

Daunting problems, exciting prospects – a personal reflection

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With an increasing awareness of the impact that climate change, droughts and floods have on our ability to sustain our way of life, it is no wonder we are seeing significant transformations in the way Australians are thinking about conservation.

In particular, the last three decades have seen the rapid expansion of Australia's National Reserve System. This extraordinary and globally significant collaboration by all Australian governments, non-government organisations (NGOs), private landholders and the scientific community has seen a great deal of innovation and adaptation by these parties in the way conservation obligations have been pursued. This work has been underpinned by two strategic mechanisms:

1. **Strategic National Policy:** A whole-of-government decision by the Council of Australian Governments in 1992 agreed to a strategic policy framework to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of protected areas throughout Australia. Twenty years on, this remains one of Australia's key conservation policies, reflected most recently in *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009–2030* (NRMMC 2009). This commitment was followed some years later with a decision by the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council to pursue a National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas.
2. **Scientific Underpinning:** The scientific foundation that underpinned and guided this work represented more than 25 years of significant collaboration between all governments and numerous scientific bodies to establish both the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA – **Figure 1**) and Interim Marine and Coastal Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IMCRA). Both have continued to be refined as new information and data becomes available. Progress in achieving the target of protecting at least 10% of the area of each of the 85 terrestrial bioregions has been impressive, with around 52 bioregions containing reservation



Cooper Creek, South Australia. ©Photo: Peter Taylor

levels above this target. The 34 or so under-represented bioregions remain as high priorities for increased protection.

The terrestrially-based National Reserve System (NRS – **Figure 2**), has laid the cornerstone for biodiversity conservation in Australia and is recorded in a national database, the Collaborative Australian Protected Area Database (CAPAD), along with each reserve's classification in accordance with the management categories of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). CAPAD is updated every two years and provides the official record of progress for reporting against numerous national and international obligations, making it quantifiable and open to public scrutiny and accountability (DSEWPC 2010).

A separate strategic policy was established by the Australian Government, within the National Reserve System policy framework, to provide opportunities for Indigenous landholders to declare part, or all of their land, as Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs – see chapter by Rose in this publication). This work has led to around 35 million hectares being added to the NRS over the last decade (representing around a quarter of the total area in the NRS). The unprecedented success of this program can in part be attributed to the socio-cultural and economic benefits Indigenous communities gain from looking after country. The recognition by the Australian Government of the critical role that traditional knowledge plays in managing remote areas of Australia forms a unique partnership between communities and government that was highlighted recently by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 2011).

Strong Australian Government leadership for establishing the National Reserve System has inspired and encouraged engagement from high wealth individuals, corporations and non-government organisations to also make contributions to the NRS. This leverage factor from the private sector relies on strong incentives which include a cost-effective means of achieving more with philanthropic funds through the shared financing model created by the Council of Australian Governments' backing for the policy framework.

While the NRS has rapidly expanded over the last two decades, attention has inevitably grown regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of resourcing for management for the system. The NRS has been criticised for adopting what some perceive to be a narrow, so-called 'lock-it-up' mentality that is often considered as a threat to landholders and resource companies. This myth needs to be dealt with as firstly, protected areas are not 'locked up', but highly productive lands, not of commodities, but for cultural, ecosystem and biodiversity outcomes. They can also often generate economic values through ecosystem services and visitation. Secondly, there are many opportunities to strengthen conservation outcomes in rangelands and highly productive lands if models of partnership with landholders are developed.

Meanwhile, on the broader natural resource management scale, a commensurate rise and expansion of local regional and state-based organisations and groups responding to local and landscape-scale conservation and resource management priorities over the last decade has been evident. The funding available under the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust and subsequently Caring for our Country programs have also helped to build capacity and leadership for some of this work. More recently, the Biodiversity Fund and carbon-related initiatives have evolved and promise to support and promote landscape-scale solutions to conservation priorities.

Unfortunately, much of the government funding support, while achieving important outcomes, has tended to be short-term, inflexible and, most worryingly, has failed to strategically garner the extraordinary goodwill, capacity and knowledge of landholders. The 'drip feed' of funding programs can exhaust this critically important social capital.

The sectorally-based nature of policy and funding programs also fail in assisting regional groups to effectively integrate their socio-cultural and economic imperatives with environmental outcomes. The strongest limitations to effective landscape-scale conservation will always be people, and their capacity and willingness to share vision and collaborate. Shared vision, collaboration and integration are central to any successful large-scale conservation initiative.



