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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

I'd like to start by paying my respects to the traditional owners of this land on which we meet, the Toorbal and Jagara.

It is a great pleasure to officially open this landmark gathering of the world's leading ecologists. To the Australian scientists here, I want to acknowledge the significant contribution you make both nationally and internationally.

Everyone present works in fields of research that are critical. Given the theme of this conference, namely the challenge of climate change, it is a truly important time to meet. I'm delighted then to add to those who have already spoken and offer the warmest welcome to you all.

I have been fortunate that throughout much of my working life – as a musician, as President of the Australian Conservation Foundation and as a politician – to have gained some insight into the state of our natural environment.

We are one of the world's 17 mega-diverse countries, with more endemic animal species than any other country. Fifteen of Australia's 17 World Heritage sites are listed for their outstanding natural and cultural values. Incidentally, our World Heritage properties show how biodiversity as well as enjoyment of our natural and cultural assets underpins our economy – they generate \$12 billion annually and support over 120,000 jobs across the country.

We have a community that retains a great affection for natural landscapes, and we have an extraordinary land and sea inheritance, the result of millennia of active ecosystem management by the indigenous people of Australia.

Whilst we break records for species diversity, it is a matter of grave concern that we're also breaking other records, records we can't be proud of. Over the last 200 years Australia has suffered the largest documented decline in biodiversity of any continent.

I don't want to dwell on the statistics because they won't surprise this audience, but it's clear that in building this prosperous, democratic nation, we have made decisions which have, at the same time, damaged its natural fabric.

Today I want to talk about what we as a Government are doing about this, and some of the challenges we face. I'll do this through a case study of a particular island that I've had to deal with since becoming Environment Minister – fascinating ecologically, but highly challenging from a policy perspective.

It's a tiny speck in the Indian Ocean, much closer to Jakarta than to Canberra, or in fact any part of the Australian mainland. It's Christmas Island, and it's famous because late in each year, most of the fifty million adult red crabs on the island march from their rainforest habitat down to the ocean to breed.

Much of the year these crabs browse on vegetation, leaves and fruit on the forest floor. They act as an army of 'gardeners', keeping the ground and the lower strata quite open. It's a unique relationship and it underlines the international significance of the island's ecology.

The red crabs are under threat from an invasive species of tramp ant, the yellow crazy ant, which attacks and kills red crabs in their territory. Wherever the crabs and their activity disappears, the structure of the forest changes, with the understorey thickening up. A crazy ant baiting program began in 2002, and crazy ant numbers have fallen by 80 per cent.

But red crabs and yellow crazy ants are not the most recent ecological issue that has come to light on the island. Survey data has shown that the Christmas Island pipistrelle bat, a micro-bat endemic to the island, has continued to experience an alarming decline, despite a recovery plan for the species being implemented since 2002.

The fate of this tiny bat became a public issue earlier this year, and I was called on to launch a rescue mission and captive breeding program.

Aware that there were a range of ecological issues on the island, I felt it was important to get the best advice I could on the whole island's ecosystem, not just on the Christmas Island pipistrelle. I wanted to understand the prospects not only for the bat, but also for its habitat.

I was conscious that a species-by-species approach to the protection of biodiversity can give too narrow a perspective to inform an effective policy response.

I was also conscious of the debates around conservation triage and the policy conundrum that lies there - the argument that when resources are limited, they should not be thrown away on what may well be lost causes. It is an argument that resonates when administering finite budgets.

I commissioned an Expert Working Group, led by Associate Professor Bob Beeton, to report on the threats to the biodiversity of Christmas Island and appropriate responses.

What that group found was that Christmas Island's conservation problems are not confined to the bat and the crabs, but are pervasive, chronic and increasing. A number of endemic species are near the point of extinction, including several forest skinks.

The Working Group looked at all the interacting factors on the island, focussing on the large number of invasive species that have taken hold in its rainforest during the last hundred years – ants, snails, a giant centipede, rats, just to name a few.

They suggested that it might be the case that an ecological cascade was occurring, with the impact of one change affecting others in unexpected ways.

For example, while the removal of yellow crazy ants from parts of the forest is an achievement, the absence of red crabs in those same bits of forest creates improved conditions for other invasives – the giant centipede and the giant African snail.

The strong message from the Expert Working Group was that it was time to take a whole-of ecosystem approach on Christmas Island if we are to halt biodiversity decline.

