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Response to Threatened Species Commissioner Draft Terms of Reference

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the draft terms of reference for the Threatened Species Commissioner.

The Invasive Species Council believes that there are compelling reasons for the terms of reference for the Threatened Species Commissioner to be broadened to encompass actions relevant to invasive species, the main reason for endangerment of Australia's vertebrates, particularly mammals, frogs and fish, and island biota; and a major factor for the majority of threatened species and ecological communities.

In this submission we provide background information that explains the scale of the impact by invasive species on threatened species and ecological communities and we suggest recommended changes to the terms of reference for the Threatened Species Commissioner.

Impacts of Invasive Species

Scientists consistently rate invasive species as one of the top two or three threats impacting Australia's natural environment, and invasive species threaten more species and communities listed under the EPBC Act than any other factor apart from habitat loss.

Invasive species have already caused the extinction of more than 40 Australian mammals, birds and frogs, and are second only to habitat loss in the numbers of Australian species and ecological communities they threaten.[1]

[1] Invasive Species Council. 2008. *Invasive Species: One of the top three threats to Australian biodiversity.* Backgrounder. See fact sheets at invasives.org.au.

Australia's latest State of the Environment report (2011) recorded that 60% of nationally endangered species are affected by invasive species and 15% by disease (mostly due to introduced pathogens) and notes that Australia's natural heritage is under pressure from a 'fast-growing number of invasive species'. Under climate change the 'current replacement of native species with a smaller number of introduced species capable of supporting a narrower range of ecological functions will intensify. An explosion in the number and impacts of invasive species is plausible...'

The need to address the decline of threatened species must require addressing the impacts from invasive species.

The report card assessments on tackling invasive species contained in the State of the Environment report were bleak: high to very high impacts with deteriorating or unclear trends. Their biodiversity impacts and management effectiveness received the worst possible ratings.

Environment component	Impact of invasive species	Trend	Management effectiveness – outputs & outcomes
Biodiversity	Very high	Deteriorating	Ineffective
Heritage values	Very high	Deteriorating	NA
Inland water environments	High	Deteriorating	Partially effective
Land environment	High	Deteriorating	Partially effective
Antarctic terrestrial environment	High	Unclear	Effective

The State of the Environment report contains several critical comments on deficiencies of management, information and resources for invasive species. For example:

> *'Government responses to invasive species are uncoordinated at the national level, reactive, focused on larger animals, biased towards potential impact on primary industry at the expense of the total ecosystem, and critically under resourced.'*
> *…*
> *'New pressures are emerging and are of high concern due to the limited resources available for control.'*

International Commitments

Australia has committed to international agreements to address the impacts of invasive species on our natural biodiversity.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, refers to invasive species and in part it commits Australia to:

> ***Acticle 8h***
> *Prevent the introduction of, control or eradicate those alien species which threaten ecosystems, habitats or species.*

As part of the Convention, Australia recently agreed to a ten year global strategic plan for biodiversity that included 20 targets knows as the Aichi targets. One target seeks to address invasive species under Strategic Goal B: Reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use:

> ***Target 9***
> *By 2020, invasive alien species and pathways are identified and prioritized, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and measures are in place to manage pathways to prevent their introduction and establishment.*

National Commitments

Biodiversity Strategy

In 2010 all Australian governments through the natural resources ministerial council agreed to the Australian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2030.

The strategy noted:

> *While Australia has good systems for managing pests and disease in primary production industries, there is potential to improve arrangements for managing invasive species that have environmental and social impacts. (p25)*

It referred to the implementation of the Beale biosecurity review (2008) and Australia Weeds Strategy and Australian Pest Animal Strategy.

The strategy recognised that we must 'accelerate action to address biodiversity decline' (page 20). It adopted ten practical targets including:

> *By 2015, reduce by at least 10% the impacts of invasive species on threatened species and ecological communities in terrestrial, aquatic and marine environments.*

This target was the sole action under the sub-priority: 'Reducing threats to biodiversity'.

Despite four years passing, there has been no baseline measure of the impacts of invasive species nor a credible attempt to reach the invasive species target. Actions to date on invasive species through cooperative state and federal actions have been limited and failed to consider how the target would be met. Given the limited action, any future attempt to meet the target must extend the deadline from 2015 to, say, 2020.

