

The Vision for Nature Australia Needs

Federal Election Policy and Actions



**Wilderness
Society**

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Who we are

For 40 years, we've stood at the forefront of Australia's most historic environmental victories, supporting the life that supports us.

From the Franklin River, to Fraser Island, to Tasmania's forests, to James Price Point in the Kimberley and numerous World Heritage Areas, we're focussed on bigger picture outcomes.

We're an independent environmental advocacy organisation powered by around 30,000 members and another 300,000 supporters from all walks of life. We're training the next generation of environmental leaders, activating the deeply held environmental values all Australians share, and advocating publicly for the protection of nature and action on climate change.

Our natural environment and the life it supports is Australia's greatest advantage; the Wilderness Society exists to protect it.

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Front cover image: Grampians National Park, Victoria.

The vision for nature Australia needs

Australia is one of the world's megadiverse countries: we have around 10% of all the world's species. Much of Australia's wildlife is found nowhere else on Earth. This diversity keeps our air and water clean, builds our soil, pollinates our crops and keeps our climate safe.

The health of our environment affects us all. Australia's nature is uniquely important not just to our people and our future prosperity, but to the world. We need to protect it for future generations.

But we're losing the life that supports our life. Australia has the worst record in the world for mammal extinction. This is not historical — three animals have gone extinct in the last 10 years alone, and 17 more are about to go. We are second in the world overall for biodiversity loss.

Australia has bulldozed so much of our forests that only 50% remain intact. Our deforestation front is one of the worst in the world, ranking alongside the Amazon. And as our Great Barrier Reef bleaches and dies from overheating and many natural ecosystems suffer from a rapidly changing climate, we continue to dig up, ship out and burn the key sources of the problem — coal, gas and oil.

Everyday Australians want governments to take action to protect our nature and act on climate change. Key studies show that environmental concern is concentrated firmly in the political centre. For example the Australian Electoral Study from the ANU shows that 47% of voters in 2016 saw the environment and global warming as extremely important when voting.

Further social research undertaken by The Wilderness Society and others shows that these Australians share deep concern for the access of future generations to clean environments and native wildlife. Overwhelmingly, they see Australia's nature as fundamental to our future prosperity and expect the Federal Government to provide strong leadership on environmental protection.

It is clear that Australians will respond very positively to visionary leadership and long-term thinking on nature and climate. In the following pages we outline the case for action and the policies required to deliver this vision for nature Australia needs.

There are four key areas requiring strong Federal Government action:

- **Creating nature laws that work**
- **Protecting and restoring forests and bushland**
- **Combating climate change**
- **Protecting iconic places**

Creating nature laws that work

Australia needs nature protection that works. We need a national plan with common goals the whole country can get behind, backed by strong, consistent laws and an independent watchdog to enforce them.

By every major indicator of environmental health, our nature is declining fast. 41 new species were added to the threatened species list this year. Water and soil quality is declining all over the country. 50% of our forests are gone.

The problem is our environmental regulations are a mess: they actually encourage the destruction of our natural wealth.

Scientists consistently rate Australia's failed laws in the top threats to biodiversity, along with invasive species and climate change.

The lines of responsibility between Federal and State are constantly in flux, creating a shifting soup of regulations. Some sectors are given special exemption from the rules, laws are not enforced, and decision-making is political and done behind closed doors. This means even the most basic of protections aren't enforced.



The koala is threatened in Queensland and New South Wales

Contrasting Outcomes for Nature: United States vs Australia

The United States Endangered Species Act (US ESA) shows that strong laws work. Over 45 years, it has protected more than 1,600 threatened plants and animals, and has prevented 227 extinctions in that time. 100 species have almost completely recovered.

The US ESA works because it is consistently enforced nationally by an independent body in the Environmental Protection Agency. It has been demonstrated to protect critical habitat needed by species to survive.

By contrast to the US, Australia's *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* manages over 1,800 threatened species but has only listed 5 critical habitats in 20 years. This doesn't guarantee protection from threats like logging or deforestation.

Australia already has one of the worst extinction records in the world, and 17 more species are considered highly likely to disappear over the next 20 years.

United States – *Endangered Species Act*:

- 1,600 threatened plants and animals protected
- 227 extinctions prevented
- 100 species completely recovered

Australia – *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*:

- 1,800 threatened species covered
- Only 5 critical habitats listed in 20 years
- 17 species highly likely to go extinct in next 20 years

Policy and actions

To achieve these better outcomes for nature, the next Federal Government should:

1. **Establish a new National Environment Act** to give the Federal Government greater powers and responsibilities to protect the environment.
2. **Establish an independent National Environment Commission** to develop a National Environment Plan laying out a series of common goals for improving environmental indicators and to report regularly and publicly on progress.
3. **Establish a new independent National Environmental Protection Authority** to act as a watchdog over the system, with responsibility for environmental impact assessments, monitoring, compliance and enforcement of all national environmental laws.

