



AUSTRALIAN
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION

Reversing nature destruction in Australia.

Five improvements
we must make 

Photo: Kerry Trapnell.

5 improvements Australia must make to reverse biodiversity destruction

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is Australia's national environmental organisation. We represent a community of more than 700,000 people who are committed to achieving a healthy environment for all Australians. For more than 50 years ACF has been a strong advocate for Australia's forests, rivers, people and wildlife. ACF is proudly independent, non-partisan and funded by donations from our community.

In October 2021 the Australian government signed the Kunming Declaration, joining other countries in the commitment to reverse biodiversity loss.

ACF welcomes the Australian government's support for marine protection, but we are disappointed, given the state of terrestrial biodiversity, that Australia's contributions at COP15 so far lack the ambition recognised as necessary in the Kunming Declaration.

Why a strong and ambitious post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework is important for Australia

- Australia is a megadiverse country with rich and unique biodiversity – 7 to 10% of all Earth's species occur in Australia, and there is a high level of endemism, about 85% of all plant species are unique to the continent. As the CBD acknowledges: "Australia's terrestrial and marine biodiversity is important both nationally and globally, establishing an obligation for its conservation and sustainable use."ⁱ
- 19 Australian ecosystems have already been found to be collapsingⁱⁱ, with more ecosystems and species at risk of extinction.
- The recently completed 10 year review of Australia's national environmental laws found that the legislation was unfit for purpose, outdated and requires fundamental reform.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Australia is failing to meet its international obligations, with conservation efforts underfunded and only 100 of Australia's more than 1900 listed threatened species and communities prioritised for recovery action.^{iv}



Five key areas where Australia can and should do better

We call on Australia to lift its ambition in five key areas by championing a strong post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, and by demonstrating how the commitments under the Framework will be implemented domestically:

- 1. Reverse nature destruction so that by 2030 nature is in better health than it is now.** Australia has a poor record on biodiversity loss in the 250 years since European colonisation. It should support an ambitious Vision and Mission for the Global Biodiversity Framework and ensure that the Framework includes milestones and targets that are consistent with the Leaders Pledge for Nature.
- 2. End extinction.** Australia's past extinction record, and the threats faced by many Australian species, mean that Australia must commit to an immediate halt to human induced extinctions and to reversing the trajectory of extinction decline by 2030.
- 3. Protect and restore the land.** Ongoing deforestation, the lack of protection for important ecosystems, and the ongoing decline in habitat quality mean that Australia must lead the way in calling for ambitious targets for protecting terrestrial, aquatic and marine ecosystems, and deliver ambitious protection and restoration commitments at home.
- 4. Strengthen the link between action on climate and biodiversity.** Climate change is already having a terrible impact on Australian ecosystems, and many ecosystems such as the Great Barrier Reef are especially vulnerable to climate change. As a significant source of emissions, Australia must demonstrate leadership in recognising the strong connections between climate change and biodiversity challenges and solutions and should ensure that these commitments are reflected in clear targets for action in the Post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.
- 5. Embed nature in all decision-making.** Australian experience demonstrates the need for mechanisms to address biodiversity loss to be embedded across different levels of government in our federal system, and across all government portfolios. Australian business must also be supported to join with international efforts to identify and act upon risks to biodiversity. Australia should provide its strong support to efforts to mainstream biodiversity protection and restoration in the post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

A mission to reverse nature destruction so that by 2030 nature is in better health than it is now

Why this is important for Australia

Australia has a very poor record of biodiversity loss and decline since European colonisation. Economic development has allowed Australia to become a wealthy nation, but at the cost of widespread destruction of biodiversity. Continued ecosystem decline now threatens Australia's prosperity. The Swiss RE Institute, for example, lists Australia as the second most at risk economy in G20 when it comes to ecosystem services decline.^v

Australian biodiversity has enormous intrinsic value, it important to the Australian community and Australia's image domestically and abroad. Our biodiversity has significant spiritual and cultural values to Australia's First Nations people, who have cared for and managed land and sea for millennia.

Despite this, **extensive land clearing is still occurring** – approximately 44% of Australia's forests and woodlands have been cleared since European settlement and clearing is still occurring.^{vi} Meanwhile, **species once thought secure have been added to endangered species lists** and continue to decline – for example the iconic Australian marsupial, **the Koala**.

Improvements needed to Australia's position on the Global Biodiversity Framework

- Australia should support improved wording in the 2030 mission statement so that it includes an unambiguous commitment to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to achieve a nature-positive world by 2030 and put biodiversity on a path to full recovery, and further commit to ensure that the Goals, Milestones and Targets are SMART and aligned with the Vision and Mission.
- Australia proposes several changes that reduce measurability within the GBF including the proposal to delete the \$700 billion dollar figure from Target 8 and the 10Gt carbon abatement from target 8 – it should seek to improve the measurability of targets, not weaken them. Australia should also abandon its approach of removing milestones from the GBF.

