

Native Vegetation in Western Australia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This paper recommends:

1. All West Australian adults should contribute to the cost of the preservation of indigenous flora and fauna in the State, as it benefits current and future generations, as well as supporting the fight against climate change.
2. Legislation for a levy on all eligible voters in the State will provide an equitable, guaranteed and transparent source of funding for the protection and retention of native flora and fauna in Western Australia.

INTRODUCTION:

A key point in The “Native Vegetation in Western Australia Issues paper for consultation November 2019” was that the Department of the Environment and Energy (DoEE) had identified 26 “bioregions” within Western Australia. These 26 “bioregions” are characterised by their distinct geology, landform patterns, climate, ecological features as well as their plant and animal communities. These 26 “bioregions” must survive to be treasured by future generations. Accordingly, a minimum of 26 “bioregions” conservation areas should be identified, established and managed effectively.

In my opinion, the “The Draft Policy on Native Vegetation” is a comprehensive document. However, “The Draft Policy” requires a greater focus on the essential pragmatic and immediate actions to protect native vegetation and indigenous biodiversity. The “Draft Policy” needs to specify the following,

1. The cost to implement Stage 1, 2 and 3 detailed in the Draft Policy.
2. The resources and strategy necessary to eradicate the non-indigenous flora and fauna on State owned land, South West of the State Barrier Fence (SBF), to facilitate an improvement in the condition of native vegetation.
3. The 26 “bioregion conservation” and critical native vegetation areas that need to be fenced and actively managed so the unique Western Australian flora and fauna is there for future generations.

The State Government is the owner of about ninety-two percent of Western Australian land. Ultimately, the State is responsible for the protection of the indigenous flora and fauna in these areas. These areas include the neglected rural “rail reserves” in the South West. This is the largest rail reserve area in Australia, covering numerous native vegetation landscapes including the “intensive and extensive” land use zones. These rail reserves were totally cleared to prevent bush fires during the “age of steam” which ended in 1970.

Unfortunately, rail and other regional reserves have been neglected. Passive, natural restoration of native vegetation in Western Australia is not possible due to the proliferation of non-indigenous species on State owned reserves. Vast land ownership by the State occurs in all 26 bioregions allowing the proper management and protection of Western Australia’s unique native flora and fauna.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER) should be given the authority and responsibility to select and fence the 26 “bioregion conservation” and critical regional reserve areas to be preserved. Appropriate fencing and management is the only way to eradicate non-indigenous flora and fauna and protect native biodiversity. Fencing also stops further intrusions by non-indigenous species into these areas. Without fencing in the immediate future, the long-term survival of native vegetation is unlikely.

PRINCIPLE ISSUES:

1. Realistically, the pressure on the State Government to meet the accelerating funding requirements in Health, Education, Policing, Public Transport and Community Services like Housing and Homelessness renders it unlikely that current budgets, with respect to native vegetation, will be increased substantially in State Departments in the future.

2. There is a community perception that State Departments due to resourcing constraints are unable to properly manage and protect native vegetation on State owned reserves. Subsequently, land management practises on most regional nature reserves tolerate the propagation of non-indigenous flora and fauna. More tragically, inadequate cultural or prescribed burning has led to the loss of property and lives from bushfires originating in State owned land.
3. Without sufficient and consistent funding for native vegetation the protection of the 26 identified “bioregion conservation” areas or State, owned regional reserves will not be possible. Consequently, the invasion of non-indigenous flora and fauna in State owned land will increase and native biodiversity will deteriorate.
4. A coordinated strategy to mitigate the impact of all feral animals (in particular cats, rabbits and foxes) is required if native flora and fauna is to survive. Legislation that locks up native vegetation areas on a map without proper active management will ultimately fail. Attachment 1 is a study from a Flinders University, South Australia that attempts to put a cost of non-indigenous flora and fauna to the community. Unfortunately, feral cats, rabbits and foxes are also increasing their numbers in Metropolitan parks and reserves before spreading to regional areas devastating biodiversity.
5. Currently, the Mt Gibson Conservation area is the sole nature reserve in Western Australia that is fenced correctly and aggressively protected from non-indigenous flora and fauna incursion. Without the establishment of similar conservation reserves in all 26 “bioregions” and selected regional reserves, there is no guarantee that Western Australia’s exceptional flora and fauna will remain for future generations.
6. The Issues and Draft Policy Papers did not include the Metropolitan Area in the discussion of native vegetation retention. However many metropolitan residents actively support the protection and retention of native vegetation and its influence on climate change. Consequently, it is important that metropolitan residents be given the opportunity to contribute financially to protect native vegetation and the establishment of regional reserves. The “Draft Policy” and Government environmental legislation indicate a total benefit for the entire community. Therefore, it is logical the entire community should contribute to the cost of native vegetation retention in a fair and equitable way.
7. Protecting native vegetation is a cost in personnel, assets, time and operating effort. These are critical limiting factor in State Agencies, regional Local Governments, rural communities, not for profit organisations and individual property owners. Financial incentives to develop the participation of State Agencies, regional Local Governments, rural communities, not for profit organisations and individual property owners of in protecting native vegetation must be detailed in the “Draft Policy”.

