



Connecting People, Connecting Nature (18-19 Oct 2022) Conference Declaration

Australia's habitats, ecosystems and species are experiencing catastrophic impacts from a wide range of threats, including habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation due to land clearing, logging, development and invasive species. Our communities and natural systems are also under further duress from the pervasive impacts of climate change. The Australian Government's 2021 State of the Environment report highlights these growing pressures and the rapid decline and degradation of our environment.

The planetary crises we face of climate change, biodiversity loss and declining human and environmental health interact and make each other worse. These crises must be addressed through an integrated, cross-tenure approach to conservation and restoration that creates impact across landscapes at the significant scale needed.

Connectivity conservation is an established, proven approach that enables the unimpeded movement of species and the flow of natural processes that sustain all life on earth, not only in protected areas but across all land tenures. Strategic, community-led connectivity initiatives that combine to create impact at the regional and continental scale can help meet the massive challenges we face and move toward achieving our global environmental and climate goals in a holistic and evidence-based way.

Through a national system of conservation corridors, with protected areas as the cornerstones, we can:

- Mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- Curb the loss of Australia's unique species and ecosystems.
- Maintain and restore the natural integrity, resilience and adaptive capacity of our landscapes, waterways and seascapes.
- Remove major threats to biodiversity and encourage natural regeneration.
- Provide vital refugia and room for species to move and adapt in response to climate change.
- Improve long-term biodiversity persistence, ecosystem carbon storage and water quality.
- Support healing and improve community health and wellbeing.

A supportive national policy framework is needed to ensure good governance and involve and empower landholders, regional communities, First Nations Peoples and other local groups to protect, connect and regenerate nature. The guidance of First Nations Peoples in the co-design of projects and the weaving of traditional knowledge and practice into on-ground efforts to maximise impact will be critical for success. Young people will inherit many of the issues we face today so their inclusion in dialogue and building pathways to strengthen the environmental leaders of tomorrow is also needed. The original National Wildlife Corridors plan adopted in 2012 was designed to provide such a national framework but it was never implemented.

More recently, the Commonwealth Government's *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* addresses some aspects of the current need but doesn't explicitly address connectivity – a critical component for achieving resilience and adaptation and for meeting Australia's new goals of 30 by 30, net zero new extinctions and 43% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 leading to net zero by 2050.

The *Connecting People, Connecting Nature* conference in Brisbane (18-19 October 2022) brought together conservation industry experts from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australasia. The depth of conversation and breadth of engagement at the event highlighted that a renewed effort to revitalise connectivity conservation in Australia is vital if we are to make significant inroads into addressing the challenges we face. The conference supported the proposed United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity target to expand protected area conservation to cover at least 30 percent of land and sea through well-connected systems integrated into the broader landscapes and seascapes.

An acknowledgement of the importance of connectivity and its translation to community-based conservation efforts is now widely accepted globally. Australia was previously a leader in this space but has fallen behind other governments and independent conservation organisations worldwide.

We, therefore, call on Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments in Australia to:

1. Implement a **National Conservation Corridors Framework** in support of the *National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy* to ensure respectful, considered and meaningful consultation with stakeholders, and support the roll-out of integrated nature-based solutions that address our climate, biodiversity and health challenges.
2. Ensure that First Nations People are actively involved in the creation and implementation of the framework.
3. Acknowledge, value and promote the ecosystem service benefits to Australia of interconnected ecosystems on land and sea, including for climate mitigation and adaptation.
4. Promote strong integration of conservation corridors across government programs such as the National Reserve System and threatened species recovery plans and their inclusion in national environmental laws.
5. Recognise and provide funding to support established and emerging conservation corridors and related connectivity conservation initiatives with the necessary existing partner networks, ongoing projects and expertise to build on the foundations already in place.
6. Adopt guidelines for future funding programs that support the establishment of national regional and local-scale conservation corridors, including in areas where biodiversity is threatened by urban growth and where social inequality has impacted on both urban communities and wildlife.
7. Work with other governments across Australasia (including New Zealand and our Pacific Island neighbours) to enable and support collaboration between connectivity conservation initiatives and ensure our nation's contribution to restoring and reconnecting landscapes and seascapes across our wider region.

Signatory Organisations:

