



## NATURE RESERVES PRESERVATION GROUP

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This submission is made on behalf of the NRPG, a long-established conservation umbrella group based in the City of Kalamunda. With the increasing rate at which the native vegetation is disappearing, this Issues paper is a timely and welcome initiative. At present, native vegetation is not effectively protected. It is hoped that, as a result of community input, combined with State Government action, better protection and enhancement of this valuable resource will be achieved. The final policy should reflect the rapidly-changing community priorities, and the increasing recognition of the physical and spiritual benefits of retaining and improving the health and extent of native vegetation.

As is customary with NRPG submissions, sections of major interest in the issues paper will be quoted in italics, followed by 'boxed' NRPG comments.

### Minister's foreword.

*"Our native vegetation ...has cultural importance for Aboriginal people..."*

Within this State, the Commonwealth Government has failed to protect areas of native vegetation of such cultural importance, as evidenced by the destruction of environmental values on the Perth Airport estate. The leased Commonwealth-owned estate is effectively 'protected' from State environmental regulations. This emphasises the need for such State mechanisms to have the ability to protect native vegetation wherever possible. Wherever possible, the State should prosecute its case for the preservation of such areas with the utmost vigour.

*"With this paper, we wish to start a dialogue with the Western Australian community on how this important asset should be managed now and for the future."*

Such "dialogue" is essential. Unfortunately, all too often, ensuing legislation fails to reflect this. Statements such as "*now and for the future*" have failed to be realised. Later amendments have tended to dilute any enthusiasm for "*the future*." NRPG has high hopes that this proposed "dialogue" may change this and welcomes the opportunity to contribute.

*"The Government acknowledges the challenge in striking the right balance between protecting the environment and delivering a strong economic outlook for the State."*

This "*right balance*" has, in the past appeared to place the environment in a position subordinate to the State's economic outlook. Whilst economic initiatives may be modified, staged and have a certain flexibility, the natural environment lacks any such attributes. Failure to protect the natural environment leads invariably, to its demise. Once lost,

biodiversity values cannot be returned to their original state. Initiatives to date, however, give hope that such a balance may be achieved through the proposed “*strategic approach*.”

*“The McGowan Government has committed to expanding the conservation estate by 5million hectares by 2023–24.”*

Welcome as is this statement, NRPg requests that this expansion factors in the need for sufficient funding to be allocated to provide adequate on-ground human resources. Only then can the conservation estate be effectively managed.

### **Introduction: Our valuable vegetation.**

It is encouraging to see the importance of our vegetation and its value to so many sectors of the economy acknowledged. In our first paragraph, we noted the physical and spiritual benefits of this vegetation being increasingly recognised and acknowledged by the population. This particular benefit should be included here as it is vital to the health and wellbeing of all sentient beings.

### **The Challenge.**

Seeing this challenge so graphically outlined, clearly indicates the need for prompt action if the values of our vegetation are to be preserved and enhanced. Daunting and protracted though the task may be, a start must be made soon, if any action is to be effective. The increasing losses must be arrested, further losses prevented and restoration of vegetation carried out wherever possible. Such action will incur significant costs and Government must allocate sufficient long-term funding to enable the research, monitoring and on-ground work to be carried out effectively.

### **Striking the right balance.**

See earlier comments regarding past experiences.

### **Box 5: Tracking the extent and location of clearing.**

*“We need to improve Western Australia’s data systems ... consolidated spatial records [cover] only 3 per cent of all historical clearing to date.”*

The need for improvement is obvious and it is encouraging to see this recognised. The figures quoted indicate the need for more comprehensive and accurate spatial records to be kept of all clearing.

*“Our existing map of native vegetation extent across the State...is not systematically updated. There are no Statewide datasets of native vegetation condition.”*

This is a serious shortcoming of the existing system and should be rectified following feedback on this issues paper. The clearly defined location and extent of clearing, authorised and non-authorised, should be accurately recorded and be freely available to conservation and other interested groups. Given the increasing effects of the changing climate, it is essential

these data should be part of the vegetation monitoring system on a regular basis, to be reported annually. See earlier comments on the need for guaranteed long-term funding.

