Submission by Gabriel Lafitte, Healesville, Vic 24 Nov 2012

I am a guide at Healesville Sanctuary, one of a small army of volunteers who educate visitors, especially international visitors on bus tours to this iconic site, about Australian wildlife, and especially threatened species.

Like all zoos, Healesville Sanctuary is doing all it can to breed threatened species, including Leadbeater's possum and the helmeted honeyeater, endemic to the forests nearby and critically endangered. But we all know a captive breeding program is a last-ditch effort, no matter how much effort is put into it.

Part of a Healesville Sanctuary guide's responsibilities is to stand inside the large Land of Parrots cage, with a rare red-tailed black cockatoo on your arm, encouraging visitors to have the bird climb onto their arm, while feeding it a seed or two. This never fails to elicit awe, wonder and a deep connection with another being, a species we seldom see up close, or at all in Victoria, where its' habitat is greatly diminished.

It is no exaggeration to say that the success and growing reputation of Healesville Sanctuary is built on those magic moments of close encounter; and the Sanctuary, mindful of its mission to become a world leader in wildlife conservation, makes every effort to educate visitors, local and international, to conserve trees, forest and habitat. A major highlight of the Sanctuary's offer is the Sprits of the Sky show of open air, free flying birds, as big as the wedge tailed eagle. For years, the keeper-presenters have been telling every show the same script, that Australia flushes 6.7 million trees a year down our toilets, which is quite unnecessary if we make the simple switch to recycled toilet paper. Every day, hundreds of people, at the height of their encounter with wildlife, get this message, that we must protect the native forests.

But some people in powerful places don't seem to get the message. Less than 15kms from Healesville Sanctuary, Leadbeater's possum habitat is being systematically destroyed, on the slopes of Mount St. Leonard's. Why is this pillage permitted when Australia is already so close to being able to source its timber entirely from plantations? Why is it that ordinary Australians have no trouble understanding the message that habitat protection is a far better way of protecting iconic species, than last-ditch captive breeding?

Those red-tailed black cockatoos on my arm, Ebony and Ivory and the naughty Bobby, are living proof that habitat protection of entire ecological communities is the only long-term solution. At Healesville Sanctuary, although we invest much, behind the scenes, in breeding endangered honeyeaters, Tassie devils and Leadbeater's possums, there is less need to build an "insurance population" of red-tailed black cockatoos even though they too are rare, at least in Victoria. What's the difference? For the red-tailed black cockatoos it is still possible to conserve and regenerate sufficient habitat, and in southwestern Victoria farmers and other land users are now ensuring the seed tree species and nesting tree species crucial to these cockatoos are making a comeback. That's the way to go. That's an effective species recovery program.

But here in the Yarra Valley ranges, our central highlands are assaulted by heavy machinery, chopped, clear-felled and, coupe by coupe, destroyed, for Nippon Paper. Where is our pride in the tallest trees in the world? Where is our bond with iconic species when it comes to the fast-dwindling forest industry

that stripmines forests belonging to all species? Where is the forests management agency that has forest protection at its heart? Where are the threatened species recovery programs that are seriously funded, resourced and enforced? Where is the serious commitment, at national level, that looming extinctions are to be prevented, as a long term responsibility of this generation to all who will come?

In these times, when few governments have the fortitude to actually govern, it is all too easy for the Australian government to divest its' powers back to states that have proven themselves, over a long time, to be in the grip of vested interests, and with little concern beyond token gestures, for the long term, the national and global interest. This is most evident in the process of ensuring that threatened species are officially listed as threatened, triggering mandatory recovery plans. State governments have all but abandoned comprehensive monitoring of threatened species and their habitats, integrated with formal listing to ensure effective intervention. Instead, the listing of threatened species is these days initiated by individuals, reminiscent of the Victorian era, when gentleman botanisers named species, collected or exterminated them at will.

This is a sign of state failure. These days, everybody likes a win/win. But in the real world, that is not always possible. The reality is that extinctions will occur, and probably accelerate, if investor complaints about regulatory regimes cause us to abandon responsibility for our human power to enhance or extinguish species and their habitats. If we are serious about conservation of threatened species there does have to be a robust, regular and enforceable regime whereby investments impacting on threatened species habitats must prove, in advance, that extinctions will not result from a proposed investment.

Minister Burke, in recent statements about the national system of marine reserves, and the supertrawler, has spoken up for just such exercising of national authority. He has boldly said, to much acclaim, that the nation must act to protect ecosystems and fish populations, and if the existing law gives the Australian government insufficient power to achieve this, then the national government must legislate anew, and give itself the necessary powers. It is good to see a government with enough old fashioned confidence to govern.

Yet the same minister, only months earlier, effectively abdicated national responsibility for threatened species, fatally wounding the national Environmental Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999 by handing back to the states the effective governance of threatened species. Tellingly, Minister Burke and Prime Minister Gillard, both announced this backflip as a business-friendly cutting of red tape. The Prime Minister's 13 April 2012 announcement is quite specific about the source of this new failure as: "the removal of red tape for environmental assessments and approvals, after listening to the requests of business."

Minister Burke has put the case for proactive, precautionary protection of marine species, in a way that is powerful, passionate, eloquent and effective. Yet, when it comes to our threatened terrestrial species, our Australian government is off the case. The states have mismanaged threatened species for 200 years, almost always yielding to "developers" when there is no win/win, and someone has to lose.

In the name of consistency, and governments that have heart to govern, for all species in our stewardship, I call on this Senate committee to re-assert the national responsibility for threatened species, in fulfilment of our international obligations under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

At Healesville Sanctuary, I see a highly committed staff doing all they can to breed captive populations of threatened species, but it does not always work. A huge effort and expense is involved in this desperate attempt to forestall extinction. It is not enough. The Sanctuary has been telling hundreds of thousands of receptive visitors each year to “wipe for wildlife” by ceasing use of toilet paper from trees in the forests of threatened species. It is not enough. Healesville Sanctuary is a must-see for international visitors to Melbourne, as the harbour bridge and opera house in Sydney are. It is not enough to save the nearby habitat of Leadbeater’s possum. No matter how much I and my fellow guides explain to our visitors what the Sanctuary does to fight extinction, it is not enough. Only a resolute Australian government assertion that it is in our national interest to save terrestrial as well as aquatic threatened species will work.

Our zoos have utterly transformed their mission. They began as “acclimatisation societies” for alien invasive species to make Australia more like England, a major reason why we have so many threatened native species. Healesville Sanctuary was created by an anatomist who donated 10,000 skeletons of koalas, kangaroos and many other species he killed and dissected, before their species were wiped out altogether. How times have changed in 80 years!

As a nation, we have moved from contempt for native animals to reverence. When the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act was legislated by a Labor government in 1999, it seemed government was keeping pace with those deep shifts in community attitudes. Now the mission of Healesville Sanctuary is fighting extinction. This is not an addition to other work, it has become the core purpose for the existence of Healesville Sanctuary. Visitor numbers are rising steadily, as a result.

Let’s keep pace with the Australian public. Let’s not abandon our threatened species and their habitats to the investors who can always sway state governments to give them priority over species on the verge of extinction.

This is a personal submission; I do not speak for Healesville Sanctuary.