ... Their knowledge and stewardship of their land is a critical component of any recipe for success. ... In the previous project there were many exchanges of views and ideas, and I think it helped both side understand each other and the nature of the barriers to adopting (conservation) principles." (3)

"...it is important for landholders who want to protect ecologically important parts of their land to have a range of tools to choose from." Absolutely. My fear is that this amendment seeks to reduce the tools available to land managers, and will thus inadvertently worsen conservation outcomes.

"New reserves will have the potential to be great tourist attractions..." Really? I would love to see more landholder-managed land accessible for the enjoyment of the public, but with the current situation with litigation, liability insurances and overzealous councils this is not realistic (4) (5).

Comments on the Bill Explanatory Notes (6):

"Areas of outstanding conservation value are not restricted to national parks, such areas frequently occur on privately owned or managed land." It stands to obvious reason that if "areas of outstanding conservation value" can be found on "privately owned or managed land", that the current management of these areas is already supportive of conservation. Yet this amendment seeks to alter the management of these lands and remove the tools that have preserved this conservation value, thus putting it at risk. (7)

"Some interest groups did, however, argue for the continuance of certain activities on special wildlife reserves (e.g. commercial grazing, forest harvesting, mining), however this is not considered compatible with the intent of the legislation." Not considered 'compatible', by whom?

The intent should be to bring about the best REAL outcomes for conservation possible. The quest for these outcomes should not be hampered by prejudice against any particular land management tool. If any activity can be shown to support the goal of conservation outcomes, it should be allowable for use by the land manager.

It must be recognised that if an activity has been historically carried out on a parcel of land, and that land has maintained a high conservation value, cessation of that activity will constitute as a change in management that may very well lead to reduced conservation outcomes. Altering the management of a high-value area is not something that should only be done without careful, realistic, & unbiased assessment.

I believe that the selective Native Forest Harvesting that has occurred on our home property since the 1930s is supportive of conservation objectives, and that closure of forestry practices will bring harm to this ecology. We're not talking about clear-fell logging. Nothing like it. We're talking about a man on foot selecting out an individual tree among many others that remain. We're talking about a sustainable, renewable, carbon-sequestering resource that brings in funds that go back into managing the forest and provide the forest with an economic value which ensures its protection.

Without harvesting, the forest will be left to moribund neglect, will be ravaged by fire, and it's conservation, commercial and economic value will all suffer.

Below are some quotes form a worthy discussion entitled "Can forest conservation and logging be reconciled?" (8)

- "Finding outcomes that offer real improvements for conservation gains depend on recognising some myths and acknowledging the dynamic nature of forests. Many people, especially in Australia, generally imagine all "logging" as broad-scale clear-felling. However, timber harvesting takes many forms, and large-scale clear-felling is at one end of a broad spectrum. In well-managed forests, foresters seek to harvest in an ecologically-appropriate way.
- "In most tropical forests managed for sustainable timber production, harvesting is selective. Between two and 20 stems are removed from each hectare of forest, once every few decades. When done carefully this leaves over 90% of the trees in place. Thus a logged, rich, tropical forest is still a rich tropical forest and stems regrow to replace those removed."
- "...the potential benefits of having local caretakers with the ability, motivation, and support to support forest conservation. The chief question is how to achieve the best results. Even if we forget the demand for timber and consider only conservation benefits, ... it is apparent that logged forests bring options and opportunities."
- "timber production provides one way in which forest lands can provide income and employment while retaining forest: in simple terms, the forest can pay for its own protection."

It must also be noted that, according to the Forestry Act 1959 (9):

"33 Cardinal principle of management of State forests

{1} The cardinal principle to be observed in the management of State forests shall be the permanent reservation of such areas for the purpose of producing timber and associated products in perpetuity and of protecting a watershed therein."

Landholders who undertook State Forests Leases did so under the clear statement of the Forestry Act that their land would be forever used for producing timber. The purpose of this land has been changed by successive governments without notice, consultation, or consideration of the landholder, and even without carrying out any environmental assessments to justify the change (10) (11).

As for livestock grazing, done mindfully, this has been demonstrated and scientifically proven as a tool that can be used to improve conservation outcomes.

Below are quotes directly from: Wetland Care Australia, Developing the Use of Grazing as a Riparian and Wetland Management Tool in the Lower Burdekin, Draft Report Project Findings to Date December 2004 (7):