The case for action

- Three unique Australian animals have gone extinct since 2009
- Australia is #2 in the world for biodiversity loss
- Only 2% of destructive projects were stopped by national environment laws in 20 years

Protecting and restoring forests and bushland

Australia's forests and bushland purify the air we breathe and the water we drink, and store vast amounts of carbon. They are home to our unique Australian wildlife like the koala, numbat, quoll and lyrebird to name a few.

Yet an MCG-sized area of forest and bushland is bulldozed every 2 minutes in Australia — currently about 600,000 ha a year. Australia's deforestation front now ranks in the global top 10, alongside Borneo, the Amazon and the Congo.

The destruction is primarily driven by beef production, logging for paper and timber products, mining, and urban development. Only about 50% of Australia's forests now remain intact.

Bulldozers drag thick chains through the landscape, snapping trees like matchsticks, killing countless animals — more than one every second at current deforestation rates. The erosion from deforestation is also clogging our waterways and smothering the Great Barrier Reef.

It's time to comprehensively protect our remaining forests and support business and landholders to transition to sustainable practices, including investing in large-scale ecological restoration.



Only 50% of Australia's forests remain intact.



Deforestation on Cape York in Queensland.

Policy and actions

The next Federal Government should:

1. **Protect high conservation value forests and bushland** through the new laws and institutions outlined on the previous pages, while taking urgent interim action where possible under existing laws to stop forest destruction from land clearing and logging.
2. **Support transition to sustainable wood and fibre industry** by formalising support for FSC national Forest Management standard and requiring logging standards to match or exceed this. In place of rolling over or extending Regional Forest Agreement (RFAs), undertake an independent inquiry to review the state of the publicly owned forest estate.
3. **Establish a National Nature and Climate Fund** to pay landholders to undertake large-scale ecological restoration, where climate, biodiversity, community and economic benefits are collectively maximised.
4. **Implement a national deforestation and restoration monitoring program** with regular data provided publicly (minimum annually).

The case for action

- Australia's deforestation front now ranks in the global top 10 alongside the Amazon
- More than one native animal is killed every single second at current deforestation rates
- Even animals like the koala are now seriously threatened in former strongholds Queensland and New South Wales





Combating climate change

Greenhouse gas pollution from burning coal, oil and gas is the primary cause of the abrupt warming of our planet. It threatens our natural world, and the landscapes, seas, ecosystems and species all Australians love. As we depend so much on life to support us, this rapid change also threatens our health, our communities and our economy.

The impacts are already affecting Australia, with much of the Great Barrier Reef bleached and dying from overheating, bushfires increasing in severity and frequency, rainfall seasonality changing, and other natural ecosystems under serious stress.

Even a few years of further delay of serious climate action will dramatically reduce our chances of preventing further severe warming. As one of the highest per capita greenhouse gas emitters, supplying to the world a large

share of the very fossil fuels causing the problem, we have a clear responsibility to act with clarity and urgency.

Curbing our domestic greenhouse gas emissions, including rapidly switching to renewable energy, and ending deforestation and regrowing our forests, are vital steps that must be taken. But we must also start managing the decline of coal, oil and gas extraction, whether or not they are burnt at home or abroad.

This starts with preventing new fossil fuel frontiers in important natural places, such as the Great Australian Bight (oil), the Pilliga forest (coal seam gas), and the Kimberley (unconventional gas). It ends with an Australian economy and society reliant instead on zero carbon industries and a healthier, more resilient natural world.



The Great Australian Bight is under threat from oil drilling.