The 2008 Beale biosecurity review and current weed and pest animal strategies have not been delivered in a way that will deliver the required improvements to the impact of invasive species.

More generally, the strategy stated:

> *The main threats to Australia's biodiversity continue to be many of the existing stressors and disturbances such as habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation; invasive species; unsustainable use and management of natural resources; changes to the aquatic environment and water flows; and changing fire regimes.*
> …
> *A major challenge is to shift our interventions to prevention of harm to biodiversity, in preference to resource-intensive efforts that attempt to repair degradation after it has occurred.* (p 46)

These ideas are the key reasons for the federal government and a Threatened Species Commissioner to have a strong role in strategically tackling the impacts of invasive species on threatened species.

EPBC Act

The EPBC is the main statutory basis for protecting biodiversity and addressing the decline in threatened species.

The listing of threatened species and the preparation of recovery plans are the detailed mechanisms for preventing the extinction of species under the legislation. A key strategic tool of the Act to limit the impacts on large numbers of threatened species is the listing of key threatening processes and the preparation of threat abatement plans.

Fourteen of the 19 listed key threatened processes relate to invasive species. The following table lists the current status of these invasive species related key threatening processes and threat abatement plans.

Key Threatening Process	Date listed	Requirement to prepare a Threat Abatement Plan	Threat abatement plan prepared
1. Competition and land degradation by rabbits	16-Jul-2000	Yes	Yes
2. Competition and land degradation by unmanaged goats	16-Jul-2000	Yes	Yes
3. Dieback caused by the root-rot fungus (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*)	16-Jul-2000	Yes	Yes
4. Predation by European red fox	16-Jul-2000	Yes	Yes
5. Predation by feral cats	16-Jul-2000	Yes	Yes
6. Infection of amphibians with chytrid fungus resulting in chytridiomycosis	23-Jul-2002	Yes	Yes
7. Predation, Habitat Degradation,	06-Aug-2001	Yes	Yes

	Competition and Disease Transmission by Feral Pigs			
8.	**The reduction in the biodiversity of Australian native fauna and flora due to the red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* (fire ant)**	02-Apr-2003	No	Yes*
9.	**The biological effects, including lethal toxic ingestion, caused by Cane Toads (*Bufo marinus*).**	12-Apr-2005	Yes	Yes
10.	**Loss of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity following invasion by the Yellow Crazy Ant (*Anoplolepis gracilipes*) on Christmas Island, Indian Ocean.**	12-Apr-2005	No	Yes*
11.	**Predation by exotic rats on Australian offshore islands of less than 1000 km2 (100,000 ha)**	29-Mar-2006	Yes	Yes
12.	**Invasion of northern Australia by Gamba Grass and other introduced grasses**	16-Sep-2009	Yes	Yes
13.	**Loss and degradation of native plant and animal habitat by invasion of escaped garden plants, including aquatic plants.**	08-Jan-2010	No	No
14.	**Novel biota and their impact on biodiversity**	26-Feb-2013	No	No

* Covered by the threat abatement plan for the impacts of tramp ants on biodiversity in Australia and its territories.

We believe that the threat abatement plans already completed do not have enough effective actions and sufficient resources allocated to reduce the growing impacts of listed threating processes.

There are also insufficient plans in place to prevent new threatening processes due to invasive species from impacting on native species in the future. The EPBC Act processes do not properly consider future threats. The 2009 Hawke review into the EPBC Act recommended that a foresighting function be added in order to identify potential and future threats and setting in place preventative strategies.[2]

Recently the scientific committee refused to assess further nominations of key threatening processes relating to invasive species on the basis that the listing of 'Novel biota and their impact on biodiversity' as a key threating process on 26 Feb 2013 encompassed the nominated invasive species (which were feral deer and tall wheat grass). But the listing of novel biota has information benefits only since there is no requirement to prepare a threat abatement plan and no action resulting from the listing. The Invasive Species Council prepared the two rejected

[2] Recommendations 23 (2) and (3) in Hawke, A. 2010. The Australian Biodiversity Act. Report of the Independent review of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 2009. Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and Arts. Australian Government.

nominations because there was a lack of action on these threats at the state level and they required a national focus.

Despite the listings of the key threatening processes, and in most cases, threat abatement plans, there remains a deteriorating trend of impacts from invasive species (see section on Impacts of Invasive Species above).

