

# Bureaucratic and funding impediments to threatened species recovery

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## Introduction

This paper considers the bureaucratic and funding impediments to threatened species recovery from the perspective of the community. It attempts to give a national perspective, however the author's work is focussed in Victoria and therefore many examples are Victorian.

## Role of community in species recovery

Firstly, it is important to outline the primary role of the community in species recovery, in order to appreciate the various impediments experienced by the community. It is well recognised that the government does not have the capacity to recover species without assistance, and that the community plays a vital role in complementing the limited time and resources of agency staff. Additionally, the community is well placed to carry out species recovery actions both on public land and private properties. Volunteers often live close to the area that requires action, and they also have the passion, enthusiasm, interest, and the time to undertake recovery actions. There is also a diversity of skills and expertise among the community that can be usefully employed to generate conservation outcomes.

## Impediments

### Policy requirements

Lack of data is an important impediment to species recovery, particularly in the more remote areas of Australia. In remote areas where data on species and ecological communities is lacking, there may be a greater need for research and skill development before on-ground works can take place. A species or community may be significantly threatened with extinction, but not recognised as such due to a lack of ecological information. This information is required for a species to be considered it for listing under the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Species must be listed under this Act in order to receive Natural Heritage Trust species recovery funding.

Similarly, a species may be classified as threatened under state legislation and be the focus of recovery action in that state. However, unless it is also nationally listed, the species would not qualify for the majority of available threatened species funding that is provided through the Natural Heritage Trust.

## **Recovery Planning**

Significant effort is currently being invested in Victoria into the writing of large quantities of action statements (state recovery plans). Some recently prepared documents are lacking in specific measurable actions and are predominantly “business as usual” documents, without any commitment or identified actions to assist with real recovery of the species identified. This could be a result of political pressures within state government agencies which results in resource use interests often being given greater importance than species recovery. An example is the recently reviewed Spot-tailed Quoll action statement, which places a limit on the number of quoll records that can be protected in forest management areas. In effect, the action statement only allows for the protection of less than 200 individuals of the species state-wide. There is some concern that this political battle within government agencies has led to lack of confidence that significant gains can be achieved in species recovery, and that this has subsequently led to lower goals being set in action statement and other similar planning documents.

Because of the significant resource that the community provides in conservation action, recovery plans that recognise the role of community are likely to achieve greater outcomes for the species. The national malleefowl recovery plan contains specific measurable targets and actions for the conservation of malleefowl. Additionally, the plan recognises the role of the community in recovery of the malleefowl and contains specific actions for volunteer and community involvement in monitoring and habitat protection for this species.

In relation to funding impediments, it is important to remember that threatened species agencies have limited funds compared to other areas of the bureaucracy. Hence they have limited capacity to devote significant amounts of time to one particular species and are forced to prioritise the allocation of their resources between large numbers of species. Similarly, agency staff in charge of coordinating recovery programs may find themselves in conflict when their loyalties to the agency outweigh their commitment to a specific recovery program. These limitations highlight the potential benefits of a community coordinated recovery program, whereby the community coordinator can focus on a particular species and not be constrained by competing interests.

In some cases across Australia, state agency staff are criticised for holding too much control over resources such as species data and conservation activities. This can be problematic mainly because agency staff do not have the resources and capacity to undertake or oversee all conservation activity. Therefore it is important that they increase their confidence in the community’s ability to add value to the conservation process and share the available information.

Staff turnover is another important impediment to species recovery, both in state as well as Commonwealth agencies. Lack of continuity of conservation staff frequently results in a slowing of support and information flow which prolongs recovery progress. It is important to maintain a constant contact point for a particular species or issue over time.

## **Regional Planning**

Regional plans have become the leading document through which regional Natural Heritage Trust and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality funding is directed. In seeking projects through the regional funding process, proponents must demonstrate the direct link to targets identified in a particular region's plan (known as the Regional Catchment Strategy in Victoria).

To date, many regional plans have taken a "business as usual" approach, with one region in Victoria recently quoted as aiming to "do what we're doing now, plus a little bit more". This is a potential impediment to species recovery, as planning bodies need to be leading significant environmental management changes in order to address the current extinction crisis in Australia. Community groups can play an important role in suggesting issues, targets and actions to be addressed in their regional plans.

Regional bodies (such as Catchment Management Authorities in Victoria) have experienced some difficulties in engaging community groups in the regional planning process. The community may see the process as long and boring, finding it difficult to prioritise spending time in meetings and reviewing long planning documents. However it is important to note that community input into these plans is very valuable, particularly from community members of recovery programs. Recovery teams input into the plans and specific targets in the plans could assist with future funding allocations to these programs. Specific actions that are relevant to the goals of the malleefowl recovery program will assist with seeking funds in future through the regional Natural Heritage Trust process.

Some regions in Victoria have adopted innovative ways to involve the community in the development of regional plans – such as holding a community survey, and providing cameras to individuals and asking them to take photos of places in the region of importance to them.

## **Regional funding**

As noted above, accredited regional plans will provide the basis of regional Natural Heritage Trust funding, including funding of national threatened species programs. It is important to note that a project must be considered a priority by a region in order to be included in the regional funding bid, which is known as the Regional Catchment Investment Plan. Limited funding is available for threatened species recovery through regional Natural Heritage Trust funding. At the time of writing, it was estimated that approximately \$300,000 would be available for biodiversity/threatened species in the 2004-05 Natural Heritage Trust funding round for each Victorian region.