The highest priority identified by the Expert Working Group was to improve the overall environmental governance of the island, with a particular focus on quarantine.

I have accepted this recommendation, and I am now working with my colleagues including the Minister for Home Affairs to do just that. We're working on an integrated approach to the management of the island's environment, and scientific input will be necessary to guide this work.

Because healthy red crab populations are so important to the functioning of the island's ecosystem, in this year's Federal Budget, the Government provided an additional \$1 million for infrastructure to better protect migrating crabs.

A new round of aerial baiting for yellow crazy ants will begin in September. While the chemical Fipronil remains the only available control measure, the Working Group did raise concerns about its effects on non-target species and the environment, and they will examine this further.

In the meantime, research into the biological control of yellow crazy ants is underway.

For two of the lizards in trouble, the blue-tailed skink and the forest skink, the Working Group recommended an immediate capture and captive breeding program. This too is underway.

And what of the pipistrelle?

The Working Group warned me that a rescue mission for the Christmas Island pipistrelle had a reasonably high likelihood of failure. There are very few bats remaining, and they are trap-shy and difficult to catch.

Nevertheless, the Working Group agreed it was worth trying, and for a number of reasons:

- this bat is an endemic species,
- it potentially plays a substantial ecological role,
- it has social value associated with its uniqueness,
- delay is not an option.

But given the high likelihood of failure, the Working Group felt that resources for the rescue mission should be capped. I accepted this assessment, and a rescue team is on the island today attempting to carry out this mission.

While captive breeding programs are the best chance we have to preserve these critically endangered species, they are also a sign of failure over many decades. We have not read or responded to the signs of an ecosystem unravelling under the pressures of invasive species. For decades, management has focused on a handful of species and threats with almost no focus on quarantine. In short we've treated the symptoms not the causes.

I must say, I had to think long and hard about the Christmas Island pipistrelle. Given the poor prospects of success, was a rescue mission worth funding?

As Environment Minister, I have a number of separate responsibilities that relate to the conservation of biodiversity.

Some of those responsibilities are statutory, making decisions about the fate of particular pieces of habitat and even species and ecological communities.

At other times, it falls to me to allocate resources, particularly money, to projects and programs that aim to halt, or at least slow, the decline of particular elements of our natural environment.

In another part of my role, I aim to influence the direction and detail of a broad range of government policies outside my direct sphere of control.

Overwhelmingly, these responsibilities relate to components of the natural environment that are already under significant threat, sometimes to the point where my decisions are critical in determining whether or not a species or population or ecological community will ever again be the subject of a government decision, except perhaps the decision to publish an obituary notice.

This is where I found myself with the Christmas Island pipistrelle.

A very senior bureaucrat once commented to me that we were like ambulance attendants parked at the bottom of a very precipitous hill.

Why, he asked, don't we build a fence at the top of the hill and stop the carnage rather than wait to treat the victims?

It's a fair question and one that I've reflected on for some time. And this audience more than most I suspect, would be aware of the dimensions of this quandary.

Why can't we get ahead of the decline and take genuine preventative action, rather than consign ourselves to a palliative role and what in some ways is merely the efficient administration of a biodiversity hospice?

Since coming to power, the Rudd Government has put in place a comprehensive reform program that does aim to take much more of a preventative approach. It is one that I am pleased to have led as Environment Minister with my colleague Minister Burke.

We've rebuilt natural resource funding under Caring for our Country, the major natural resources program, to align it with clear national priorities and measurable targets.

These priorities are designed to make a real difference at the landscape scale and ensure that funding goes to those areas and projects across the nation that best meet the ecological challenges we face.

A good example of this is the Reef Rescue program, a \$200 million five year commitment to improve water quality in the Great Barrier Reef region, a world centre of marine diversity. The program helps farmers in the reef catchments change their practices to reduce the nutrients and chemicals in run-off from their farms. It will help build the Reef's resilience to the shocks it will experience from climate change.

I'm particularly proud of the increase in funding to the National Reserve System program. It now has more than four times the funding of the previous Government's program, and is directed to acquiring conservation lands in bioregions which are less than 10 per cent reserved. We have a plan to increase it's size by one quarter by 2013.

We're also taking a landscape and ecosystem approach to environmental regulation. We're using the strategic assessment provisions of the national environment law to inform future decisions on the Kimberley in Australia's north-west, and in urban growth areas in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, and we're looking to extend that approach to other regions.