Anne Kennedy is one of many locals opposed to coal seam gas drilling in the Pilliga Forest (Santos' Narrabri Project)

Policy and actions

The next Federal Government should:

1. **Reform greenhouse gas emissions accounting** to properly record the full life-cycle emissions of fossil fuel mining activities (known as "scope 3"), and include regular analysis of the contribution of the Australian economy to global climate change.
2. **Disclose climate-related risks to the Australian economy** and Federal Government budget via a public national study led by Treasury, while also ensuring mandatory climate risk disclosure from all ASX companies.
3. **End fossil fuel industry subsidies** and ensure public money is only used to accelerate projects, industries and facilities (including infrastructure) that are consistent with the transition to a fossil fuel-free, decarbonised economy.
4. **Prevent expansion of offshore oil and gas industry** by halting the release of new offshore oil or gas acreage and ensuring existing permits that lapse are cancelled, with priority protection provided in the Great Australian Bight, central NSW coast and marine reserves.
5. **Work with states to prevent new onshore fossil fuel projects and plan for the decline of existing ones** by formally supporting state moratoriums on unconventional gas development or any other fossil fuel development, and initiate COAG workstream to develop a clear and time-constrained plan for managed fossil fuel mining decline.
6. **Lead internationally in managed decline of fossil fuel industry** by making a suite of commitments to the UN Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that includes emission reduction targets, land sector targets and government-led fossil fuel industry contraction commitments and targets – seeking support and similar breadth of commitment from allies.

The case for action

- 30% of corals in the Great Barrier Reef died as a result of the 2016 bleaching event alone
- Australia is one of the highest per capita greenhouse gas emitters in the world
- Australia is a leading global exporter of climate change causes: coal (#1) and gas (#2)

Protecting iconic places

Australia has bulldozed so much of our forests that only 50% that were standing in 1780 remain intact. So it's important that we protect the best of what's left: protected areas are one of the most important tools we have for preserving our biodiversity.

Australia's national parks and protected areas are places where wildlife, plants and whole ecosystems are protected from threats, given refuge from the impacts of climate change, and are able to regrow and restore themselves.

For our protected areas to achieve these goals, however, they need to:

- Protect at least 20% of all types of ecosystems
- Protect enough of each ecosystem that the wildlife and plants which rely on those areas to survive can continue to do so
- Be managed to allow natural systems to repair themselves and keep threats (like invasive species) out

Australia is less than halfway towards achieving this goal. While Australia has, by area, a large protected area system (the National Reserve System), many of those protected areas are in large, remote places with few industrial threats. This means the National Reserve System offers little protection in areas where our wildlife is most under threat from human activity.



The Kimberley needs greater investment for protected areas and management.



The Tarkine Rainforest in Tasmania deserves World Heritage protection.

Policy and actions

The next Federal Government should:

1. **Expand and strengthen Australia's protected area estate** by increasing funding to the National Reserve System Program to at least \$200 million a year, with the aim of 20% of every terrestrial and marine bioregion in Australia being protected in IUCN category I-III protected areas.
2. **Protect as World Heritage Areas** the Great Australian Bight and takayna/Tarkine.
3. **Protect nationally important ecosystems**, such as the Tasmanian Future Potential Production Forest, Great Forest National Park, the Simpson and Central Desert, Emerald Link, Pilliga, Great Koala National Park, Fitzroy River National Park in the Kimberley and Helena Aurora Range National Park in the Great Western Woodlands.
4. **Update the National Wilderness Inventory** and prioritise the protection of large, intact, functioning ecosystems (wilderness areas) currently outside of the protected area estate.
5. **Protect critically unprotected or underprotected ecosystems**, such as our offshore continental shelf and slope; RAMSAR sites such as the Lower Murray Lakes/Coorong and Coongie Lakes; known ranges of endangered and critically endangered animals; and critically endangered ecological communities.

The case for action

- More than a quarter of Australian ecosystems remain unprotected
- The Australian Government stopped matching funding for new parks in 2012
- Australia's National Reserve System is underfunded by at least \$200 million per year

What success looks like

The success of implementing this vision for nature will be judged by the following results:

Zero destruction of primary, remnant, old growth or high conservation value forests and bushland.

At least 50% reduction in current land clearing rates of regrowth vegetation by 2020, near zero by 2025.

No more fauna or flora extinctions.

Measurable recovery of numbers or extent and quality of threatened, endangered and critically endangered species and ecosystems.

Measurable recovery of freshwater ecosystems, including the Murray-Darling Basin.

Measurable recovery of large, intact and functioning ecosystems (wilderness areas).

20% of every terrestrial and marine bioregion in Australia protected in a nationally coordinated and consistent system of conservation reserves.

Federal Government leading the country in ensuring environmental indicators improve.

Environmental regulation, planning and decision-making independent from political parties, adequately resourced to achieve outcomes, conducted transparently and fully enforced.

Community given legislated right to open standing, merits review and third-party enforcement rights under national environmental laws.

Community and NGO sector granted access to consistent, regularly updated and reliable government data on environmental values and and greenhouse gas reporting, disaggregated by sector and clearly separating carbon drawdown/sequestration figures from emissions.





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