## **Coordination of effort**

The coordination of recovery effort across regions is an on-going challenge in species conservation. Some species recovery programs only require funding from one region and others require funding from numerous regions. For example, the red-tailed black cockatoo recovery team currently seeks funding from 3 separate regions that span the range of this bird in Victoria and South Australia. This is particularly time-consuming in terms of application and reporting requirements. However, there is an opportunity for recovery programs to seek multiple-region funds, coordinated through one region, which is currently referred to as "regional competitive" funding. Bids of

this nature require cooperation, good communication and clear goals identified by all regions involved.

Inconsistencies in time lines and communication have made it difficult for community groups and recovery teams to engage in the regional Natural Heritage Trust funding process. For example, most regions had different time lines for the submission of project ideas through an “expressions of interest” process in Victoria for 2004-05 funding – some regions closed their process in October 2003, while others were still undecided on the process in January 2004. Additionally, not all regions had a formal “expressions of interest” process. Accessing information regarding time lines required contact with individual regions. Hence the level of work for a recovery team wishing to access funds in various regions has been significant and somewhat confusing.

There is room for improvement in the communications area, however it is recognised that this is an evolving process and that Victoria in particular is experiencing a significant learning process. It would assist groups greatly if the funding process and time lines were more consistent and better communicated. While some groups are aware of the regional funding process, many (including some regional threatened species agency staff) are not aware of the detail and hence of the different opportunities available. For example, there is limited awareness of the opportunities through “regional competitive” funding (ie. funds to be invested across a number of regions, but sought through one region only) and that this funding is available through the annual regional funding process. As noted above, this funding has the potential to significantly reduce coordinated effort across regions.

## **Solutions**

### **What can government do?**

Overall, there is a need for significantly greater funding for threatened species recovery as evidenced by the lack of staff resources and limited funding available for species work through the Natural Heritage Trust. NRM facilitators employed in each region and across states could certainly help to increase staff resource capacity and communication about funding opportunities to community groups, but are likely to be overwhelmed by the scale of the task at hand. Other needs include the following:

#### ***Improved communication***

- i. There is a need for better communication to inform the community and regional threatened species agency staff of all available funding opportunities in a timely manner. Additionally, the application process needs to be clear, and consistent with other processes where possible.

#### ***Community input into planning documents***

- ii. Community involvement in recovery and other planning is recognised as being valuable for a number of reasons, including the limited capacity (staff and funding resources) of governments and the broad range of skills and resources held by the community. Members of recovery programs are also

well placed to identify relevant actions and targets for the regional plan and species recovery plan.

***Meaningful planning documents***

- iii. In order to achieve adequate outcomes for threatened species and biodiversity conservation, recovery plans and regional plans need to have meaningful and challenging targets and objectives.

***Trust in the community & sharing of information***

- iv. It is also important to recognise the value of community input and to share data and other information.

***Building the knowledge base***

- v. In many cases the most pressing need for threatened species recovery is to conduct research and there is a need to provide support and resources in this area.

**What can the community do?**

The community has a key role to play in planning and implementing actions for threatened species recovery, and also in demonstrating public support for the prioritisation of threatened species conservation by government. In particular, the community can:

- Support and encourage government to allocate more funds to threatened species conservation.
- Become familiar with regional planning processes, which direct funding priorities in each region.
- Have input into regional and species/communities recovery plans.
- Share recovery successes with other species recovery programs and among different states working on the same species.
- Improve national coordination of actions, particularly of the national malleefowl program.

**National malleefowl coordination**

Several recovery programs are successfully coordinated across a species' habitat range. These include:

- swift parrot
- red-tailed black cockatoo and
- orange-bellied parrot

The habitat range of the red-tailed black cockatoo crosses South Australia and Victoria and the recovery team's work is not constrained by these boundaries (although it is required to work within the challenges of different laws between the two states, as well as between the various councils involved). The recovery team is hosted by Birds Australia, who employs a project officer to coordinate activities of the team, including writing of a newsletter, development of recovery projects, the annual count and the seeking of funding.

The habitat of the swift parrot covers Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. A national recovery team, coordinated by a project officer based in NSW, operates to implement the national Swift Parrot recovery plan. The recovery program benefits from the following:

- coordinated training workshops
- information sharing
- national policy input
- education materials & awareness raising
- annual count & other data collection
- developing pilot projects
- seeking funds

The Swift Parrot Program successfully sought “regional competitive” funding via one region in NSW for the years 2003-04 and 2004-05. This funding can be spent across the habitat range of the species to implement the national recovery plan. This “regional competitive” funding stream could also be suitable for the malleefowl program, to implement the recovery plan across various regions from different states.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, there are a number of funding and bureaucratic impediments to threatened species recovery in Australia. The impediments are often related to political priorities, limited resource availability and/or gaps in communication. A lack of funding will ultimately mean that many threatened species do not benefit from recovery actions, and that agency staff cannot always provide the support required to assist the community in threatened species recovery. Funding and other impediments are often associated with political decisions and priorities - for example in some cases resource use interests will dominate the planning process and limit goals that can be set for a particular species. Poor communication means that it is increasingly difficult for community groups to be aware of and understand the various opportunities for involvement in threatened species recovery actions.

There are various issues that need to be addressed to remedy the resourcing, communication and other impediments to threatened species recovery, and suggestions for both the community and bureaucracy have been made in this paper. State and national coordination of recovery efforts is an important first step in facilitating improvements in this area.

The malleefowl recovery program could potentially benefit significantly from national coordination, particularly in the sharing of resources and knowledge. While some states are advanced in particular areas, such as the development of educational and promotional materials, others have much to share in other areas such as training. Sharing of these skills and resources should to some extent assist with overcoming resource constraints and also in demonstrating to funding bodies that the program is a valuable investment. Sharing of knowledge and skills can help to overcome some of the bureaucratic and funding impediments to malleefowl recovery, or to at least provide a suitable forum through which to manage these issues.