Southern Tanami Indigenous Protected Area in the Northern Territory: Bruce Rose (Manager of the Australian Government's IPA Program) and Madeleine Dixon (Traditional Owner and Senior Ranger) discussing the CyberTracker survey work being undertaken by rangers. ©Photo: Peter Taylor

The NRS is one of the very few truly all-of-government conservation commitments that is collaborative with a clear and simple vision understood by all. And yet despite these attributes, there are signs that the national support for maintaining or building on the NRS has been declining. The historic Ministerial Council network of government officials that steered protected area policy and collaboration across the states on the scientific underpinning for the NRS was disbanded in 2009. The recent Natural Resources Management Ministerial Council document *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009–2030* (NRMMC 2009) effectively has no dedicated network monitoring or steering of its actions. In my view this downgrading of policy capacity and overall attention to implementation unfortunately reflects elements within various governments who overtly embrace 'landscape-scale conservation'. However, they distort the meaning, as championed by international bodies like the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas and WWF, which emphasises protected areas as the essential core lands upon which larger landscapes are built, to a policy which gives priority to conservation on agricultural or grazing land and relegates protected areas to irrelevance.

This perspective perpetuates a 'siloes approach', and limits much needed integration between the protected area and natural resource management sectors.

Despite declining leadership there are some extraordinary innovations occurring across the country that are often being led through partnerships by communities, some governments and the private sector. These include:

- An initiative being led by state-based conservation covenanting organisations to coordinate reforms in covenanting nationally to ensure consistency and flexible approaches to supporting long-term conservation on productive land.
- Private and public discussions on sustainable financing models for Indigenous Protected Areas.
- The reform of state-based legislation to enable protection of conservation values across different private land tenures (e.g. freehold and pastoral leases).
- Some specific private models looking at the potential of 'carbon farming' as a both a source of income for conservation and a mechanism to encourage new land to come under conservation management.

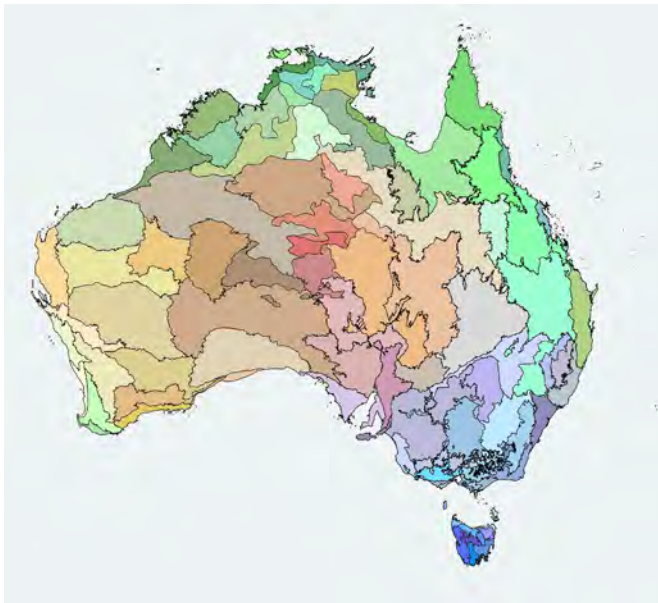


Figure 1. Bioregionalisation of Australia: The product of 25 years of collaboration between science, government and the private sector. Source: DSEWPC.

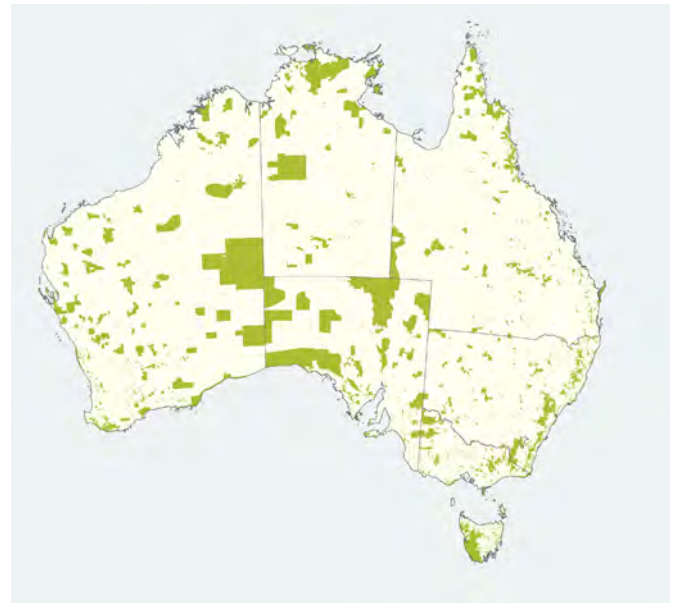


Figure 2. Australia's National Reserve System at 2010: A need now exists to think of new models, paradigms and partnerships to ensure we achieve in perpetuity protection of samples of key bioregions. Source: DSEWPC.