## **The Initiatives:**

### **1. A State native vegetation policy.**

*“A State native vegetation policy will promote consistency and transparency in the objectives that apply to native vegetation and clearing across all government processes.” (p. 8).*

The creation of such a policy is to be applauded, particularly since a lack of transparency in the past, has been a concern to all sectors of the community. The recent discussions on the need to bring the Environmental Protection Act into the 21<sup>st</sup> century should ensure that amendments include an assurance that such a policy is mandatory. The policy should also incorporate the **Bush Forever** concept of “*a representative system of protected areas*” referred to as the ‘Comprehensive Adequate and Representative’ reserve system (CAR). The Policy should incorporate this CAR commitment of the Bush Forever reserve system as protected areas. This incorporation may go some way to arresting the loss of Bush Forever sites experienced over the past decades.

#### **Desired outcome.**

*“Set an enabling framework for consistent, transparent objectives for consideration of native vegetation across all government processes”.*

Should this policy **fully** explore the suggested approaches and **deliver** the expected benefits, it will be welcomed. Development of this framework should be carried out in tandem with any revisions to the EP Act, resulting from recent submissions and discussions.

#### **Box 6: Proposed policy objectives.**

*“a. The management of native vegetation is consistent, transparent and strategic and strikes a balance between environmental, economic, social and cultural outcomes to Western Australians”*

Past experience dictates we have concern whenever the word “balance” is found in policy documents. Refer to earlier comments (above) which explain this concern in more detail.

*“b. Western Australia’s native vegetation is strategically conserved and restored to maintain and improve ecological function and biodiversity at a landscape scale.”*

Strategic conservation and restoration on such a scale may well be the best method of retaining biodiversity and ecological function. Current legislation and practices seem unable to achieve these aspirations.

*“c. Higher priority and strategic protection for unique and at-risk native vegetation, tailored to the regional setting.”*

This action is long overdue and the objective is to be welcomed. To achieve this objective however, will, require increasing funding needed for the extra research required. More needs to be known about these rare species and communities. The increased detailed surveys and mapping required, together with the processing of data obtained, will require significantly more staff.

*“What opportunities are presented by the development of a State native vegetation policy focused on how the Government manages vegetation?”*

Applied effectively and rigorously enforced, the policy will enable better, more effective retention, protection and management of native vegetation. The enhanced knowledge base will be readily available to inform future policies and on-ground actions. This could result in the preservation of current levels of vegetation and, in the best potential outcome, a net increase in native vegetation cover.

## **2. Better information.**

### **Issues**

A comprehensive account of the issues, NRPG endorses this account and stresses the importance of up-to-the-minute (as far as is possible) data. These data should show clearly areas cleared each year and include all clearing – authorised, unlawful and exempt. See earlier comments.

### **Expected benefits**

Improved understanding, more transparency of process, easier and simpler access to relevant data and a greater knowledge and acknowledgement of the cumulative effects of clearing, would all be worthwhile benefits. None of these will eventuate unless a binding commitment is made by Government to provide long-term funding for this.

### **Possible approaches**

The potential of Landgate’s Land Monitor project (well-established over two decades) and, similar emerging technology projects, should be fully utilised.

### **Box 8: Towards statewide, regularly updated native vegetation information**

Given current concerns over the effects of a changing climate, maximum use should be made of monitoring systems to regularly assess data such as the State’s carbon sequestration rates and carbon emissions. See comments above.

### **Your thoughts ?**

#### **How do you use native vegetation data in your sector?**

Mainly, to keep abreast of development threats, to monitor vegetation variations, to stay informed on trends and, to gain up-to-date information for use in submissions. Broader issues are examined with help from other bodies such as Urban Bushland Council and Conservation Council WA.

**Which of the following elements of better information provision would be most relevant to your sector?**

Evidence base for decisions. The more accurate information available, the more chance of presenting a convincing case when defending the retention of native vegetation.

**What other opportunities are presented by improved information and improved access to information?**

The more detailed vegetation maps resulting from the combining of vegetation and flora survey data, will add to the bank of knowledge available to those able to access this information. Community conservation groups such as NRPG, confident in the currency of the information, will find these data of great use in compiling submissions. Planners at all levels in State and Local Government, will find the information of use in achieving the “*balance*” between Environmental and developmental benefits. The improved information may also lead to the long-awaited halt to the clearing of areas of native vegetation, including Threatened Ecological Communities (TECs) and to the protection of vegetation in the State’s South West biodiversity hot spots, the Wheatbelt and in the Perth Peel Region (already drastically cleared).

### **3. Better regulation.**

#### **Issues**

In order to offer any guarantee of effective conservation of native vegetation, effective regulation across all government departments is essential. The continuing loss of native vegetation, makes it clear current legislation is in need of an overhaul. To ensure conservation of these valuable assets is assured, legislative reform is needed, together with firm commitments from the State Government that adequate funding will be made available for on-ground operations. Currently, personnel involved in such operations are sorely stretched, a problem exacerbated by the welcomed expansion of the Conservation Estate (see earlier comments). The fact that the shortcomings of the current legislation are, in part, acknowledged, is an encouraging start.

It is disappointing to see no mention of Bush Forever in this section, since its relevance to the health of residents and visitors is widely acknowledged. We earlier commented on the need for the Bush Forever CAR system to be incorporated in this policy (**Initiative 1.**) Our concern is that, with the increasing vulnerability of these valuable (and rapidly-degrading) Bush Forever sites, sufficient resources may not be made available for their protection. This Government needs to arrest the past decline of these unique reserves and to ensure the survival of their valuable biodiversity for the benefit of future generations. Proper management of all Bush Forever sites and their public promotion, will be a huge benefit to the people of Perth and to visitors. The relevance of Bush Forever to Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in the Perth region, should dictate that all LGAs be required to prepare Local Biodiversity Strategies under the Planning Act or MRS Act. The WALGA guidelines, if followed by Authorities, will ensure biodiversity values are retained through recognition of the importance of greenways, wildlife corridors and linkages.

In concert with Urban Bushland Council (UBC), NRPB recommends that funding be provided for the transfer of those Bush Forever reserves identified for incorporation into the conservation estate and to be managed by DBCA. Funding for conservation and management of such reserves should be a legal requirement under the CALM Act. See earlier comments on CAR reserve system. Action is urgently required if the ageing Bush Forever initiative is to retain any credibility.

### **Your thoughts?**

**Which of the following elements of *better regulation* would be most important to your sector?**

*Improved protection for native vegetation.*

This is, not surprisingly, the most important element for NRPB. Current protection is inadequate and, in many cases, non-existent.

*Improved compliance and enforcement of unauthorised clearing.*

Whilst improved compliance is needed and would be our second most important element, the drafting of the latter part of this element needs revision. As written, it makes little sense, NRPB suggests it be amended to read: ***“and vigorous enforcement of penalties for unauthorised clearing.”***

### **What other opportunities are presented by better regulation?**

- Opportunities here may be exploited in conjunction with our suggested amendments to the EP Act, submitted earlier. Areas of Threatened Ecological Communities (TECs) and rare species habitat, should be declared Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) under the Environmental Protection Act.
- The unique south west biodiversity hotspot and the Wheatbelt regions should be declared ESAs and, under an amended EP Act, no further clearing should be permitted within these ESAs. The Clearing Regulations should ensure this.
- An amended EP Act and the Native Vegetation clearing regulations, should be capable of delivering an overall ‘environmental net gain’ and increased biodiversity conservation. A net increase in vegetation cover in the State will greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration.

## **4. Box 11: Threatened species and communities**

- Banksia, Tuart and Wheatbelt woodlands are described as nationally threatened and protected ecological communities. Under the EPBC Act. Currently these communities are **not** being protected federally or by the State, and areas are being lost by cumulative clearing through a national “death by a thousand cuts” regime. This needs to change. We recommend clearing regulations be clarified and strengthened. Clearing proposals at variance with one or more of these strengthened Clearing Principles would not be approved. Rigorously applied, these Clearing Principles would end the clearing of threatened species and communities.
- Currently, neither the Environmental Protection Act (EP Act), nor the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act), have been able to prevent

the increasing rate of loss of TECs in the State. There is a disconnect between the two Acts which enables clearing of TECs on Commonwealth land within the State.

#### 5. Box 13: Managing unlawful clearing

Given the extent of unauthorised or ‘inadvertent’ clearing taking place throughout the State, it appears more funding and resources are needed, to allow increased surveillance and detection of such clearing and, where appropriate, prosecutions to take place. To help tackle the problem, a single agency, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER), should assess all proposals. In the Wheatbelt region and in the heavily-cleared south west areas (including the Perth and Peel sub-regions), exemptions should not apply. In clearing proposals from State Government agencies, in all cases the principle of “avoidance” should be employed in the interests of retaining biodiversity.

