

Dear Environment Minister Steven Dawson and Director General of the Department of Water & Environmental Regulation (DWER) Mike Rowe,

Our Joondalup-based community group – the West Coast Wilderness Group – would like to make a submission for the 2019-2020 Native Vegetation in Western Australia policy and initiatives review. Our submission will address and put forward recommendations for:

- Implementation of a State native vegetation policy and better regulation across all sectors of business enabling local and State governments to know how much High Conservation Value Habitat is being cleared and the consequences of that on the State's biodiversity and carbon emissions.
- Provision of better information, including transparency in all decision making and early public notice of clearing proposals. This also calls for more clarity on what work has been done to determine biodiversity, identify species habitat, and analyse the likely impact on linked environmental issues such as carbon emissions, our water table, future soil salinity and soil health.
- Application of a bioregional approach so the State Government not only has an accurate snapshot of bushland clearing and levels of deforestation, but more importantly, has better information on biodiversity in all regions to mitigate clearing of rare, threatened pockets of woodland and forest species. In this way the Government can also address how to *reforest* and retain valuable areas of bushland.

The West Coast Wilderness Group is a relatively new community group of concerned individuals. We care deeply for our own pockets of bush in the northern suburbs of Perth, as well as the incredibly rich, yet fragile, biodiversity in WA. Some of us travel widely across the State and Australia. We have all observed the incessant clearing of land, both in the city and in rural and regional areas. We are witnessing the habitat destruction of the precious Carnaby's and Red-Tailed Black Cockatoos locally. It's incredibly worrying to us that the WA government – in its Native Vegetation Paper (https://dwer.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/NV_issues_paper_FINAL.pdf) - admitted there is no clarity or oversight on how much High Conservation Value habitat is being cleared, and how this is affecting our threatened species and climate. Federal Government figures show that WA has the second highest rate of 'primary deforestation' in Australia – and that these levels are increasing.

Such is the richness of WA's biodiversity that hundreds of different plant species can be found within 50 metres of each other. Very often, such species cannot be grown anywhere else on Earth. Our soils are ancient and well suited to the plants which have evolved over millennia. This should be a great source of pride and motivation to preserve the uniqueness of our environment. Yet broadscale clearing of forests and woodlands mean destruction of precious plant species and loss of animal, insect and fungi habitat. Our ancient soils are exposed, bringing a multitude of issues which are apparent throughout Western Australia: a rise in salinity (making land virtually toxic); weed invasion, altered fire regimes, habitat fragmentation and altered hydrology.

Water scarcity is a huge issue, and there is clear evidence that deforestation is leading to lower rainfall. WA's own Centre for Water Research has found that:

Logging between 1960 and 1980 was linked with a 16% reduction in rainfall, compared to coastal levels. The study published in the International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology suggests that there is an economic impact from the change of land use and available water. According to the research, there is an urgent need to increase reforestation to improve rainfall levels.

(<http://theconversation.com/deforestation-linked-to-rainfall-decline-in-western-australia-20593>)

Bill Bunbury's book *Invisible Country* (**UWA, 2015**) focuses on land clearing in South West WA. It has interesting research of how, through the return and maintenance of significant bushland corridors in rural areas, species pathways and diversity can be encouraged and returned - provided that the width is sufficiently significant. Such initiatives are also resulting in increased rainfall. However, these initiatives presently seem reliant on farmers or local areas taking direct action, rather than being led by State government policies.

Our group recommends the following actions:

1. Implementation of a State native vegetation policy and regulatory improvements
 - a. An effective native vegetation policy that sets a goal to maintain and restore the condition, ecological function and connectivity of native vegetation. We want to see policies that actively seek environment gains and a flourishing environment, rather than just slowing the march to complete habitat destruction.
 - b. Integrated consultation implemented across all departments of the State Government in order to avoid conflicts, mixed messages and delays in the regulatory processes. These processes should also be extended to Local Governments, to enable consistency and transparency across all levels and sectors of Government.
 - c. Consistent policies across all industries, with no legislative loopholes. This can be regulated by an independent body consisting of indigenous land holders, local communities, scientists and other bioregional stakeholders.
 - d. Consistency, clarity, effectiveness and transparency of proposed offset funds with a focus on protecting and managing remaining high value vegetation, especially in landscapes where little native vegetation remains.
 - e. Consideration and research to identify the most effective models for replanting habitat. And rather than relying on a monoculture of very few plant species, identify the varieties of plants best suited to each individual soil/climate type.
2. Provision of better information
 - a. Invest in better data collection, monitoring systems and centralised databases which are also standardised, in order to track the extent and quality of our native vegetation. This data should be collected from scientists as well as indigenous communities and local communities by enabling citizen scientists and friends groups to upload images and video footage so that species can be tracked and recorded across a wider range of areas.
 - b. Facilitate data collection and publish annual State of the Environment reports and updates on the extent of native vegetation degradation, restoration efforts and the state of ecological function to keep the community informed.
3. Application of a bioregional approach

- a. To be complemented with improved state-level processes in planning and management for both vegetation clearing and biodiversity protection.
- b. To include investment in research to improve understanding of native vegetation, which incorporates indigenous knowledge. This would enable a far more *nuanced* approach to the care, preservation and growth of native vegetation across vastly diverse environments in Western Australia.
- c. To include community involvement at all stages.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission. If you wish to contact us about the contents of this submission, please contact Jo Baker on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

Gabrielle Grime & Jo Baker

(on behalf of the West Coast Wilderness Group)