

Australia's draft 'Strategy for nature' doesn't cut it. Here are nine ways to fix it

Written by Euan Ritchie, Associate Professor in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Centre for Integrative Ecology, School of Life & Environmental Sciences, Deakin University

Australia arguably has the [worst conservation record](#) of any wealthy and politically stable nation. Since European arrival roughly 230 years ago, 50 animal and 60 plant species have gone extinct, including the loss of some 30 native mammals – [roughly 35% of global mammal extinctions since 1500](#)

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These are not just tragedies of the distant past – the [Christmas Island pipistrelle](#), the [forest skink](#) and the [Bramble Cay melomys](#) have all died out within the past two decades.

More than 1,800 plant, animal and ecological communities are listed as being at [risk of extinction](#), ranging from individual species such as the orange-bellied parrot and Gilbert's potoroo, all the way up to entire ecosystems such as the Great Barrier Reef. This number [rises every year](#), in the face of threats such as [climate change](#), [rampant land clearing](#), [mining](#) and [invasive species](#).

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This bleak situation has been [recognised by successive governments](#), but never successfully tackled.

Read more: [***Australia's species need an independent champion***](#)

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In the midst of such a [tremendous environmental challenge](#), the federal government has released a draft document, [Australia's strategy for nature 2018–2030](#), for public comment. This is a welcome step, but regrettably the strategy falls a long way short of what's required and contains [significant flaws](#). It contains no firm commitments or measurable targets, and overlooks a substantial amount of relevant scientific evidence.

As representatives of Australia's peak professional ecological body, the Ecological Society of Australia ([ESA](#)), we are deeply concerned that the strategy is not fit for its purpose of protecting Australia's biodiversity.

A bolder, science-based vision

As part of ESA's formal submission to the public consultation, we provide an alternative, evidence-based vision. This includes nine key recommendations for nature conservation in Australia.

1. Set measurable targets. Any project needs a set of quantifiable targets, otherwise we won't know whether it has been successful or not. Some suggestions:

- establish a comprehensive national network of ecosystem monitoring sites by 2025
- reverse the declines of all species that are threatened by human-caused factors by 2025.

2. Commit to preventing human-caused species extinctions. The strategy should state explicitly that human-driven species extinctions are not acceptable, and establish and maintain [clear paths of accountability](#).

3. [Adequately fund](#) the strategy's implementation. Australia should show international leadership in conservation by investing at the upper end of OECD and G20 averages. At present Australia allocates less than 0.8% of GDP to conservation. We suggest 2% as an urgent minimum investment, with scope to expand funding to [ensure that targets can be met](#)

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4. **Focus on the [intrinsic value](#) of biodiversity.** The draft strategy is supposed to represent “Australia’s biodiversity conservation strategy and action inventory”, but it does not define biodiversity, choosing instead to focus on the vague notion of “nature”. We recommend the document return its focus to biodiversity, defined in the

[Convention on Biodiversity](#)

as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems”.

5. **Make specific legislative recommendations.** The strategy should specify the legislative revisions that will be needed to improve conservation, with particular focus on the flagship [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation \(EPBC\) Act 1999](#)

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- requiring [recovery plans for all threatened species](#)
- requiring threat-abatement plans to efficiently manage major threats to many species, such as impacts of feral predators and herbivores, invasive plants and new diseases
- specifically protecting high-value ecosystems, including those of economic value such as the Great Barrier Reef, and those that are critical for species survival, and rare ecosystems.

6. **Commit to establishing a comprehensive system of protected areas, including marine parks.** Despite longstanding commitments to developing a fully representative network of protected areas in Australia, many bioregions remain [poorly represented in the National Reserve System](#) and the national marine protected area system.

7. **Include all 20 [Aichi biodiversity targets](#) and affirm Australia’s commitment to the Convention on Biodiversity.** Australia has a proud bipartisan history of national and international engagement with conservation. But the new draft strategy is poor in comparison with other countries’ equivalent documents, such as [Germany’s National Strategy on Biological Diversity](#) and [New Zealand’s Biodiversity Action Plan](#)

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8. Base the strategy on Australia's international conservation commitments. Australia has signed [more than 30 international conservation agreements](#), including the Convention on Biodiversity, the [Apia Convention](#), and the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#). The domestic EPBC Act requires Australia not to defy these agreements, yet with the exception of the Convention on Biodiversity, none of them rates a mention in the new draft strategy.

9. Recognise key issues that affect Australian biodiversity conservation. Any successful strategy should specifically address new and emerging issues that can harm our environment, such as Australia's increasing use of natural resources, environmental water flows in rivers, and overfishing.

We cannot ignore human population growth, increasing per capita consumption and subsequent resource demand as drivers of threats to healthy and resilient ecosystems.

Our unique plants, animals and other organisms shape our national identity. They have wide-ranging benefits to our society, as well as being inherently valuable in their own right. They need a much stronger commitment to their ongoing protection.

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