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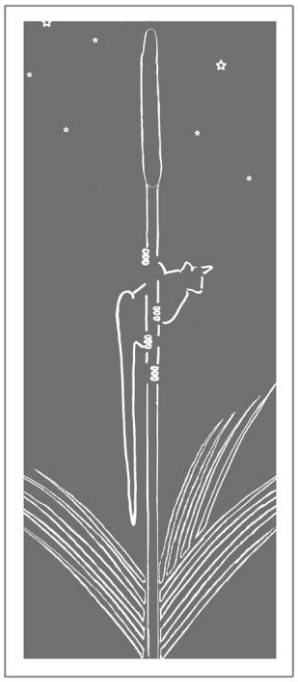

save me a home amongst the gum trees

Submission to the senate standing committees on environment and communications—regarding threatened species

Daryl Dickson,
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Never have I written a submission that I believe is more important to the future of our environment and our threatened species than the submission I am making to this committee.

I write as a passionate and informed advocate for Australian wildlife. Someone who has been actively involved, for decades, "on the ground", working with state and federal agencies, NGOs and community to try to assist in the recovery of one of Australia's most threatened arboreal mammals and the species that share this fragile and restricted woodland ecosystem on the coast of the tropical north.

The mahogany glider, Petaurus gracilis exists in a very restricted distribution in tropical coastal woodland in north Queensland. Indications are that as few as 1500 animals remain in the wild. It is an iconic species, listed as an endangered under the Australian Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 & Queensland Nature Conservation Act 1992. It shares its habitat with a suite of highly endangered plants and animals and it is our most endangered ecosystem in this part of Australia. The coastal woodlands including the melaleuca forests are neither protected by the Wet Tropics World Heritage listing nor an adequate National Park system.

I believe that our experience of the ineffectiveness of Australian legislation to protect threatened species is not isolated to the far north. In some cases Australia's threatened species may be just holding on to the status quo but in many cases they are rapidly losing the battle. I think we are all aware of just how many threatened species we are talking about, how great a challenge we have and how little money is available at present. I believe that the limited budget that has been available is not being spent in the best possible way and the outcomes not being realistically and effectively monitored; and while we pat ourselves on the back for minor wins and PR successes our endangered species slide closer to extinction. We are window dressing and not being honest about to the public about what we are doing and what is really happening. This applies at all levels of government.

Our threatened species are now being assaulted in Queensland and other states by a rapid wind back of state protective legislation that has provided at least some protection of habitat and eco-systems. We are seeing a rush to facilitate rapid approvals for development. There is no doubt that this, in many cases, will have a negative effect on habitat and the environmental outcomes and negate some of the innovative planning that has been starting to take place to enable a shared environment and some developments that are scaled and built to share the habitat.
The feeling on the ground is one of the clocks being "turned back by 30 years".

Our only hope and the one pillar that we have relied on for decades has been the oversight of the federal government to ensure that state governments acted in the interest of the national good and with due regard to our obligation to protect the natural environment and our threatened species. Many issues that are looked at under the EPBC are of national and international significance. It is imperative that this oversight remains.

I am acutely aware of both the ecological richness of our environment and the failure of our systems to maintain biodiversity. The IUCN has placed the mahogany glider on its “Red List” stating that its habitat continues to decline in both extent and quality; this assessment would verify our assessment within the habitat that at present our threatened species legislation is not working effectively to recover this species.

We are still losing essential habitat through poor landscape management- fire, weed and pest control needs to be adequately funded for a long enough time to be effective. At present we are wasting money through lack of continuous funding and limited ongoing capacity on the ground.

We have legislation that tells us of its intent to protect and recover but what we see on the ground are actions that do not relate to the “intent of the legislation” – we read good, sound information in recovery plans but we do not see funding or actions to adequately match the intent of the recovery plans.

It is essential that the federal government takes an honest and effective lead in protecting Australia’s threatened species and their eco-systems. Our future will hold challenges enough for the environment; national, effective and honest leadership is required.

Yours faithfully,
Daryl Dickson