Submission to:
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications, P.O. Box 6100, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012

As secretary of the Kingston Conservation and Environment Coalition, a body that represents volunteer and friends' conservation groups in the Kingston municipality in the state of Victoria, I wish to submit our opposition to divesting federal powers to States and Territories for environment protection and biodiversity conservation. We also support the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012, to enable the federal government to meaningfully protect and manage the Australian environment.

Our members have had many experiences of local environmental decisions taken for short-term political gain or to honour hasty electoral promises. The need for approval from the federal government provides a safeguard that is crucial in preventing ill-advised decisions that can have long-term and often irreversibly damaging effects. One of our members, Ms Nina Earl, has sent a submission on these grounds, and I include her final four paragraphs here as we fully agree with and support her submission.

Historically, Australian States and Territories have focussed on development for State, Territorial or vested interests that have led to vast amounts of land clearing or change of land use. In the process, conservation of natural areas has been dismissed or overlooked which has led to: 1) an appalling and shameful record of species extinction in Australia; 2) isolated pockets of habitat that barely remain viable and restrict movement of species; and 3) widespread invasion of weeds and feral animals for which eradication or management are an enormous cost to governments, landowners and productivity. Nevertheless, some gems of natural areas remain across this nation and in its waters that must be protected by firm and appropriate conservation powers.

Here in Victoria, the Baillieu Government seems intent on continuing the degradation or destruction of natural areas—to name a few: 1) returning cattle to alpine areas—thankfully thwarted so far by a Federal court; 2) logging or 'ecological thinning' of native forests; and 3) virtually unrestricted expansion of development into green wedges and rural zones. I expect to see further environmentally damaging actions should more powers be divested to this State.

The Federal Government does not have the same developmental pressures as the States and Territories and is, therefore, in the best position to keep an overview of national conservation and management of natural areas and their connectivity, but with appropriate incentives or delegation that is accountable to the Federal Government for particular conservation purposes. Two recent and welcome Federal conservation examples are the Marine Sanctuaries initiative and the National Wildlife Corridors Plan, neither of which are likely to have come about if conservation powers were divested to States and Territories.

Australian plants and animals are unique in the world and iconic to this nation—most species exist nowhere else and identify this island continent—they are worthy of protection and the Federal government is the best agency to provide conservation of Australian's unique biodiversity. Kingston Conservation and Environment Coalition therefore requests that the Senate find in favour of retaining Federal Approval Powers in this inquiry into the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment Bill 2012.

Submitted by:

Dr Elizabeth Flann, Secretary, Kingston Conservation and Environment Coalition,

15 January 2013