

Why the Bushland Conservation Fund is needed

The following information provides some background on sustainability issues associated with land clearing, the extent of land clearing in WA, State Government policies and some ideas about what you can do to become more involved in the campaign.

Land clearance in Australia

A recent Federal Government Biodiversity audit of Australia indicated that almost 3000 ecosystems are under threat with half damaged beyond repair, and the rate of land clearing accelerating in recent years to fifth highest worldwide in 1999.

That's a rate of over 100 football fields destroyed every hour in Australia. Although most land clearing is occurring in Queensland, a national target for biodiversity conservation to reduce the net rate of land clearance to zero by 2001 is yet to be achieved in WA.

Land clearing and Sustainability

The effects of land clearing have far-reaching impacts on all aspects of sustainability - environmental, economic, and sociocultural.

Land clearing is the biggest threat to biodiversity conservation, and contributes to net Greenhouse gas emissions and human-induced climate change.

In WA our knowledge of biodiversity is limited, many species have not been scientifically described or named, and their conservation and ecology is unknown.

Data on the genetic diversity of species is almost non-existent. The fragmentation of native vegetation from land clearing, into patches of remnant bush makes survival difficult for many species. Over time these species (sometimes called the 'living dead') gradually die out in the uncleared area.

This long time lag (or extinction debt) means it takes decades or even centuries before the full impacts of current clearing practices becomes apparent.

Conserving native bushland is a far better and cheaper way of conserving biodiversity than tree planting and revegetation projects. Healthy, complex native bushland communities are difficult, if not impossible to reconstruct once destroyed, and if achievable would be prohibitively expensive.

Land clearing is the major cause of dryland salinity and salinisation of inland waterways of WA. Currently 10% (2,000,000ha) of the WA agricultural landscape is affected and recent estimates predict 25%-35% (6,109,000ha) could become salt affected by 2030.

Dryland salinity threatens the economic and social basis of the State's agricultural sector. An estimated \$2 billion is required over the next 30 years to implement a Salinity Management Strategy in the wheatbelt of Western Australia.

Lost agricultural production in WA attributable to salinity now exceeds \$130 million annually and potentially could rise to nearly \$1billion/annum. In some areas salinity is reducing the life of roads by 75% and affecting rail lines and buildings from rising damp in at least 30 towns. Infrastructure costs such as these are estimated to cost the community around \$100 million/year.

Land clearance in Western Australia

i) Agricultural areas

The south west of WA is the only Australian area identified as one of twenty-five global 'biodiversity hotspots for conservation priorities'.

Within the south west there are eight or nine nodes of species richness deserving recognition in their own right.

Despite its rich biodiversity heritage, 95% of the SW agricultural area has been cleared substantially during the period 1945 to 1982.

An average of 32,500ha/year was authorised for clearing during 1986-1992.

By 1997/98 to 2000/01 the average had fallen to ~1,317 ha/year in the agricultural region of WA and on rural zoned land in the SW land division.

However, this figure does not include other areas within the State typically associated with infrastructure (499ha in 2000/01), or illegal clearing (~2,500ha cleared July 2001-April 2002). Nevertheless this is a significant decline from previous years and at least part of this decline could be attributed to the Society's campaign for legislative reform.

ii) Metropolitan area

In the Perth metropolitan region there is still much room for improvement. Remnant vegetation on the Swan Coastal Plain was audited as part of the Bush Forever (2000) scheme and aims to secure 10% representation in all but 3 of the 26 vegetation complexes where past commitments and approvals reduce the area for conservation.

During the period 1994 to 2003 an estimated 23% (121,900 ha) of the remnant vegetation on the Swan Coastal Plain was cleared. Some readers may be better able to relate to the severity of land clearing by considering the following statistic - the equivalent of 1040 football fields were cleared of remnant vegetation in 1998-2001.

In addition, 70% of the original wetlands have been destroyed and the remaining 30% have been affected to some extent by drainage, filling or mining.

Currently only ~28% of native vegetation remains on the Swan Coastal Plain portion of the Perth Metropolitan Region. This is 2% below the target set for National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation 2001-2005 and by the Perth Biodiversity Project in 2003 (30% representation of vegetation communities).

We are at a crucial time in history in determining the fate of our biodiversity heritage in the Perth Metropolitan Region.

There are 75,000ha of natural areas outside secure tenure (for conservation) within the Perth Metropolitan Region. Of this, 8-9,000ha are already 'up-zoned' under the State Metropolitan Regional Scheme i.e. earmarked for future development over the next 30 years. This leaves another ~66,000 ha of natural areas at risk of clearing.

[An Urban Growth Boundary for Perth](#)

As a response to widespread community concerns of ever continuing urban sprawl into pristine bushland, the Society have taken a novel but proactive approach to the future. The Save Our Bushland campaign developed a proposal for an Urban Growth Boundary and an associated Greenbelt for the Perth Metropolitan Region. A campaign map of the metropolitan region shows the urban growth boundary superimposed on current planning zones and native vegetation. It respects the natural assets of the landscape such as wetlands, bushland conservation areas, water supply catchments, (groundwater mounds as well as surface water catchment areas), soils and landforms suited to agricultural uses, and major landscape features such as the Darling Scarp and Hills forests. The Society believes that this proposal is readily achievable and would be acceptable to the people of Perth.

[Dialogue with the City](#)

The Department of Planning & Infrastructure's Dialogue with the City workshop held on 13th September 2003 was an important initiative for the public to assess the future direction of urban development in the Greater Perth Region. The Society's Urban Growth Boundary proposal was presented as one of the scenarios for consideration. Significantly, 70% of groups at the workshop agreed Perth should have a Growth Boundary. Furthermore, when asked the top five aspects worth keeping to make Perth "the world's most liveable city", the 1100 Dialogue participants gave priority to the natural environmental elements (i.e. rivers, bushland, forests, wetlands, beaches, foreshores, 'open space', and so on).

[Government Policies](#)

The profound ramifications of extensive native vegetation clearing in WA illustrate that historically biodiversity conservation measures in this State have been under-emphasised, largely ineffectual, and in some cases misguided.

The most recent changes to land clearing policy was passed in the Legislative Assembly and Upper House in September 2003. The Environmental Protection Act 1986 (Act) is being revised and reformed by the Environmental Protection Amendment Bill 2002 (Bill). The Bill introduces a new offence for causing "Environmental Harm" under which unauthorised clearing is included.

The penalties for offences have been greatly increased and should further reduce unauthorised land clearing in WA. The new clearing regulations will remove any former loopholes and are a major step forward.

However, it is the exemptions and the degree of political will to end clearing across all lands which will dictate the success of outcomes.

What you can do:

- Make a tax-deductible donation to the Wildflower Society Bushland Conservation Fund. (See details below.)
- Meet, phone or write to your local parliamentarian about your concerns about bushland clearing.
- Talk to your friends about this campaign and the issues it raises.

The Wildflower Society Bushland Conservation Fund

This fund supports the Save Our Bushland Campaign which relies solely on donations for its continuation. The fund is managed by a committee of Wildflower Society of WA members, including members of the Society's Management Committee. Donations to this fund are tax deductible. If you really care, please make a donation.