

Meeting Communiqué – June 2019

Advisory Committees for the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia



CONTEXT

The Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area is a serial cross-jurisdictional property consisting of some 40 reserves across northeast New South Wales and southeast Queensland, including the iconic Lamington, Springbrook, Main Range, Mount Barney, Border Ranges, Wollumbin, Nightcap, Washpool, Gibraltar Range, Dorrigo, New England, Oxley Wild Rivers and Barrington Tops National Parks.

Inscribed on the World Heritage list for outstanding universal natural value, it contains remnants of the rainforests that once covered the supercontinent of Gondwana. The area now contains endemic relict species found nowhere else in the world and closely related to those in the fossil record from millions of years ago. The dramatic landscapes tell the story of the development of the continent, including the Tweed Shield volcano, which is the best-developed erosion caldera in the world. The diversity of habitats and ancient species mixing with those newly evolved, makes this area one of Australia's biodiversity hot-spots containing some of the most important habitats for species of Outstanding Universal Value for conservation and science.

The Gondwana Rainforests Advisory Committees are appointed by the NSW and Queensland environment ministers to provide advice to the ministers and managing agencies on the protection and management of the World Heritage property. The chairs of the Advisory Committees are jointly appointed by the NSW, Queensland and Australian Government environment ministers. There are two Advisory Committees: a Community Advisory Committee appointed to provide advice on the protection and management of the property from the viewpoint of the community, and a Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee appointed to provide scientific advice for conservation management of the property, including advice on research and monitoring.

The 30th meetings of the Community Advisory Committee and the Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee were held in Brisbane on Thursday 13 and Friday 14 June 2019. The following outcomes and recommendations are provided as advice to the ministers and the Management Committee.

CONSERVATION – IUCN Outlook report, a call to action

The committees warn that the deterioration of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) as reported in the IUCN World Heritage Outlook report is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The advisory committees endorse the findings of the report and advise that the threats and risk may be higher than reported. A separate letter will be sent on this issue outlining concerns about the accuracy of some of the content in the report. The report presents a call to action for government to address threats to the OUV of the property.

CONSERVATION – threats to World Heritage values

- The advisory committees are very supportive of the **proposal for climate change adaptation planning** in the NSW section of the property. It is heartening progress and it is recommended that there be ongoing collaboration with Queensland to coordinate adaptation planning and management using all available options and sharing tools and expertise.

- The advisory committees have identified continuing concerns about the potential impact of **groundwater extraction** on the OUV of the property, particularly given the precedent that has been set by current extraction, and the potential for higher impact under the projected increase in rainfall variability. Further correspondence will be sent on these issues to Minister Enoch and Minister Ley with copies to Minister Kean.
- **The committees recommend further efforts are made to address the threat of feral horses** to the OUV of the property in NSW. It is understood that, as drought conditions continue, feral horses are having an increased impact on dry rainforests in Oxley Wild Rivers National Park. We raised concerns about the impacts of feral horses on the Gondwana Rainforests in the November 2018 advisory committee meeting communiqué, having observed the damage being done to ecosystems in Barrington Tops. A separate letter will be sent to Minister Kean and Minister Stokes on these matters.

CONSERVATION – threatened species management

The committees commend the collaborative approach to the management and protection of the Eastern Bristlebird. It is understood that coordinated habitat management and monitoring are continuing to be undertaken through partnerships between the NSW and Qld departments and private landholders.

PROTECTION – EPBC controlled actions – ecotourism development

- The committees are keen to support managing agencies with further assistance and advice about the **Scenic Rim Trail**. The committees are concerned that the independence of the peer-reviewed environmental impact assessment and monitoring strategy may be compromised, since the (independent) consultant was paid by the proponent. The committees are pleased that DES will seek to share further information about the monitoring plans for the activity. This will allow advisory committee members to provide expert advice to the managing agencies, consistent with the role of the committees and their terms of reference.
- Because of the ongoing concerns in relation to the precedent set by this activity, and the potential impacts on OUV, a working group has developed **guidelines for the assessment of ecotourism proposals**. These will be sent to the Ministers in separate correspondence.