As government leadership and resourcing capacity continues to diminish, strategies for 'innovation for twenty-first century conservation' become even more essential. There is a need to re-think a number of the policy strategies and leadership models we tend to take for granted. New paradigms need to be debated urgently and can be divided into three categories of need as described below.

Enduring national approaches to conservation

As indicated above, the NRS provides a critical cornerstone in Australian conservation. It is world-leading, fully accountable and conforms to international standards, is collaborative, and science-based. *Australia's National Reserve System Strategy 2009–2030* provides the mandate to reform the direction of this work to be more relevant and applicable on productive private land.

Conservation covenanting provides a secure and potentially significant vehicle for NRS reform – with flexible approaches to addressing conservation on productive private land. An innovative project has commenced through an alliance of Australia's covenanting organisations to explore these options – the Australian Land Conservation Alliance. This work needs support and stronger linkages with governments and private landholder networks. An urgent debate is needed among these sectors to explore how best to connect the NRS with a matrix of private land conservation mechanisms, from covenanting through to short-term conservation outcomes. The documentation of these outcomes will enable managers and policy makers to explore issues around accountability and national consistency.

Leadership

The once-vibrant national network of state and Commonwealth officials that provided leadership on NRS policy and maintained the scientific collaboration necessary for the continual updating of IBRA and IMCRA no longer exists. The NRS Strategy has a number of specific actions and challenges to address over the next 20 years. There is no dedicated network responsible for the specific implementation of this Strategy. Although it does fall within the domain of a broad Ministerial Council Working Group (along with the Biodiversity Strategy and the Native Vegetation Strategy), there is no specialist group responsible for the NRS Strategy.

It appears that the momentum of the NRS leadership has slipped. With increasing pressures on the NRS from mining, and groups wanting to open up areas for incompatible uses, leadership at this time becomes critical. A new leadership model is needed – one that considers new paradigms for the NRS and its application on private land in addition to the protection and maintenance of what has already been gained. Leadership options such as an institute, a network of private and public experts, or a Wentworth Group-type equivalent should all be considered. What is important is that it should be a public/private leadership model, recognising that enduring conservation outcomes will increasingly need to involve landholders.

Social capital

Indigenous Australians see healthy country as an intrinsic virtue for healthy culture and society. The Australian Government now recognises the importance of this special relationship between country and people, notably through the Indigenous Protected Area model. While more work is needed to secure this extraordinarily important model, its successes are important when considering the broader conservation debate. The principles we now understand in relation to what is making IPAs successful could be actively considered in the broader private land conservation landscape. There seems to be a perception among many that production and conservation are incompatible and that landholders are not good managers. To varying degrees, landholders across Australia are passionate about looking after country and recognise the importance of high production and healthy land. The knowledge and expertise built over many generations of landholders has ensured that in many areas ecosystems are still intact. This intergenerational knowledge base, while perhaps lacking structure and organisation, does represent capacity in regional Australia that will be essential in helping to lead innovative models for enduring conservation on private land.

Conclusion

At the core of this chapter is the extraordinary and globally significant progress Australia has made in protecting representative samples of our diverse ecosystem types in an enduring National Reserve System. Leadership and collaboration across all governments has been the key ingredient to the success so far. This leadership and collaboration is now lacking, leaving any consistent approach to the NRS at risk. The pressures of global economic uncertainties, diminishing resources for environment programs, the impacts of climate change and the unparalleled resource exploration interests in Australia – all make the timing critical for a leadership model to establish new national conservation paradigms. While Australian Government leadership is essential, completely new paradigms for conservation will only be achieved with substantial engagement and collaboration from the private sector. The most substantial challenge will be to integrate science, policy and knowledge paradigms to design solutions for conservation. This will require great humility by all parties.

Disclaimer

The views in this paper are my own and not necessarily a reflection of those of my current employer, The Nature Conservancy, or past employer, the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

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Biography

Following nearly 30 years working with the Australian Government mainly in protected area policy, Peter Taylor commenced work in 2011 with The Nature Conservancy as their Canberra-based Director of External Affairs. Peter's work within the Australian Government spanned Indigenous, marine and private land conservation policy.