SOLUTION:

The State Government needs to identify, develop and protect the 26 “bioregion conservation” strategic areas. Eradication of non-indigenous fauna and flora in the 26 “bioregion conservation” areas and State owned reserves South West of the SBF is essential. If areas of significant native vegetation and biodiversity are on private land the State should purchase or lease that land. These actions should be funded by,

1. A percentage increase in the State Royalties on economic activity executed on State owned land.
2. Proponents of industrial estates and housing developments on land rezoned for that purpose are required to pay a percentage of their estimated profits to a Native Vegetation fund.
3. A Native Vegetation Levy (NVL) be payable by all West Australian enrolled voters, as it exemplifies the principles of equity, efficiency, simplicity and effectiveness in the protection of native vegetation.

If DWER is allocated the above funding, the 26 “bioregion conservation” and regional, reserve areas could be established and developed. In addition, DWER could also use this money for financially incentives to regional Local Governments, communities, not for profit organisations and individual property owners to assist in retaining and maintaining native flora and fauna.

Funding sourced from one and two above are dependent on the level of economic activity, development and population growth in Western Australia. As royalties and development funding can be identified by, production and business plans of proponents, payments can be calculate and collect. (Obviously, this cost will eventually flow on to the consumers of the product enabling the “user pay” principle to apply.)

Legislation to instigate a Native Vegetation Levy (NVL), would deliver a consistent supply of annual revenue. This sustainable revenue source would enable long term strategic planning to deliver measureable outcomes without the vagaries of fluctuating and discretionary funding allocations. Revenue collection would be simple with The Department of Finance, Office for State Revenue, annually invoicing every Western Australian on the State electoral roll.

The Native Vegetation Levy (NVL) would ensure that the 1.7 million Western Australian constituents are contributing equally to the State’s biodiversity and its link to climate change initiatives. The NVL is equitable, transparent and engages the public in the native vegetation strategy through their financial contribution. (An NVL of 50 cents per day would raise over 300 million dollars in revenue annually. This amount is far less than the cost of the daily newspaper and 10% of the cost of a “take away” coffee).

More importantly, the DWER’s Annual Report would enable all West Australians to measure the value of their NVL contribution. Also, DWER’s “key performance indicators” (KPI’s) in the conserving, restoring, maintaining and improving native flora and fauna in the fight against climate change could be evaluated by the public. Additionally, the NVL funding will hasten the development of the 26 “bioregion conservation” areas boosting tourism, jobs and small business opportunities in regional and remote communities.

CONCLUSION:

The current annual budget for native vegetation retention appears to be inadequate. State owned land (particularly nature, rail and road reserves South West of SBF) will eventually be destroyed by non-indigenous flora and fauna reproduction. DWER needs to be resourced to implement plans to ensure the 26 “bioregion conservation” and regional reserve areas with unique West Australian flora and fauna are properly managed for future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. All West Australian adults should contribute to the cost of the preservation of indigenous flora and fauna in the State, as it benefits current and future generations, as well as supporting the fight against climate change.
2. Legislation for a levy on all eligible voters in the State will provide an equitable, guaranteed and g for the protection and retention of native flora and fauna in Western