

14 December 2012

From: Sera Blair

To: Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Submission to Senate Inquiry into:

The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Threatened species conservation is at a critical point in Australia. Our current trajectory is for a new wave of mass extinction unless there is a serious investment of resources and concern on behalf of the Australian governments and people. As the species fall, next fall the ecosystems and the services they provide people. I don't think we have any other responsible option other than to get biodiversity conservation back as a top priority for our country to mitigate the level of damage that will occur.

I have been involved in threatened species conservation for 10 years as a community advocate, educator and researcher. In 2004 I started the community group, Friends of Leadbeater's Possum Inc. with the aim of getting Leadbeater's conservation back on the agenda in Victoria. Despite being the state's faunal emblem, their conservation needs were being forgotten. In July 2006 I had the opportunity to discuss their conservation needs with then Victorian Environment Minister John Thwaites and demanded he re-establish the Leadbeater's Possum Recovery team which had not met for years. In October 2006, the new Recovery Team met for the first time. It has met a few times a year since then, more as required. The membership has fluctuated from a strong interest in the beginning from a range of state government departments but has waned significantly in the past few years. In August this year, Professor David Lindenmayer of the Australian National University, the key scientific expert of Leadbeater's Possum habitat conservation, resigned from the Recovery Team because there has been no real action by the government to implement the recovery plan or action statement and that the knowledge gained through his research about the rapid and significant decline of forest ecosystems and Leadbeater's Possum habitat decline was falling on deaf ears.

Over the 8 years I was president of Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, until my retirement in October 2012, I have found the process of threatened species recovery very frustrating, slow moving and wholly inadequate to bring about real conservation gains. Leadbeater's Possum is a species we know enough about to save, but our government is choosing not to save. There are many more species in our forests that have received much less investigation and therefore their survival relies on forest conservation through Leadbeater's Possum as a flagship species. Despite

the amount of understanding we have on Leadbeater's Possum, very little has been done for its conservation. There have been some significant gains like the Permanent Reserve system but even in the process of developing the reserve system priority of the forest use was given to the needs of the timber industry before areas were allowed to be re-zoned as special protection zones (SPZ).

From my experience:

- Threatened species conservation is a low priority for the state government
- There is inadequate resourcing provided to threatened species conservation to bring about timely consideration of conservation needs, action planning and ultimately implementation.
- In 6 years on the Leadbeater's Possum recovery Team there were numerous revisions of the Action Statement and Recovery Plan... but due to low resourcing (for staff to write up the changes) and lack of political will there still is no current version of the Species' Action Statement or Recovery Plan!

In response to the key investigation areas of this inquiry, please see comments regarding my personal experience with threatened species conservation below. Most comments are to the best of my knowledge and are generally in regards to my experience with Leadbeater's Possum conservation.

a) Management of key threats to listed species and ecological communities;

- Threats were frequently due to other uses of the forest, in particular timber harvesting which is 100% incompatible with Leadbeater's Possum habitat protection.
- Timber harvesting is clearly a government priority for forest use rather than threatened species protection and after the 2009 bushfires, there is simply not enough forest left for both.
- Processes in place to protect habitat around timber harvesting (special zoning that reflect habitat elements) are ill-defined making them difficult to interpret and not monitored for compliance. So while the rules for habitat protection may exist on paper, they are not implemented or checked so are essentially meaningless. Changes in the Timber Harvesting Code of Practice have allowed a loop hole for the timber industry saying requirements to protect threatened species in state forests where timber harvesting occurs may be waived by the government. Increasingly, the formal protections for threatened species habitat are being whittled away so while in the past we had to argue for rules to be followed, we are finding under the current Victorian government they are simply removing the rules as they have no intention of following them and they don't want to be accountable to the public for habitat destruction!

b) Development and implementation of recovery plans;

- It should not take over 6 years to update an Action Statement and recovery plan for a species! It is stunning the lack of ability and commitment the Victorian Government has shown to this process for one of the highest profile threatened species, Leadbeater's Possum! Constant stalling and excuses about lack of resources and waiting for new information are totally unacceptable. I fear they are delaying updating the action statement to allow them to manipulate the information to suit their political desires to support the timber industry.