- "Controlled grazing offers the only viable means of landscape scale control of these grass weeds."
- "...biodiversity costs of excluding grazing from national parks that contain naturalised pasture grasses.."
- " Cattle grazed riparian zone on Castelanelli's Lagoon shows effective control of exotic pastures, active recruitment of overstorey trees, and limited weed promotion."
- "In grazed areas the impacts of fire on vegetation structure appeared less with lower levels of mature tree death and active recruitment present in the grazed areas."
- "... demonstrated the effectiveness of grazing for reducing fuel loads and associated fire intensity"
- "The fact that wetland plant diversity has come back so successfully with the reintroduction of grazing..."
- "The key management implication that emerges from the grazing exclusion trials is that exclusion of grazing is not an environmentally sound option..."
- " Beyond total exclusion of grazing, the other end of the spectrum – permanent grazing pressure also results in poor outcomes for wetland communities including a loss of plant diversity and reduced recruitment of overstorey tree species ...The balance lies in sufficient grazing pressure to manage exotic pasture growth and sufficient spelling to maintain wetland vegetation."
- "In the absence of grazing it has become infested with exotic pasture grasses".
- "While it could be argued that invasion of exotic pasture grasses are the primary cause of these impacts, most exotic grasses ... have been in the lower Burdekin landscape for many decades and it is land use change i.e. the exclusion of grazing from wetland and riparian areas rather than new weed infestation events that have resulted in observed impacts. "
- "...challenges the conventional wisdom that exclusion of grazing from wetlands and riparian areas is optimal for biodiversity conservation."
- "Some of the greatest habitat loss observed in conjunction with exotic pasture grass infestation occurs through the occurrence of hot burns resulting from high fuel loads in ungrazed areas. Single events have been observed to kill large stands of mature overstorey trees. This occurs in typically fire sensitive riparian vegetation communities but also in open woodland vegetation types in which fire is a natural and dominant evolutionary factor."
- "Intense fires are also observed to further promote the growth of pyrophytic (fire loving) species such as Guinea Grass and hence increase subsequent season fuel loads by reducing tree cover and associated competition. This is in contrast to established annual burning practices which are often undertaken notionally for 'reducing fuel loads'."
- " ...controlled grazing is the most viable means of control and has ecological benefits over other approaches."
- "Under Qld legislation grazing is an incompatible land use with National Parks..."

- "Findings of this project demonstrate that there are greater risks to biodiversity associated with the total exclusion of grazing than with the maintenance of controlled grazing regimes in wetland and riparian areas of the seasonal dry tropics where exotic pasture species are widely naturalised. Incorporation of appropriate grazing regimes in the management of floodplain and riparian conservation reserves is a prerequisite to the maintenance of biodiversity values."
- "... greater risks to wetland and riparian biodiversity associated with grazing exclusion than grazing..."
- "... the highest priorities for protecting nature conservation values in the lower Burdekin is the re-introduction of grazing to habitat remnants infested by exotic pasture species. For maximum environmental benefit grazing needs to be managed specifically for environmental outcomes and conducted in conjunction with fire regime management."
- "... use of controlled grazing offers an economically viable means of protecting revegetation sites ..."
- "One of the key findings of this project has been the prospect of developing 'extensive' revegetation techniques using grazing to promote natural vegetation succession ..."
- "This project's findings show that under a regime of controlled grazing the condition state of most lower Burdekin riparian vegetation communities will be improved or maintained to a better condition and associated ecosystem functioning than in the absence of grazing."
- "In the case of National Parks there is an identified need for changes to Statutory based management provisions to enable the use of grazing as a management tool."
- "Ultimately there is a whole field of potential ecological management applications associated with the use of controlled grazing..."
- "... specifically apply it (controlled grazing) as an ecological management tool for the ecological recovery of landscapes. This is an exciting direction for grazing based research to pursue and offers the prospect of landscape scale management tools for protecting, managing and restoring Australia's biodiversity."

The project quoted above was in relation to wetlands, but the findings are relevant "also in open woodland vegetation types", and supported by our own experience as land stewards.

Many more examples of mindful, controlled grazing being used as a tool to advance conservation outcomes can be found among the Soils for Life case studies, which can be found here (12):

<http://www.soilsforlife.org.au/regenerative-agriculture-case-studies>

Clearly, activities on areas of high conservation values need be assessed based on reality and conservation merit... not prejudice, ideology nor politics.

I will go further to make note that "biodiversity in Australia's national parks is in decline" and "that the establishment of conservation reserves alone is insufficient to maintain biodiversity." (13)

Professor Hugh Possingham: "Many of our remote reserves are so over-run with feral herbivores and predators that some believe that neighbouring pastoral properties are better for conservation. The major mammal declines in northern Australia appear to be occurring everywhere, regardless of land tenure, even in some of our best funded national parks here's also a case to suggest that protected areas are an increasingly poor surrogate for conservation performance." (14).

William Sutherland, et al: "Much of current conservation practice is based upon anecdote and myth rather than upon the systematic appraisal of the evidence... Furthermore, very little evidence is collected on the consequences of current practice... failure to evaluate can lead to the acceptance of dogma that be can wrong. ... many of the practices seem based upon faith and a political agenda rather than on the benefits to biodiversity." (15).

Dr Tim Flannery: "Absolutely nothing practical is being done... those who do know of it (the extinction crisis) commonly believe that National Parks and reserves are safe places for threatened species. In fact the second extinction wave is now in full swing and it is emptying our National Parks and wildlife reserves as

ruthlessly as other landscapes. ... Paradoxically, biodiversity is sometimes flourishing more vibrantly on private land than in National parks, despite hundreds of millions of dollars being spent annually by Government on reserve lands. ... Firstly and foremost the problem stems from an illusion that the simple act of proclaiming a National Park or Nature Reserve will result in the protection of biodiversity. ... Humans have become the keystone species in the Australian environment. When they withdraw their ecosystem services, ... Australia's ecosystems won't revert to some pre-human ideal, but will spiral toward ecosystem collapse." (16)

As someone who cares deeply for our native animals, this is all very disturbing.

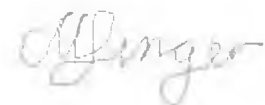
Obviously this country needs a totally refreshed approach to conservation.

It must start with an honest appraisal of the effectiveness of the "protectionist" approach that seeks to lock humans, and human activities, out of "protected areas".

We must allow for any and all available tools - including grazing and forest harvesting - to be considered in light of their potential to further conservation outcomes.

And a broad-scale, long-lasting approach to conservation simply must be founded on positive, 2-way partnerships with landholders.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.



Michelle Finger.

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