

# Implementation of Australia's Threatened Species Strategy

*In August 2018, Dr Sally Box, the Australian Government's Threatened Species Commissioner presented at the National Malleefowl Forum in Mildura. The following paper is a synopsis of that presentation.*

## Introduction

The Threatened Species Commissioner model was established in 2014 to bring a new national focus to conservation efforts and help address the growing number of native flora and fauna in Australia facing extinction. Australia's first Threatened Species Commissioner, was appointed in 2014 and Dr Sally Box was announced as Threatened Species Commissioner in December 2017 and commenced in the role in January 2018. The Threatened Species Commissioner is a Senior Executive Service position in the Department of Environment and Energy. The Commissioner champions the development and implementation of practical actions, participates in and influences policy and program development, brings partners and resources together to deliver on ground change, promotes awareness of threatened species at a national level and supports local communities and their efforts to avoid extinctions.

## The need for action

Australia has a growing list of almost 1800 plants and animals listed nationally as threatened. For example, the Malleefowl is currently nationally listed as Vulnerable. There are many threats to our biodiversity and threatened species, including habitat destruction, changed fire regimes and impacts from climate change. The impacts of invasive species are also an important threat, particularly for ground nesting birds. Recent research coming out of the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program's Threatened Species Recovery Hub has indicated that feral cats are killing 1.8 million reptiles and over 1 million birds a day.

Biodiversity loss in Australia remains unacceptably high – a great many of our native species are now threatened with extinction. The loss of the thylacine is what most people think about when we talk about extinction in Australia, but we need to recognise that its extinction is actually a marker of much more wide spread loss. In a little over 200 years, more than 130 of Australia's known species have become extinct, we have lost birds, mammals, frogs, invertebrates and plants too. New thinking and approaches to biodiversity conservation is needed if we are to protect our iconic wildlife for future generations. A key component of the Australian Government's response to the growing number of species threatened with extinction is the development and implementation of Australia's Threatened Species Strategy.

## Threatened Species Strategy

Australia's first Threatened Species Strategy was launched in July 2015. It is a comprehensive policy document aimed at protecting threatened species and averting extinction. The Strategy is based on science, action and partnership – along with a set of principles for prioritisation. One of our key principles of prioritisation is 'Umbrella actions that benefit multiple species or habitats'. The strategy serves as the guiding document for the work of the Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner.

The Strategy sets out a road map to achieve the long-term goal of reversing species declines and supporting species recovery. It does this by outlining a science-based approach and using evidence-based decision making, setting out clear actions which are supported by science and backed by targets. Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner work is guided by a set of principles for prioritisation.

These principles inform the species we are focussing on, and continue to assist us to select recovery initiatives that are likely to get the best results for the investment, and which can be sustained through partnering with the community.

Key action areas that are priorities for the Strategy include:

- Tackling feral cats
- Safe havens for species most at risk
- Improving habitat
- Emergency intervention to avert extinctions

Key targets to measure success of the Strategy include:

- 2 million feral cats culled by 2020 and five islands free of feral cats by 2020
- 20 threatened mammals with improved trajectories by 2020
- 20 threatened birds with improved trajectories by 2020
- 30 threatened plants with improved trajectories by 2020
- Improving recovery guidance

### ***Targeted Birds***

The Australian Government is committed to supporting improved trajectories of at least 20 targeted birds by 2020 under the Strategy. The list includes several ground dwelling or ground nesting birds including the Hooded Plover, Plains Wander and of course the Malleefowl. While some of the threats to these species are common – like predation by introduced pest species - each poses a unique set of recovery challenges based on factors like their geographic range, natural history, population size and even their public profile. The Strategies 20 Bird species occur across Australia with some individual species like the Malleefowl with a range that spans much of the southern half of the continent.

Work on many of the target species provides umbrella benefits for dozens of other threatened species. For example, feral pest control for the Malleefowl also provides benefits other ground dwelling birds, mammals and reptiles in its range. The same is true of habitat improvement work and fire management. Improved habitat range and quality benefits all the native species that call it home. Species like the Malleefowl are important in their own right, but doubly so under the Strategy because of the umbrella benefits it can provide for the species across its gigantic range.

