

PROTECTING OUR REGION'S NATURE

The ACT, like the rest of Australia, is undergoing a biodiversity extinction crisis. Canberra's mature trees are being removed at alarming rates¹; our faunal emblem, the Gang-gang Cockatoo is endangered; and our natural areas are at increasing risk of development and degradation².

Australia's unique animals and plants are under significant pressure. In July 2022, a landmark State of the Environment Report was released outlining that overall Australia's natural environment is "poor and deteriorating."³ The report found more extinctions are expected in the next decades. The ACT is also experiencing this biodiversity crisis with five new species added to the ACT Threatened Native Species List since 2020⁴. Urban development, invasive species and climate change pose the largest threats to biodiversity, including in the ACT.



Photo: Lutgart Uten

¹ Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, 2023. Loss of Mature Native Trees Key Threatening Process Action Plan. Accessed via: https://www.environment.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2316188/Loss-of-Mature-Native-Trees.pdf

² Office of Sustainability and the Environment. ACT State of Environment Report 2023, "Canberra's Urban Boundary." Accessed via: <https://www.actsoe2023.com.au/issues/canberras-urban-boundary/>

³ Australian Government, 2021. Australia State of the Environment Report 2021.

⁴ ACT Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate. Threatened Species and Ecological Communities. Accessed via: <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/threatened-species-and-ecological-communities>. The five additional species are the Gang-gang Cockatoo, Mountain Skink, Yellow-bellied Glider, Keys Matchstick Grasshopper and the Pilotbird.

The ACT has 58 threatened species and two critically endangered ecological communities⁵. The protection of remaining Natural Temperate Grasslands and Yellow Box-Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodlands is especially important given their national significance, their intrinsic value, the amenity they bring to our city and their role as habitat for many threatened species. In view of the pressure on biodiversity across the ACT, all areas of moderate to high conservation value should now be appropriately protected and managed for effective conservation outcomes.

How environmental laws and policies are administered by the ACT government and environmental statutory office holders is critical to achieving strong environmental outcomes⁶. It is therefore essential that there are best practice environmental governance arrangements in place to ensure that fundamental accountability principles are upheld in relation to environmental management.

IMPLEMENT THE BIODIVERSITY NETWORK

As the 'bush capital', Canberra is fortunate to host a mosaic of natural areas in and around the city. Many of the larger natural areas are protected under the ACT's reserve system. But this system does not adequately protect all the Territory's natural values, leaving many unprotected and at risk of mismanagement.

In December 2022, The Conservation Council ACT Region and Friends of Grasslands published *Building a Biodiversity Network Across the ACT*⁷. The aims of this key document are to formalise conservation and management of biodiversity outcomes on multiple tenures including public and leased land, by identifying them as Conservation Areas, through a combination of protection, restoration and reconnection compatible with other land management objectives.

⁵ Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, 2024. Threatened Species and Ecological Communities. Accessed via: <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/threatened-species-and-ecological-communities>

⁶ GreenLaw, 2023. Final Report: Environmental Governance in the ACT. Available at: <https://www.actsoe2023.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Environmental-Governance-in-the-ACT.pdf>

⁷ Conservation Council ACT Region and Friends of Grasslands, 2022. Building a Biodiversity Network Across the ACT. Available at: https://conservationcouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/BRIEFING_BIODIVERSITY-NETWORK-_Final_Version_December.pdf

Implementing the Biodiversity Network will protect and enhance all remaining threatened species and communities in the ACT in perpetuity. By protecting remnants of natural value that are not reserved, these remnants, together with those in reserve, will be unified into a single management framework for protection and implementation of ecological management. Therefore conservation can be achieved across land tenures, without compromising the land uses that may exist in those places.

Building a Biodiversity Network Across the ACT is the key policy position for the Conservation Council ACT Region as its implementation will result in planning and land management that enhances long-term biodiversity outcomes. The statements outlined below are underpinned by the implementation of the Biodiversity Network, as it enables best environmental protection and management.