PRESENTATION – celebrations and interpretation

- The committees congratulate the managing agencies on the **25th anniversary program** of events and the widespread coverage promoting the unique and precious values of the Gondwana Rainforests. The campaign developed and implemented by Amanda Cope of NPWS is impressive for the range of activities and promotional material. The evaluation of people's interaction with social media is excellent and valuable. The committees recommend that options for evaluating behaviour change be investigated in tandem with the campaign, to better understand how people's experience of the material and visits to the Gondwana Rainforests enhance their awareness of World Heritage values and support for the conservation of the property (consistent with World Heritage management principles and the draft Strategic Management Plan).
- The committees commend the work of Tim Moore, Queensland DES, to develop products to promote the work of rangers in the field, and to enhance understanding and appreciation of World Heritage values. Tim's willingness to respond to the advice of the advisory committees and enhance the accuracy of information is admirable.

PLANNING – Strategic Management Plan and reserve management plans

- The committees are encouraged by the progress with the **Strategic Management Plan** and news that consultation with Aboriginal peoples with rights and interests in the property will be undertaken ahead of public exhibition. The advisory committees have provided ideas for relevant contacts and forums to the Coordinating Committee.
- The committees were pleased to learn that the **management plans for all the Queensland Gondwana Rainforests parks** are being prepared together.

EVALUATION, MONITORING AND REPORTING – a framework for the Gondwana Rainforests

- The advisory committees commend the approach for developing local capacity and locally based monitoring for **Evaluation, Monitoring and Reporting**, including co-design with the Aboriginal community. Technology to assist the community to help monitor the property is a valuable approach. However, there needs to be additional resourcing to assist with coordination and interpretation of the data. Scientists must be involved, and monitoring programs must be adequately resourced.
- The committees were interested to receive an update on the **IUCN Green List** nomination for Lamington National Park and are happy to participate in the assessment process.

Linkages between the biodiversity crisis and the climate change crisis and recommendations for the Gondwana Rainforests

1. The advisory committees formally endorse the position that the **biodiversity crisis and the climate change crisis are fundamentally interlinked** and recommend there be a continuing agenda item to assess the implications of this for the Gondwana Rainforests.
2. Recommend the managing agencies undertake work to:
 - a. assess the trends on conservation status of species contributing to OUV since the nomination;
 - b. update information on values from phylogenetic publications;
 - c. identify and map the different types of refugia that need protection;
 - d. identify how best to maximise ecosystem integrity and stability across the property (including mapping and establishing buffers and connectivity of habitats) to improve the property's integrity including through the protection and rehabilitation of corridors;
 - e. evaluate the US "Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act 2019" as a possible template to adapt for enacting similar legislation here;
 - f. assess the status of ecosystems with respect to the IUCN's Red List Criteria for Ecosystem Collapse as a mandatory part of strategic management.

ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADES

The committees **applaud the ongoing management work and activity** that is taking place in both the NSW and Queensland sections of the property; the upgrades and refurbishment of assets is to be applauded. In particular, the committees were pleased to hear about:

- the NSW Government announcement of significant capital investment for Improving Access to National Parks including the the extensive community consultation and planning for the Tweed Hinterland Project
- the upgrade of interpretive signage at Barrington Tops and the enhancement of messages about the World Heritage values of the Gondwana Rainforests.

VALE PETER HITCHCOCK

The committees note with sadness the passing of **Peter Hitchcock** and recommend there be greater recognition of his work in having the Gondwana Rainforests inscribed on the World Heritage list as a serial property. His work is an inspiration, and reminiscent of the quote from Margaret Mead, *“Never doubt that the actions of a few can change the world.”*

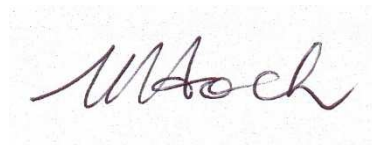


IN CLOSING

We will be following up on items noted in this communiqué with individual letters on the following key issues:

1. The critical need for action to address threats highlighted in the IUCN World Heritage Outlook report (Ministers Ley, Enoch and Kean);
2. The emerging threat of groundwater extraction to the outstanding universal value of the property (Ministers Ley and Enoch, cc Kean);
3. Recommended guidelines for the assessment of ecotourism proposals within the Gondwana Rainforests (Ministers Ley, Enoch and Kean);
4. The need for the eradication of feral horses from the Gondwana Rainforests reserves in NSW (Ministers Ley, Enoch and Kean).

We appreciate the opportunity to support the protection and management of the property.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mahri Koch". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "NICK REID". The signature is written in a bold, blocky, uppercase style.

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