Actions required to implement in Australia

- Develop a binding strategy to implement the Post 2020-Global Biodiversity Framework including a binding commitment to halt extinction and reverse biodiversity decline by 2030.
- Reform national environmental laws to provide a new framework for Australian government leadership necessary to meet the overarching goal of reversing biodiversity loss. These reforms should include legally binding national environmental standards to guide delivery of environmental outcomes across Australia's federal system of government and an independent regulator to enforce the law.

End extinction

Why this is important for Australia

In the just over two centuries since European colonisation of Australia, more than 100 endemic species have gone extinct.^{vii} Australia is a world leader in extinction.

Once common species are now being added to the IUCN Red List and listed as threatened under Australian laws. The iconic Australian koala has recently been listed as endangered in some States, and unique Australian species like the greater glider (a giant gliding possum), and the gang-gang cockatoo are now endangered.

Species such as the Bramble Cay melomys (*Melomys rubicola*) have gone extinct in recent years, despite being listed under Australia's national environmental laws.

Australia's laws and policies currently lack clear and unambiguous commitments to prevent further human induced extinctions. Funding is well short of what is required and is also considerably less than what other developed countries dedicate to threatened species recovery.^{viii}

Improvements needed to Australia's position on the Global Biodiversity Framework

In relation to Milestone A.2, Australia should:

- Support a clear and unambiguous commitment in Milestone A.2 to **halt human induced extinctions by 2030**. Framing the milestone in terms of halting or reversing rates of extinction lacks clarity and falls short of what is required.
- Support a reduction in extinction risk of at least 20%, rather than the 10% currently proposed.
- The proposed Australian Government wording to insert a reference to 'due to direct human activity' is not supported as we are concerned that this ambiguous wording potentially excludes a broad range of threats which may not be able to be directly attributable to human activities, but to which humans have contributed.
- Withdraw its proposal that the enhancement or maintenance of populations be limited to "threatened" populations.

Actions required to implement in Australia

- Reform Australia's failing system of conservation planning by developing a comprehensive, systematic and integrated system of bioregional and recovery planning and implementation.
- Identify and strengthen legal protections for habitat critical to the survival of all listed threatened species and communities.
- Significantly increase funding for the protection and recovery of threatened species and ecological communities.

Protect and restore the land

Why this is important for Australia

Historical and continuing habitat loss is one of the key drivers of biodiversity decline in Australia. While Australia supports a global target of 30% protection of land and of sea, domestically it has made no commitment to increase terrestrial protection.

While some Australian ecosystems are well protected in areas managed for conservation, many ecosystems in areas subject to pressure from urban and agriculture development are poorly represented. Many of these areas are in private hands, and so support for private conservation efforts is critical.

Indigenous Protected Areas managed for biodiversity conservation by Indigenous groups are a critical component of Australia's National Reserve System, accounting for 74 million hectares – almost half of the National Reserve System. Recognition of and support for the rights and aspirations of Indigenous People in caring for country critical to Australia meeting its commitments under the post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

Many Australian ecosystems are in poor condition, and several are at risk of collapse.^{ix} Restoration is critical to reversing declines and increasing resilience of these ecosystems.

Improvements needed to Australia's position on the Global Biodiversity Framework

- In relation to Milestone A.1 Australia should advocate for a commitment to reverse the decline of highly intact or highly vulnerable ecosystem (including climate vulnerable ecosystems).
- For Target 2, Australia should commit to and urge other countries to commit to a target of at least 50% of degraded ecosystems and their connectivity either restored or under restoration.
- Australia should continue to support a target to protect 30% of land and 30% of sea areas, including freshwater and inland water ecosystems.

Actions required to implement in Australia

- Commit to protecting 30% of Australian land by 2030, with particular attention to terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems that are currently underrepresented in Australia's reserve system.
- Halt land clearing and deforestation.
- Provide funding, policy and legislative support to Nature Based Solutions which contribute to both biodiversity and climate mitigation and adaptation objectives.
- Using bioregional planning and other conservation planning mechanisms, identify areas and ecosystems that are priorities for investment in ecosystem restoration, and facilitate restoration efforts through public funding and encouragement of private investment.

Strengthen the link between action on climate and biodiversity

Why this is important for Australia

The joint work of the IPCC and IPBES highlights the need for the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss to be considered in an integrated manner, indeed neither can be solved without addressing the other. Ecosystem decline not only exacerbates climate change and its impacts, recovery of species- and carbon-rich ecosystems is itself an essential climate mitigation measure.^x

This is especially the case in Australia, where the recent IPCC Working Group II report has highlighted the likelihood of collapse of several Australian ecosystems.

Australian ecosystems have already been heavily impacted by climate related disasters, such as the 2019-2020 bushfires which burned nearly 100,000 km² of vegetation and resulted in impacts to Australian wildlife including many listed threatened species.^{xi}

As a country with high per capita emissions and as a significant exporter of fossil fuels, it is imperative that Australia demonstrates that it recognises the connection between greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity impacts and that it acts on both in a concerted and integrated manner.

Improvements needed to Australia's position on the Global Biodiversity Framework

In relation to Target 8, Australia should abandon its proposal to remove the quantified contribution of nature-based solutions to mitigation of at least 10 GtCO₂e/year.