### ***Mobilising resources under the Strategy***

The Threatened Species Strategy is backed by significant investment into projects with threatened species outcomes. Since 2014, the Australian Government has mobilised \$302 million for over 1200 projects supporting threatened species outcomes. This funding comes from a variety of Departmental sources such as the Threatened Species Recovery Fund, Australian Government's National Landcare Program (including Regional Land Partnerships), Green Army Program, 20 Million Trees Program, and the National Environmental Science Program (NESP). The Commissioner's Office works to embed Strategy priorities into these broader programs, essentially mainstreaming threatened species action within these programs. It also builds partnerships with other State and Local governments, NGOs, private sector and community in recognition that we're all in this together and we need to combine our efforts and resources to recover threatened species.

There is so much to be done, and so many opportunities to help. We need to look beyond traditional funding sources – partnerships and greater community participation is increasingly important. Conservation is everybody's business. Australian Government investments have been complimented

by partnerships and investments mobilised through innovative new funding models like the Threatened Species Prospectus. The Prospectus was developed by the Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner and outlines over 50 projects seeking partnerships and investment. It has been successful in attracting over \$6.5 million in project funding. Partnerships have included state governments, private industry, non-profit organisations, community groups, Zoos and international organisations.

## **Communication and engagement**

Another important function of the Threatened Species Commissioner is raising the profile of Australia threatened species. The Commissioner model overall has been very successful in raising awareness and support for the protection of threatened plants and animals, with over 36,000 social media followers and regular engagement with leading traditional media outlets. Social media channels are important tools for engaging directly with the community on a range of issues and to communicate the Government's approach to threatened species recovery. Social media can be a powerful communication tools. Some of the Commissioners individual posts on Facebook can reach hundreds of thousands of people.

Social media not only helps engage and educate the public on threatened species issues it can also help provide tangible funding and conservation outcomes. The Commissioner's office has been able to use the considerable audience we have established to garner support for particular causes and projects. For example, last year, the Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner helped promote the 'Operation Green Parrot' crowd funding campaign being run by Birdlife Australia on our social media channels. The campaign was very successful and raised more than \$86,000 to supported Parks Australia trial reintroductions of Norfolk Island Green Parrot to Phillip Island to establish an insurance population. There are a number of examples in recent years of these sort of community led efforts providing important resources and support to boost recovery efforts for our threatened species.

Traditional media outlets provide an important conduit to Australians and help to communicate why we should care about threatened species and what we need to do to recover them. Since January 2018, the Commissioner has given many interviews and made contributions to television, radio and print media pieces. Having an active presence through a variety of media platforms helps to engage a large and diverse audience. It also allows for the socialisation of new ideas and information. The Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner and others have had a strong messaging focus on the impacts of feral cats in recent years which has helped raise the profile of this issue in Australia and to stimulate debate and action on addressing it.

Face to face stakeholder engagement is critical to the Commissioner role. This year the Commissioner has attended events, meetings and visited project sites in every Australian state and territory. In that time, she has met directly with more than 140 stakeholders including state and territory government officials, NGO staff, scientists, community organisations and Indigenous groups. Direct engagement is of course also an opportunity to hear directly about issues of concern that can be fed back to government, and opportunity to bring different groups together and put in touch with each other.

## **Influencing policy**

The Office of the Threatened Species Commissioner plays an important role in advocating for Threatened Species and helping shape the Australian Government's approach to fighting extinction. The Commissioner's office is fortunate to have direct access to engaged federal Ministers and the Department acts as a conduit between scientists, conservation organisations, NGO's and policy

makers. The Commissioner tries to set an example for state and local policy makers and help bring parties together through initiatives like the feral cat taskforce and by providing input into the meeting of environment ministers (MEM). For example, last year the Commissioner's Office wrote to Mayors and NRM CEOs across Australia appealing for stronger cat management approaches and staff frequently meet with State Government colleagues to discuss threatened species issues around the country. Departmental representatives also sit on recovery teams which is particularly important when dealing with cross jurisdictional species like the Malleefowl or Orange-bellied Parrot

## **Fostering innovation**

Under the banner of the Threatened Species Strategy the Department has been able to support the development and trailing of a number of novel projects and innovative techniques. Support for projects such as using detector dogs to identify threatened species and feral predators in the landscape and captive breeding programs for species like the Plains Wander, Western Ground Parrot. New 'Grooming traps' are being developed with smart technologies that identify feral cats and squirt a poisonous gel onto their fur. These traps reduce off target impacts of traditional baiting and can be deployed in remote areas for long periods without upkeep. Similarly "Canid Pest Ejectors" are being used to target foxes and wild dogs while reducing the need for the broad distribution of baits that can be eaten by native scavengers.