Implement changes to legislation to ensure in-perpetuity protection for Conservation Areas within the Biodiversity Network

1. In line with Recommendation 20 of the Inquiry into the Territory Plan⁸, implement the Biodiversity Network to ensure Conservation Areas outside the reserve system of moderate to high conservation value or needed for environmental connectivity are protected in perpetuity, and managed for their ecological values.
2. Introduce a formal program of voluntary environmental stewardship on rural and other leased land, that incorporates protection in perpetuity.
3. Consider options to provide protection through the Planning Act and the Nature Conservation Act that includes enabling simultaneous compatible uses⁹.

Implement ecological management in all Conservation Areas

4. Commence ecological management of Conservation Areas, and within key landscape connectivity areas.
5. Adequately resource the restoration of native vegetation and habitat to improve ecological condition.
6. Adequately resource rangers and land managers to manage Conservation Areas across the ACT, and to support rural lessees and Parkcare and Landcare volunteers.
7. Ensure alignment of government programs, such as the Urban Tree Planting Program, with appropriate biodiversity outcomes.



Photo: Lutgart Uten

⁸ Legislative Assembly for the ACT Standing Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services. Inquiry into the Territory Plan and Other Associated Documents. Accessed via: https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2416190/Inquiry-into-the-Territory-Plan-and-other-associated-documents-report-CURRENT-version.pdf

⁹ Conservation Council ACT Region and Friends of Grasslands, 2022. Building a Biodiversity Network Across the ACT. pp.19

Protect priority Conservation Areas

8. No industrial or urban development in the Western Edge Investigation Area.
9. Ensure protection from disturbance or loss for all Conservation Areas across the Territory, including within the Western Edge Investigation Area.
10. Provide Nature Reserve status to Ngununggula/ Bluetts Block.
11. Incorporate Conservation Areas, including Ainslie Volcanics and Glenloch grasslands, into adjacent reserves.
12. Develop a Conservation Management Plan for Central Molonglo.
13. When ceded to the ACT Government, provide reserve status for Lawson Grasslands.



Photo: Lutgart Uten



SUPPORT COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

14. Provide secure, long-term operational funding for Landcare ACT and member Catchment Groups.
15. Fund, support and enhance community-led environmental programs including Canberra Nature Map, Vegwatch, Waterwatch, Frogwatch and Fauna monitoring programs.
16. Provide additional Transport Canberra City Services (TCCS) rangers to support urban community on-ground programs.

ENSURE BEST PRACTICE MANAGEMENT OF PEST PLANTS AND ANIMALS

17. Ensure there is adequate and secure funding to manage invasive species, including for increased staffing and expertise of ACT Government land managers, resources to detect and manage new threats, and for trials for improved long-term control and maintenance of naturalised species.
18. By the beginning of 2026, implement and enforce full cat containment where all cats, no matter the age or suburb, are contained territory wide.

ENSURE BEST PRACTICE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

19. Remove Environment from the Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate to create a separate directorate responsible for land management, modelled on the previous Environment ACT agency.
20. Establish the Environment Protection Authority and the Conservator of Flora and Fauna as independent statutory bodies.
21. Review and consolidate all actions from ACT Government action plans, conservation strategies and plans of management to reduce duplication and confirm key priorities. Subsequently, fully fund and implement these priorities, applying specific timeframes to improve accountability.
22. Implement an education program about ecological management on public and private land, including tree retention, for community, arborists and relevant ACT Government staff across directorates.
23. Prepare, fund and implement emergency management plans for flora and fauna in response to extreme weather events.

SUPPORT THE PROTECTION OF NATIVE FORESTS IN OUR REGION

24. Help protect native forests in our region and uphold the right to a healthy environment:
 - a) Phase out wood-burning heaters in urban Canberra by 2030, in line with the Right to a Healthy Environment.
 - b) Ban the advertising, sale and installation of new and replacement wood heaters from January 2025.
 - c) Require all firewood sold in the ACT to meet forest certification (Forest Stewardship Council) standards.
 - d) Declare ACT Government support for an end to native forest logging nationally.