Actions required to implement in Australia

- Commit to the development of nature-based solutions with integrity and which satisfy criteria for additionality, and which do not delay the phasing out of emissions from fossil fuels.
- Improve disaster resilience and ensure systems and processes are in place to reduce risk and manage impacts on nature from catastrophic climate related events such as bushfires.
- Recognise the clear link between the emissions from the combustion of fossil fuels and contribution of climate change to the loss of biodiversity and the exacerbation of other threats to biodiversity, such that Australia should move rapidly to phase out the use of fossil fuels.

Embed nature in all decision making

Why this is important for Australia

Australia's economy is the second most at-risk economy in the G20 when it comes to the decline of biodiversity and loss of ecosystem services, and the fragility of its environment.^{xii} However, Australia does not consistently measure the state of nature or its own economic dependencies on ecosystem services, and it does not use the data it does have to inform good decisions.

The information systems relied upon by the Australian government are "inefficient, disorganised and incomplete" and this has led to "suboptimal decision-making, inefficiency, additional cost for business and poor transparency to the community."^{xiii}

Australia lags behind world leaders when it comes to the mandatory reporting of environmental impacts of business^{xiv}. This creates an uneven playing field for leading businesses, hinders business risk management, and will impede delivery of the double materiality objectives of the Task Force on Nature-related Financial Disclosures in Australia.

Improvements needed to Australia's position on the Global Biodiversity Framework

The following proposals by Australia would weaken the GBF and should be abandoned:

- Insertion of the words 'strive to' ahead of the Goal D's aim to close the gap between available and need financing resources, making it effort rather than outcome focussed.
- The deletion of the measurable \$700 billion figure from milestone D.1 making the milestone considerably less SMART.
- Deletion of 'by half' in Target 15, significantly weakening the ambition of the target and removing measurability.

Australia should:

- Push to strengthen Target 14 by ensuring that it specifically refers to both public and private financial flows, and that parties should require financial institutions to measure, assess, disclose, and account for risks, dependencies and impacts associated with biodiversity loss and reflect assessed risks and opportunities in their investment decisions.
- Support proposals that would strengthen changes proposed to Target 15, including that business be required to avoid all negative impacts and implement deforestation and conversion-free supply chains, not merely "supported" to do so.

Actions required to implement in Australia

- Act on the recommendations of the 2020 independent review of Australia's national environment laws including for improved systems for environmental data collection and management.
- Adopt a whole of government approach to integrate biodiversity values into national strategies, plans and budgets, including increasing the ambition and accelerating the delivery of Australia's national strategy on environmental accounting.
- Implement mandatory disclosure laws for business in Australia aligned with the TCFD and TNFD.

- ⁱ Australia, country profile - <https://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/?country=au>
- ⁱⁱ Bergstrom et al (2021) Combatting ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic, *Global Change Biology* 2021:27:1962-1703.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, Final Report, Foreword. <https://epbcactreview.environment.gov.au/resources/final-report/foreword>
- ^{iv} EG Ritchie (2022) Australia's biodiversity crisis and opportunity *Science* Vol 375, 21 January 2022 275.
- ^v Swiss Re Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services Institute Index: measuring the value of nature, reported at <https://www.swissre.com/media/news-releases/nr-20200923-biodiversity-and-ecosystems-services.html>
- ^{vi} Regional and landscape-scale pressures: land clearing. Australia, State of the Environment Report, 2016. <https://soe.environment.gov.au/theme/land/topic/2016/regional-and-landscape-scale-p pressures-land-clearing>
- ^{vii} J. C. Z. Woinarski et al. (2019), Reading the black book: The number, timing, distribution and causes of listed extinctions in Australia *Biological Conservation*. 239, [108261].
- ^{viii} B. A. Wintle et al.(2019), Spending to save: What will it cost to halt Australia's extinction crisis? *Conservation Letters*. 12, e12682.
- ^{ix} Bergstrom et al (2021) Combatting ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic, *Global Change Biology* 2021:27:1962-1703
- ^x IPBES_IPCC Co-sponsored Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Climate Change, June 2021. <https://ipbes.net/events/ipbes-ipcc-co-sponsored-workshop-report-biodiversity-and-climate-change>
- ^{xi} Ward et al (2020) Impact of 2019-2020 mega-fires on Australian fauna habitat *Nature Ecology and Evolution* 4, 1321-1326.
- ^{xii} Swiss Re Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services Institute Index: measuring the value of nature, <https://www.swissre.com/institute/research/topics-and-risk-dialogues/climate-and-natural-catastrophe-risk/expertise-publication-biodiversity-and-ecosystems-services.html#/>
- ^{xiii} Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, Final Report 2020, Chapter 10. <https://epbcactreview.environment.gov.au/resources/final-report/chapter-10>
- ^{xiv} <https://www.governanceinstitute.com.au/resources/governance-directions/archive/issue-3/climate-risk-reporting-pressure-builds-for-disclosure-by-australian-corporates/>