### 4. A bioregional approach

NRPG supports such an approach. Concern is felt and expressed elsewhere in this submission, for the State’s south west and Wheatbelt areas. Already under stress from loss of biodiversity values, they require drastic revision of current legislation to prevent further clearing. The current discussions on the need to bring the EP Act into the 21<sup>st</sup> century are particularly appropriate in dealing with native vegetation protection. All infrastructure and Utility agencies should be forcefully advised of the need to avoid damage to native vegetation. Currently, this is not the case. The result is the needless loss of vegetation.

Under such an approach, in any decision making under the EP Act, protection of the natural environment and its biodiversity, as the name of the Act should imply, should be paramount.

As NRPG called for in its EP Act submission (**extract below**), there is a need for the introduction of more Environmental Protection Policies (EPPs).

*“Key Environmental Protection Policies (EPPs).”*

Any review of this section should be expedited. In light of the perceived “mixed effectiveness” of such policies and of the calls for changes to the section, consideration should be given to expanding the range of EPPs to include the following:

All Regional Parks, existing and proposed.

Banksia Woodlands of the Swan Coastal Plain TEC.

Tuart forests of the Swan Coastal Plain (critically endangered).

Reintroduction of the former Wetlands EPP.

Revocation of any existing EPP should trigger public comment on the EPA’s advice to the Minister and, parliamentary approval of the Minister’s decision should also be required.

### Other initiatives

#### Box 16: Aboriginal land management

The Aboriginal Ranger programme has the full support of NRPG, with the further request that knowledge from indigenous groups be **fully** utilised in the fire management areas of land management.

### **Box 17: The value of nature-based tourism for regional economies**

This is a point which should be emphasised and widely broadcast. Roadside clearing, frequently justified on spurious or, at best, dubious ‘road safety’ grounds, is increasingly responsible for kilometres of bland, boring driving. For many drivers from interstate and overseas, this will be their fate. ANY roadside clearing application should have a strong, valid argument to support its case. The aesthetic value of such vegetation should be acknowledged, both as a tourism and therefore, as a regional economy asset.

### **Box 18: Environmental offsets to fund restoration grants?**

Whilst the existence of such a fund may seem a sound idea and capable of benefitting the natural environment, the basic concept is flawed. Offsets, all too often, provide a virtual ‘get out of jail free’ ticket at State and Federal level, to those wishing to clear native vegetation. The end result is always a net LOSS of the native vegetation and its ecosystems triggering the offset process. The best that may be said of the offsets principle is that it may be better than nothing and, that any such ‘offset’ monies, distributed as land care grants will benefit some conservation projects. Commercial entities such as mining companies should, on completion of activities, be compelled to set aside sufficient monies for the full rehabilitation and revegetation of degraded or denuded sites.

### **Box 19: The power of private land managers in managing native vegetation**

As stated, these land managers play a vital role in the future of native vegetation. Existing programmes mentioned should receive increased funding and support from the State Government and programmes such as the Western Suburbs Regional Organisation of Councils (WESROC) Greening Plan should be supported. Many private landholders are willing to improve management of their native vegetation, initiatives exist as models and Government should make every effort to ensure this willingness and enthusiasm does not go to waste.

### **Box 20: Plan for Our Parks**

The commitment to increase the conservation reserve system is welcomed by NRPG (see earlier comments) and, we repeat the need to ensure adequate funding is guaranteed to support long-term management of the increased reserves. Whilst the regional extent of such expansion is welcomed, the importance of the parks of the Perth metropolitan area should not be neglected. These are parks readily accessible to the population of the area, in many cases, part of daily life and, of immense benefit to the large population having access to them. The management of these parks should not be neglected in the worthwhile efforts to expand the conservation reserve system. The Bush Forever plan is not mentioned in this section. This should be corrected (see earlier comments on this).

### **Box 21: Economic diversification to support Rangelands condition**

In order to address the implications of the changing climate and to support the owners and leaseholders, stocking rates should be reduced, revegetation and rangeland restoration and carbon farming encouraged and, diversification into other spheres such as eco-tourism, more strongly supported.



## **Conclusion.**

A final comment (endorsing that of the Urban Bushland Council), concerns the following passage from Box 3 of the issues paper:

*“WA is a signatory to Australia’s Native Vegetation Framework (COAG 2012). However, as WA does not have a single framework for native vegetation, the national goals have not been integrated into a single policy or approach.”*

This integration must take place. It is vital that these national goals be brought under a single framework and policy under the Environmental Protection Act and, that the goals apply to and, are superior to all other State Acts.

NRPG welcomes the opportunity to comment on this issue and looks forward to learning how the four initiatives will be implemented.

Anthony Fowler

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NRPG President.