For many species new technologies and approaches are going to be needed if we are going to prevent their extinction and recover their populations. The application of LiDar (Light Detection and Ranging) mapping of Malleefowl mounds or the use of purpose built monitoring and data consolidating Apps is a fantastic example of this. More up to date monitoring helps inform Malleefowl management actions, target resources and people where they are most needed and ultimately makes the entire recovery program more effective. It is encouraging to see the adoption of these types of technologies by recovery teams and other groups working to conserve our threatened species. There is no such thing as a technological 'silver bullet' to solve our conservation problems, but each of these new approaches have shown positive early results and provide additional tools for conservation practitioners working to recovery species.

## **Indigenous participation**

Since its inception the Threatened Species Strategy has had a strong focus on engagement with Indigenous Australians and land managers. Many threatened species occur almost exclusively on lands managed by Aboriginal groups and Indigenous Rangers and communities play a vital role in threatened species management. This is particularly true in arid Australia. Traditional knowledge and practices such as right way burning and wildlife tracking are being increasingly incorporated into recovery practices and threatened species monitoring activities. This year, the Commissioner was in central Australia for the launch of the Bilby Blitz program. The Commissioners office helped fund the development of the "Tracks App" that allowed Indigenous Rangers to digitally record and map wildlife tracks in remote regions of Australia. The bilby blitz was a huge success in coordinating the efforts of Indigenous ranger groups across arid Australia. Data collected through the Tracks App has helped map existing bilby range, find new populations and showed that their distribution was wider than once thought. This information helps target recovery actions and makes time and resources spend on bilby conservation more efficient. The success of innovations and collaborations like this are hearting and prove that the same principles can be applied to the monitoring of other species, including the Malleefowl.

## Looking back

There has been a huge amount of effort since the launch of the Strategy by so many different dedicated organisations, community groups and individuals. A number of the Strategy's targeted species are already showing positive signs and we celebrate conservation success stories. For example, for our target plant species we have been able to create seedbanks and managed insurance populations while also establishing new wild populations. In some cases wild populations are now more than double what they were just a few years ago. It's also important to acknowledge that for other species the challenges continue to be significant. The Orange-bellied parrot for example has been the subject of huge financial investment and years of dedicated work from many agencies and conservation groups. Despite these efforts their numbers in the wild remain perilously low.

The Strategy's year one report showed it met 21 of its 26 targets and overachieved on 7 targets. The Year three report due at in early 2019 will provide another opportunity to assess progress and make adjustments. Each new project provides an opportunity to learn, adapt and refine recovery approaches. With long term recovery programs adapting to new information, conditions and technologies is critical to maintaining success. The proactive approach to adaptive management taken by the Malleefowl Recovery Team is a fantastic example of this in action. Information like that held in the National Malleefowl Monitoring Database helps to inform management decision and will be critical to accurately reporting on the trajectories of the Strategy's targeted threatened species.

## Looking ahead

There no shortage of work left to be done to protect Australia's threatened species under the strategy. We must also be able respond to new and emerging threats. Looking forward to 2020 the Commissioner's office will continue to work toward delivering against the Strategy targets and action areas. This includes improving the trajectory of our target species, undertaking emergency interventions to prevent extinctions when needed, and tackling the impacts of feral cats. Staff will support the Department to deliver the Regional Land Partnerships under the National Landcare Program with my team providing ongoing advice to maximise national outcomes in relation to threatened species. The Commissioner's office will also continue working to improve recovery practices and exploring new opportunities, partnerships technologies and approaches to protecting Australia's threatened species.