Solutions

To achieve the global convention and national strategy targets and goals will require stronger action at all stages of the intervention hierarchy for invasive species:

- Prevention: Stopping the deliberate and accidental introduction of non-native species that are likely to harm native species. Preventative actions will deliver the greatest return for effort expended.

  Progress: Australia continues to import species that have never been subject to risk assessment, including species that are known invaders and new variants of existing invasive species. There are few restrictions on the movement of plants native to one part of Australia but harmful elsewhere. New harmful invaders continue to arrive accidentally and establish here.

- Eradication: Eliminating new and emerging invaders before they become entrenched.

  Progress: By neglecting opportunities to eradicate invasive species, governments condemn future Australians to the financial and health burdens of ongoing control programs and biodiversity to future declines and extinctions.

- Containment and control: Protecting biodiversity from harmful invasive species.

  Progress: Taking into account that climate change will worsen the threat of invasive species, there needs to be more concerted and coordinated action to contain and control harmful invaders. To achieve the national target of 10% reduction of impacts will require planning, law and policy reform, cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral cooperation and more funding directed at high priorities.

We believe that it is clear that the implementation of existing Government policies is failing to address the growing impact of invasive species.

Terms of Reference for the Threatened Species Commissioner

The main limitation of the proposed terms of reference is their piecemeal focus on individual threatened species and the lack of a broader focus on the drivers of species decline. They completely neglect the role of key threatening process abatement in species recovery.

Action on many individual threatened species will waste scarce resources without action to address the key drivers of species decline.

Reducing the impacts of invasive species is essential to make progress towards addressing the decline of threatened species and endangered ecological communities.

Accordingly, the duties of an effective Threatened Species Commissioner must include a role in driving progress in tackling current and future invasive species.

Suggested Changes to the Terms of Reference

The following additional roles/responsibilities for the Threatened Species Commissioner are suggested:

Short term:

- Identify priority key threatening processes where action can be taken that will lead to significant threat reduction, including a major focus on the threats from invasive species.

- Identify the steps and resources needed to achieve the national biodiversity conservation strategy target of reducing the impact of invasive species by 10%.

Medium to long term:

- Review the effectiveness of strategies, policies and programs to reduce the impact of current and future key threatening processes

- Work with the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and the federal environment department to strengthen the connection between the statutory key threatening processes and threat abatement planning processes and the implementation of threat abatement actions.

The following program outcomes should be added:

- targeted, practical and cost effective investment in threat abatement actions
- clear and accessible public reporting on the effectiveness of threat abatement actions
- baseline data collected and a pathway determined to reach the 10% target to reduce the impact of invasive species on Australia's biodiversity by 2020.

I am happy to provide more details to explain how the expanded terms of reference may work in practice.

I can be contacted on 0438 588 040 or email andrewcox@invasives.org.au

Yours sincerely

Andrew Cox
CEO

FOR REFERENCE

Proposed Draft Terms of Reference for the Threatened Species Commissioner

Roles/responsibilities

In the short term (first 12 months):

- identify priority nationally listed threatened species for which conservation actions are likely to be successful.
- work with stakeholders to identify the highest priority actions to secure those species in the wild for at least the next 100 years
- identify and secure partners and funds to implement this programme of high priority actions over the longer term
- guide a process of reform to simplify and streamline the statutory recovery plan process

In the medium to long term (1 – 5 years):

- advise on and direct conservation actions in priority national threatened species recovery programmes in collaboration with the programme coordinators
- building on government, non-government and community-based threatened species initiatives, develop a strategic approach to threatened species conservation, including a prioritisation framework for species and conservation actions
- work closely with the Threatened Species Scientific Committee to strengthen the connection between the statutory listing and recovery planning processes and the implementation of conservation actions.
- identify opportunities for longer term funding models, including co-investment and partnerships, to support the threatened species conservation action programme
- monitor the effectiveness of priority conservation actions and report to the Minister and to the public.

Programme outcomes

- implementation of conservation actions for priority nationally listed species
- priority threatened species are secured in the wild for at least the next 100 years
- more integrated, complementary threatened species conservation efforts at a national level
- targeted, practical and cost effective investment in threatened species conservation actions
- clear and accessible public reporting on effectiveness of threatened species conservation actions
- a more strategic approach to threatened species conservation to better inform government policy and planning.