

## **Conserving biodiversity through land use change: some principles and directions for Victoria**

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### **Abstract**

The majority of Victoria's native vegetation cover has been lost, especially on private land, so the aim should be protection of existing remnants, together with their expansion and enhancement, and the development of new, sustainable land uses. A major statewide (indeed, nationwide) revegetation effort is required if Victoria is to control salinity and conserve biodiversity values as best it can. What might the catalysts be for 'repair' work on this scale?

A national 'landscape repair' initiative is needed; including the use of outcomes-based property environmental management tools, coupled to regional targets, which are in turn accountable to national targets for conservation and restoration.

Achieving these objectives will be very difficult, if not impossible, unless private land use can be shifted significantly towards sustainability. Alone, government grants and community-based initiatives are not enough. A 'leveraging private investment' package would empower landholders, communities and businesses to capitalise on plans for sustainable land use.

### **Keywords**

biodiversity conservation, environmental management, private funding, revegetation, sustainability

### **Introduction**

In the face of inevitable landscape change, the question for conservation managers, scientists and advocates is how to manage that change to avoid further biodiversity loss. Degrading processes continue throughout Victoria: salinity, declining water quality, weeds, pests, the effects of habitat fragmentation, reduced river flows, climate change, and so on all actively work against the comparatively small-scale conservation measures currently employed (VCMC 2002).

A major 'landscape repair' initiative is needed, and Victoria is well-placed to play a national leadership role in this regard.

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) appreciates the efforts of government, private enterprise and community groups in Victoria to encourage and enable landholders to conserve biodiversity. However, much more will need to be done if the state is to meet its conservation obligations.

### **Repairing the country**

A major state-wide (indeed, nation-wide) revegetation effort is required if Victoria is to control salinity and conserve biodiversity values as best it can. With the majority of the State's native vegetation cover having been lost, especially on private lands, the aim should be protection, expansion and enhancement of existing remnants and the development of new, sustainable land uses. Some of these uses may well have both commercial and conservation outcomes, through intelligent design. So what might be the catalysts for 'repair' work on this scale?

### **Environmental management systems and sustainable land use**

Governments and some in industry apparently see environmental management systems (EMS) as the next step in rural environmental management beyond Landcare, and as a method of

enabling farmers to fulfil an as yet ill-defined 'duty of care' (Commonwealth of Australia 2002).

A major challenge for natural resource management is to effectively link actions at the property scale to environmental outcomes at the landscape scale. Effective links need to be established between natural resource management plans and the commercial decision-making that drives most of the environmental outcomes in a region. Together with Southcorp and Land and Water Australia, ACF commissioned a study of how to make those linkages using EMS (Alexandra and Urwin 2002).

The report found, however, that a number of institutional and information barriers stand in the way of facilitating the best outcomes from EMS.

Coupled with environmental performance targets and standards, EMSs may be used to good effect in improving property natural resource management. On their own, however, they cannot arrest current trends in ecological degradation. They are process instruments, not performance standards; and they focus on changing land management, not land use.

There are certainly opportunities to use EMS to augment and refine incentives, investment and regulatory systems by 'harvesting' environmental information from a property with the blessing of the landholder. The study found, however, that regional plans must be more prescriptive and require greater detail, improved ecological risk assessment and greater definition of the biophysical properties of the landscape, so that sustainable land use decisions can be made with a reasonable degree of confidence. Clearly, plans that ensure that priority conservation issues are taken up by farm enterprises, via EMS or other tools, will be markedly different from those in use today.

It remains to be seen whether the regional targets currently under development can generate landscape change, and whether accountability for performance can be effectively built into the system.

### **Leveraging private investment in sustainable land use**

In 2001 the Allen Consulting Group was commissioned by the Business Leaders Round Table, of which ACF and CSIRO are members, to develop a national framework for mobilising large-scale private sector investment in landscape repair (ACG 2001).

ACG designed a package of measures, based on policy tools already available (i.e. those with a more or less proven track record). The idea is to make sustainable land uses and land management practices more attractive to investors, compared with unsustainable production.

The first task is to improve access to Australia's substantial pool of private capital. To capture a portion of these funds (some \$600 billion), ACG suggested establishing statutory investment companies (pooled development funds) to attract investors and generate innovation.

They further suggested an integrated package of taxation offsets and concessions carefully tailored to make environmental investments more attractive, and the establishment of a national Land Repair Fund to administer the package.

If we add to this some plain, old-fashioned seed funding for innovative commercial ventures that achieve environmental benefits, we would be well on the way to tipping the balance of private land management in favour of conservation. Indeed, the consultants conservatively estimated a leverage ratio of about \$3.50 of private sector money for every one taxpayer dollar under the proposed framework.

To ensure private dollars generate real conservation outcomes, however, robust sustainability accreditation of plans, projects and enterprises that attract preferred investment is essential.

## Targeting conservation

Where public money is invested, governments can expect real outcomes, or at least real progress towards outcomes, as defined by explicit targets and standards. Both the Australian National Audit Office and the mid-term review of the Natural Heritage Trust have strongly recommended the development of challenging but achievable targets for natural resource management outcomes.

It is disappointing, therefore, to see that the most recent national natural resource management programs, have developed ‘matters for targets’ for regional bodies, rather than outlining targets for environmental performance, as was suggested at its commencement.

National and state biodiversity conservation targets — clear, measurable and time-bound — are needed to inspire real on-ground action and ensure accountability across all levels, including accountability to taxpayers. In order to make national targets effective, landholders and catchment managers will need assistance in interpreting the available science, as well as an improving information base, legal reforms and financial help. If poor performance cannot be explained wholly in terms of unforeseen circumstances, however, then the continuation of public support should be carefully reviewed.

## Conclusions

A national ‘landscape repair’ initiative is needed, and must include the use of outcomes-based property environmental management tools coupled to regional targets, which are in turn accountable to national targets for conservation and restoration.

Achieving these objectives will be very difficult, if not impossible, unless private land use can be shifted significantly towards sustainability. Alone, government grants and community-based initiatives are not enough. A ‘leveraging private investment’ package would empower landholders, communities and businesses to capitalise on plans for sustainable land use.

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