

Saving Australia's native flora and fauna with Aboriginal peoples' ecological knowledge and expertise

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Abstract : *This paper presents the authors' response to the Australian Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communication's inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis. The main focus of the response to the inquiry is on: the ongoing decline in the population and conservation status of Australia's nearly 500 threatened fauna species; the wider ecological impact of faunal extinction; the use of traditional knowledge and management for threatened species recovery and other outcomes, as well as opportunities to expand the use of traditional knowledge and management for conservation; and the adequacy of existing funding streams for implementing threatened species recovery plans and preventing threatened fauna loss in general. In all aspects of protecting Australia's natural environment, the traditional knowledge and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ecological experts, community representatives and organisations, particularly Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs), must be drawn upon. Genuine and ongoing partnership between Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments and these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, community representatives and organisations is essential, as set out in the new National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap.*

Keywords: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ecological knowledge and expertise; koala; the Australian Government; Partnership Agreement; Closing the Gap*

About the author

Dr Adam Paul Heaton was awarded a PhD in education in 2014 at Charles Darwin University. The focus of his PhD was in Aboriginal Studies, with a focus on tackling racism. He has worked at numerous NGOs and Australian Government Departments in Aboriginal Affairs. Adam has published ten peer-reviewed research papers and over forty submissions into Australian Government inquiries, advocating for the rights of and better outcomes for Aboriginal people. He has authored books on his experiences building a home for orphans and empowering over 500 children and their families and communities in Africa.

The need to invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional ecological knowledge and expertise

Australian native flora and fauna has been in rapid decline over the years, mainly due to deforestation and forest degradation. The degree of decline has rocketed in the last few years, particularly due to the impacts of the fire events up until mid-December 2019 (Lane, Wallis, and Phillips, 2020; Blanch and Taylor, 2019; Phillips, Wallis and Lane, 2021). Largely due to the failure of Federal, State and Territory Governments to pass strong laws to protect Australia's native flora and fauna, at least 885,596 hectares of forests and woodlands were bulldozed between 2000 and 2016.

The situation requires urgent attention, and the need to draw upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and expertise is critical. Prior to 1788 and through to today, Aboriginal people have been deeply engaged in conservation of native flora and fauna. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are committed to the protection and sustainable management of Country. The impact of the 2019-20 bushfire crisis on the land, and the ongoing decline of the nation's flora and fauna, is particularly devastating for Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people, and will have an enduring impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of affected communities. Such government support for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their knowledge and expertise fulfils with United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) Article 24:

Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.

Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments should also support the endeavours of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in maintaining and developing their cultural practices, as per UNDRIP (2007) Article 31:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

It is imperative to better utilise the traditional knowledge and expertise in ecological practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Investment in our First People is integral to investing in the environmental health of our nation. Such investment must extend to bolstering educational, training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, so that they can participate more comprehensively in nature conservation practices for protecting our native fauna. With Federal, State, Territory and Local Government fiscal support, extending education and training opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ecological services, including on Country, would make a real difference to the nation's native fauna.

An area of employment particularly ripe for expansion, pending further investment, is that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers, who draw upon traditional skills and connection and knowledge of Country to protect and maintain local flora and fauna, as well as build and maintain the health and wellbeing of their communities (Preece, 2019). More than 700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed as Rangers around Australia, but there is room for more (Country Needs People, 2019). In early 2020, the Federal Government committed \$102 million over seven years from 2021 to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers who are playing a critical role in protecting Australia's network of national parks and reserves (Allam, 2020). Creating a national land management program would further create jobs at the local level, ensure knowledge is passed on, improve land management practices, and ensure strong partnerships with landowners and environmental interests, and bolster the ongoing, effective maintenance and management of our land, flora and fauna.

Federal, State and Territory Governments must make a greater investment in consulting and employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Rangers, environmental officers and in a wide range of other environmental and ecological services, and have them central in policy development and program implementation and evaluation. By investing in more Ranger and other jobs in ecological services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not only will employment opportunities be optimised, but so too will ecological outcomes, including for our fauna populations under peril. Clean energy, energy efficiency technology, waste management and recycling are emerging industries that will also contribute substantially to us better looking after the planet, and our fauna. At present a very low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in these industries. By Increasing Federal, State and Territory Government funding for ACCOs, a greater range of clean energy, waste management and recycling services to be delivered

and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas to be employed, Australia's native fauna and flora will be protected and multiplied.

Another integral aspect of investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their traditional ecological knowledge and expertise, toward achieving better outcomes for our native animals and their habits, must be the diversification of local economies in rural and remote communities. There is currently extensive fragility in rural and remote communities due to high costs in transporting goods, a lack of internet connectivity, challenges in recruiting and retaining staff and rampant racial prejudice and discrimination, including in systems of education, employment, business and government (Heaton, 2019). Environmental setbacks include a lack of access to land and water for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and surrounding flora and fauna, as well as the impacts of climate change. Opportunities to broaden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement and business enterprises on Country, and to better protect Country and its flora and fauna, are optimised through increased support from Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments. In consultation and negotiation with ACCOs, the service delivery of each ACCO needs to be broadened, with additional, appropriate funding attached, so that they may better deliver ecological and environmental health services, delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers, Environmental Health Workers and other workers delivering ecological services. ACCOs provided immediate support to communities affected by the bushfire crisis without the benefit of additional funding, resources, staffing or surge capacity, but this is not acceptable and should not be repeated.

It is also imperative to strengthen Federal, State and Territory Government laws, to see the rampant deforestation and destruction of the habitat of our native animals slowed, and even halted. Federal, State and Territory Governments must invest in the regrowth of tens of thousands of acres of native flora to optimise the chance of protecting and building the nations' native fauna population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental and ecological experts, community representatives and ACCOs must be central in the strengthening of laws pertaining to the protection and regrowth of these habitats.

Conclusion and recommendations

Ensuring the protection of native flora and fauna is a highly important issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can be best achieved by drawing upon their traditional knowledge and expertise. Genuine and ongoing partnership between Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, community representatives and organisations is essential for seeing the results that we need to see. For the sake of Australia's native fauna, as well as for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, through such partnership, greater funding from these levels of government must be directed to:

1. strengthen Federal, State, Territory and Local Government laws pertaining to the protection and regrowth of habitats for Australia's native fauna;
2. invest significantly in consulting and employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Rangers, environmental officers and in a wide range of other environmental and ecological services, and have them central in policy development and program implementation and evaluation;
3. invest in educational, training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, so they may more fully participate in nature conservation practices for protecting Australia's native flora and fauna;
4. develop and implement:
 - a. emergency management plans to reduce the impact of bushfires and other natural disasters;
 - b. a sustainable funding model for Aboriginal-led national management programs; and

- c. cross-cultural training for all fire managers, whether Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or not, to understand and implement traditional practises;
5. fund the diversification of local economies in rural and remote communities, to optimise opportunities for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to better engage in ecological practices; and
6. increase funding for ACCOs for the delivery of a greater range of clean energy, waste management, recycling and other environmental and ecological services, in order for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas to be employed and native fauna and flora will be better protected and strengthened.

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