We're completing marine bioregional plans for all Australian waters, intending to meet our international commitment for a national representative system of marine protected areas by 2012.

It is an approach that says we should not focus solely on the sick and dying, but should work to build the resilience of ecosystems and landscapes, to ensure if you like, that the hospital waiting rooms are a little less full and the health care a lot more preventative!

Australia has 1,750 species now on the threatened list. And while, like the pipistrelle, we will have to act in an urgent way from time to time to prevent their extinction, it won't always be effective to keep tackling them one by one. Over time, we will have to put more emphasis on ecosystems and how they function rather than species and the places they were last seen. We will need to take a more holistic and strategic approach, building the fence at the top of the hill rather than staffing the ambulance at the bottom.

But in order to do this, we will have to take the community with us. As the world's leading ecologists, you have an important role to play, not only helping decision-makers understand how to undertake this task, but helping the community and policy makers to understand what is required in terms of public policy, resources and priorities.

I encourage you to do that, to take the time to engage in these public debates. And I don't mean by simply lending the weight of your credentials to a letter or petition on the hot button issue of the day, which is often represented simplistically in the media or political debate. I mean really engaging in public forums on the big issues:

- where we should best put our efforts and resources;
- how we link protected areas into landscape scale conservation efforts;

- the debate I've highlighted today about prioritising and managing ecosystems rather than species;
- and the subjects you'll be looking at today, all important and some requiring rethinking by governments and society.

The priority is to urgently build that critical mass of understanding in the community, to help us both better comprehend and then get on with what is required to halt the decline in the biodiversity that underpins our communities and our future.

Before finishing I'd like to go to the conference theme of Ecology in A Changing Climate, and take this opportunity to launch a new and important report. The report is called *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change: A strategic assessment of the vulnerability of Australia's biodiversity to climate change*. It's the first major scientific analysis of what climate change will mean for our unique biodiversity, and its been prepared by some of Australia's most knowledgeable and respected scientists and environmental management experts, led by Professor Will Steffen who I understand is here today.

The report summarises the existing threats to Australia's biodiversity and the intensifying impacts of climate change on those threats. It recommends a 'vastly enhanced conservation effort' calling on policy makers to:

- Reform our management of biodiversity
- Strengthen the national commitment to conserve Australia's biodiversity
- Invest in our life support systems
- Build innovative and flexible governance systems
- Meet the mitigation challenge.

Some substantial effort has been applied by the Government over the past 18 months, and while there is more to do, I am pleased to say that we are already acting in many of the areas this new report highlights:

- by reviewing our national environmental legislation,
- by strengthening our national reserve system,
- by providing clear guidance on national priorities, with targeted goals and encouragement of partnerships
- by maintaining our investment in the environment in the 2009 Federal Budget.

This excellent summary will be an invaluable input for all Australian governments as we review our national biodiversity strategy. I have heard the calls for a more targeted, more robust and more accountable national biodiversity strategy, indeed it's something I favour. I will be taking this up directly with my State counterparts on the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, seeking their support for a much stronger response to this national crisis.

Some might say that the midst of an economic crisis is no time to be discussing Australia's biodiversity. I say it is exactly the right time. We cannot afford a return to the polarised, 'either/or' debate about the environment and the economy. We are sufficiently aware that our wellbeing is inextricably linked to the health of our natural ecosystems.

That sterile discussion belongs to the last millennium, and to the last Federal Government, whose backward-looking policies are still alive and well in the Federal Opposition. Just look at the appalling way they have failed time and again to develop a coherent approach on climate change.

It is not a case of being sentimental when we talk about the massive threats to our environment, including those presented by climate change, nor of being alarmist.

Indeed I would assert it is a case of being clear-sighted pragmatists, keen to protect our assets, to adapt to the inevitable, and to strive to live more sustainably in every part of our lives, and over and above that, to enable successive generations that same portfolio of opportunities.

I am committed to that path, as is the government and we appreciate this means being informed by the experts in this field.

If ever there was an issue that required a whole of ecosystem response, it's climate change, and with the range of topics you will explore being vast, so the task is ever more pressing, and the need for action ever more urgent

I wish you well in your deliberations and take great pleasure in officially opening the Tenth International Congress of Ecology here in Brisbane Australia.

Thank you.

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