- At my insistence the Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Team met for a two day workshop (13014 August 2009), solely to update the Action Statement after to the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires to ensure appropriate action was taken after the fires to allow habitat to recover. At that workshop 25 management actions were determined and a draft of the action statement created for review internally within DSE. **That was over 3 years ago and there is STILL no action statement!** And as Leadbeater's only exist in Victoria, the Action Statement forms the basis of the Recovery Plan as well so there is also still no Recovery Plan.
- Even with a current Action Statement of Recovery Plan for threatened species they seem to be interpreted as optional by State Governments. There seems to be no requirement for implementation, which renders them useless. We need a system of accountability and responsibility for adequately managing threatened species. The current system is clearly ineffectual and we are allowing species to decline rapidly, significantly increasing our biodiversity conservation challenges to the point we are now not going to be able to save all species!

c) Management of critical habitat across all land tenures;

- To manage critical habitat you have to know where it is and what it is first. This requires a level of knowledge and investigation we simply no longer have, so we have little hope of saving critical habitat. The significant reduction in ecological monitoring in our forests is staggering. What knowledge that is available is open to political interpretation/manipulation. As we have seen with Leadbeater's possum... the scientific evidence of radical and irreversible habitat decline due to timber harvesting (by Professor Lindenmayer at ANU) has been ignored to allow the government to increase timber harvesting and secure votes from the National Party as it is their coalition that got the current Liberal government in power. Threatened species habitat conservation should not be allowed to be manipulated for short term political gain. We need a system external to the political whims of the government of the day to secure critical habitat.
- It is truly devastating to see forests that are habitat for Leadbeater's Possum and a myriad of forest biodiversity being logged and then burned to support a failing timber industry that specialises in low grade products like wood chip for paper production. It is criminal that logging mature native forests is allowed to be done for such low grade products, and that the native timber industry is HEAVILY subsidised to do so!

d) Regulatory and funding arrangements at all levels of government;

- To my knowledge there is no specific funding available in Victoria for Threatened Species conservation. Last year Leadbeater's Possum was able to secure, after much effort, the paltry sum of \$10,000 from NRIP funding. NRIP has now been abolished by the current Victorian government so no funding is available.
- Funding for current on ground conservation efforts for Leadbeater's Possum has had to come from community groups like Friends of Leadbeater's Possum through fundraising. This fundraising is done through community donations, sausage sizzles and grants. Government grants can be useful but they generally do not cover support for employees or equipment (vehicles), which are increasingly needed due to the massive cut backs on Parks Victoria and DSE staff in the field who used to be able to support community groups to be able to provide the free labour for habitat enhancement activities. Now community groups are left on their own to implement complex projects and this is unacceptable.
- Threatened species conservation requires independent funding that cannot be removed by state governments.

e) Timelines and risk management within the listings processes;

- Timelines for listing threatened species need to be quick and efficient, with the capability of emergency listing status.
- But listing a species needs to follow through with real action to help save that species. In my experience a listed species, and a high profile one at that, can still receive little to no attention and can go for 17 years without an updated Action Statement for land management agencies to work from!
- The first Leadbeater's Possum Action Statement was written in 1995, was due for renewal in 2005 and is still to be renewed!!!

f) The historical record of state and territory government on these matters; and

See my other comments

g) Any other related matter.

Problems with the listing process for threatened species:

- The listing process for threatened species is not automatic, many species are not listed and the lists vary significantly between the EPBC Act, The FFG Act and the DSE Advisory List. If we are going to use threatened species lists to guide our management of threatened species then there needs to be a much stronger effort to have them up to date and representative of all threatened species.
- Without automatic and mandatory listing, the government of the day can manipulate the numbers on the lists. State governments cannot be trusted to adequately represent threatened species decline as listing species requires them to invest in action and if that conservation action is contrary to business or industry initiatives they support politically they are unlikely to do so.
- Therefore it is essential that the EPBC Act and federal guidance oversee threatened species conservation overall, but this needs significant additional investment to ensure all species are properly listed, listings are maintained, actions are appropriate and resources are available to implement recovery actions.

Problems with Recovery Teams

Recovery Teams are generally formed to provide expert advice to the state government on threatened species conservation. They do not have any power and are considered an internal organisation, so information they discuss is generally not public. When the Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Team provided specific advice on changes that are needed for the species' Action Statement to improve the capability of the document to identify and protect critical habitat for the species, this information was ignored by the state government. I can only presume that the current Victorian Government does not want to protect Leadbeater's Possum habitat as it interferes with access to the forests for the timber industry. This kind of expert advice should not be dismissed due to political affiliations; threatened species conservation needs to be above political discretion.

Key Reference the Inquiry should consider:

- Environment Defenders Office (Vic), *Where's the Guarantee?* March 2012
- VAGO, Administration of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, April 2009
- Effectiveness of Compliance Activities: Departments of Primary Industries and Sustainability and Environment, October 2012.

I would recommend the Senate invite Professor David Lindenmayer to address the inquiry, and Bram Mason from DSE Threatened Species Unit (head of the Leadbeater's' Possum Recovery Team). I am happy to address the inquiry panel to discuss my personal experiences in threatened species recovery.

Thank you for launching this inquiry. Clearly threatened species conservation is in a dire state in Australia and it is very important that we investigate the problems and come up with some solutions quickly before we allow the new wave of extinctions we are on the cusp of to occur.

Yours sincerely,

Sera Blair
Immediate Past President, Friends of Leadbeater's Possum.