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PROTECTING QUEENSLAND'S ICONIC ANIMALS & THEIR HOMES

The Great Koala Ark

Queensland was one of the koala hotspots of Australia and many of us remember koalas in and around our yards as we grew up. Sadly, koalas are now under threat of disappearing entirely from southeast Queensland. Without committed action we will be the generation responsible for the regional extinction of koalas in southeast Queensland.

The greatest threat to koalas is habitat loss, mostly from unsustainable development. As habitat shrinks, koalas become more vulnerable to attack from dogs, collisions with cars, and disease. For koalas to survive and thrive, we must identify and protect key refuges.

The Great Koala Ark would link the best koala habitats that rim the regions of the Gold Coast, Brisbane and Sunshine Coast. We are lucky that these built-up regions still have areas of surviving bushland. As we lose the battle to save koalas in heavily populated areas, we must ensure a safe haven in the forests that encircle them.

Recommended Policy for the Queensland Government

- Establish an 'Ark' of protected koala habitat around the Gold Coast, Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast by protecting, restoring and managing government land, and providing advice and incentives to private landholders to help them do the same.

New parks should also be developed to protect other iconic and threatened animals including the Proserpine rock-wallaby and Eungella honeyeater in the Mackay-Whitsunday region, the flashjack wallaby, black-throated Finch, northern quoll and northern hairy-nosed wombat in the Brigalow Belt, the cassowary, northern bettong and mahogany glider in the Wet Tropics, golden-shouldered parrot on Cape York and night parrot in outback Queensland.

Indigenous Rangers

Queensland currently funds 76 Land and Sea Rangers throughout the state.¹ In addition, the Commonwealth Government's Working on Country program funds 777 rangers throughout Australia.

Indigenous rangers bring a depth of cultural attachment and unique land management skills to the nationally and internationally important task of 'looking after Country'. Indigenous ranger programs provide real jobs for Indigenous people to be proud of, and are one of the few Indigenous programs to have shown significant measurable improvements in the health and well-being of participating Indigenous communitiesⁱⁱ. Rangers are usually associated with management of Indigenous nature refuges or national parks (such as on the Girringun Indigenous Protected Area, which includes state national parks and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park).

However, at present contracts are only for five years, a low level of security for rangers. Gender equity is an ongoing issue, with less than a third of positions going to women. Finally, WWF estimates that at least 150 new ranger positions are required to meet conservation needs in Queensland, and the Indigenous community appetite to answer that need.

Recommended policy for the Queensland Government:

- An additional 150 Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger positions, with emphasis on longer contracts, gender equity and Great Barrier Reef catchments.

National parks and other 'protected areas' on Indigenous, public and private lands

Queensland is home to some of the most unique animals and plants on the planet providing the state with a unique offering in the global tourism market. Visitors to Queensland's national parks and to the Great Barrier Reef spend around \$5.6 billion and \$6 billion respectively each year. In 2013, 2.8 million domestic and 1.26 million overseas wild-nature oriented tourists visited Queensland parks and nature destinations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many Queensland animals and plants are facing extinction as a result of habitat loss and degradation. National Parks, Indigenous Protected Areas, privately-owned Nature Refuges (collectively '*protected areas*' or '*protected area system*') provide a safe space for these unique and at-risk Queensland species. In order to do so, new protected areas are needed in the right habitats, so as to ensure that all '*regional ecosystems*' (communities of native vegetation found in particular areas), habitats of threatened species and other high biodiversity areas are '*adequately represented*'^{iv} in the protected area system.

This should be achieved by first identifying and converting high biodiversity value state lands to national parks (including unallocated state land, state forest, and leasehold land). This involves retiring or buying out any leases or permits currently valid. Secondly, the State should purchase high biodiversity value private lands to become new national parks. At present, the capacity to do either is extremely limited, with only \$5 million a year budgeted and processes for assessing and converting state forests and leasehold land halted by the previous government.^v WWF estimates at least \$55 million a year is needed to meet commitments.

Finally, the State should provide meaningful financial incentives to non-government landholders who voluntarily protect their land. At the moment, the 500+ Nature Refuges covering 4 million ha of the state, including many over Indigenous land, get little preferential treatment in regard to taxes and rates, or National Landcare Program grants.^{vi} The state only has a \$5 million NatureAssist grants program. The lack of full protection for nature refuges is also a disincentive to landholders to participate, as the granting of a mining approval over Bimblebox Nature Refuge shows.^{vii} Direct grants are, however, only one of many incentives that could be applied. Other incentives include increasing legislative protection, preferential access to regional NRM funding, and land tax or rates relief.

It is essential to ensure that all protected area managers, of either of government national parks or non-government Nature Refuges, have the funding they need to properly manage fire, weeds and feral animals. The state government recently boosted national park ranger funding to keep pace with the growth of national parks.^{viii} WWF estimates that the nature refuge system takes, on average, at least \$8/ha to manage. Accordingly, management investment should be at least \$30 million per year into the nature refuge system through a mixture of instruments.

Recommended policy for the Queensland Government:

- By 2022, increase funding for growth and ongoing management of protected areas of all types to ensure that all *regional ecosystems*, threatened species habitats and other *high biodiversity areas* are adequately represented. This will require the protection of about 17.5 million hectares (or about 9% of the state).^{ix}
- Legislate to ensure nature refuges can be fully protected from all consumptive or extractive resource use, including mining and livestock grazing.
- Boost NatureAssist and regional NRM funding, and offer new land tax and rates concessions to nature refuges, such as by setting the statutory unimproved land value at zero or close to zero for rates purposes.

Costs:

- \$55 million/year for five years (\$275 million) for new land purchases or for buying out and retiring interests over state land needed for national parks, with additional increments in base funding for QPWS to manage new parks as appropriate.^x (This includes the Great Koala Ark).
- \$30 million/year toward expansion of and management of existing nature refuges, in the form of a boost to NatureAssist grants, Regional NRM grants, as well as new land tax and rates relief.
- \$15 million/year for five years (\$75 million) for 150 new Indigenous rangers including wages and operational budgets.

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ⁱ <https://environment.ehp.qld.gov.au/land-sea-rangers/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Consolidated-SROI-Report-on-IPA-WoC.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tourism Research Australia unpublished data provided to WWF, 2013

^{iv} Queensland joined all jurisdictions in agreeing to the Natural Resources Management Ministerial Council's 2009 *Strategy for the National Reserve System* which contains explicit targets for species and ecosystem representation.

<http://www.environment.gov.au/land/nrs/publications/strategy-national-reserve-system>

^v <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/6/14/koalas-climate-change-reef-and-jobs-for-park-rangers-key-budget-priorities>

^{vi} Smith, F et al 2017 Reforms required to the Australian tax system to improve biodiversity conservation on private land. *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 33:443-450

^{vii} Bimblebox has been approved to be destroyed by a coal mine. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2013-12-23/bimblebox-nature-reserve/5172742>

^{viii} <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/6/14/koalas-climate-change-reef-and-jobs-for-park-rangers-key-budget-priorities>

^{ix} For more detail see: WWF's *Building Nature's Safety Net 2014* report and WWF's submission on the draft *Queensland protected areas strategy* (available on request).



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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