Declining Biodiversity - National Parks are not our Salvation

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Two centuries ago we had sustainable land management, world class fire management practices and abundant biodiversity.

Joseph Lycett c1820, Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos

What happened? Over a short period of time Aboriginal land management skills and knowledge disappeared and our control over fire was lost. At the same time we introduced plants and animals that became widespread pests. As our population grew much of our native vegetation was cleared for the production of food and fibre and most of what remained was left unmanaged. The combined effect of these things had a major impact on our biodiversity. The greatest impacts were west of the Dividing Range with the extinction of the majority of our small ground dwelling mammals including the iconic bilby, numbat, and brush-tailed bettong.
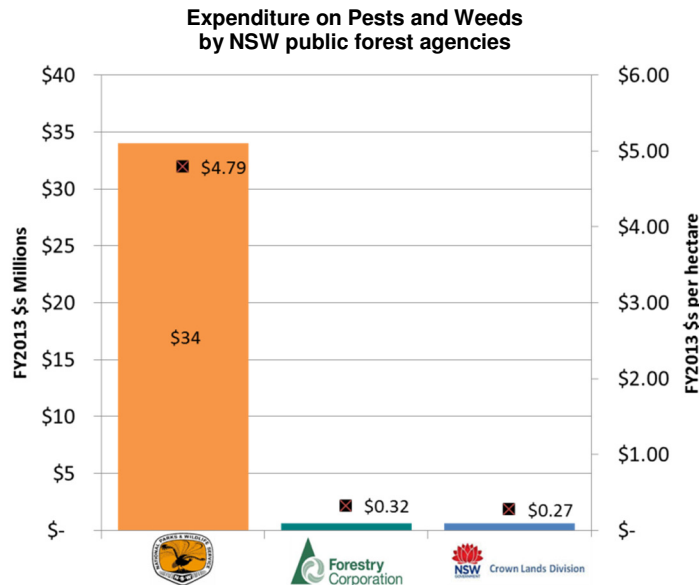
To stem the decline in biodiversity we have introduced a complex web of tenure based legislation. Tenure is a legal concept rather than a best-practice management method. It means that public native forests have been classified as National Parks, State Forests or Crown Land.

As NSW is the most heavily regulated forest environment it provides an insight into the problem. As an example its native forests are governed by around 50 Acts of Parliament, 5 State ministerial portfolios and 12 Government Agencies. For a while this system seemed to work, supporting improved knowledge and development of specialised forest management skills. However the tenure system offers no broad landscape management and accountability. Frequently, forestry departments focus on the profits of timber production, park managers focus on the records of individual species and managers of Crown Lands focus on administration.

Tenures have always been ripe for political opportunism. Over a ten year period in NSW a former ALP Premier claimed to save the forests by relabelling 350 parcels of State forests and Crown Land as National Parks and directing the majority of all public land management spending into their promotion and management. For his efforts he was awarded the World

Conservation Union International Parks Merit Award and life membership of the Wilderness Society. City dwellers were convinced that the forests were saved and that a world class conservation reserve system had been created.
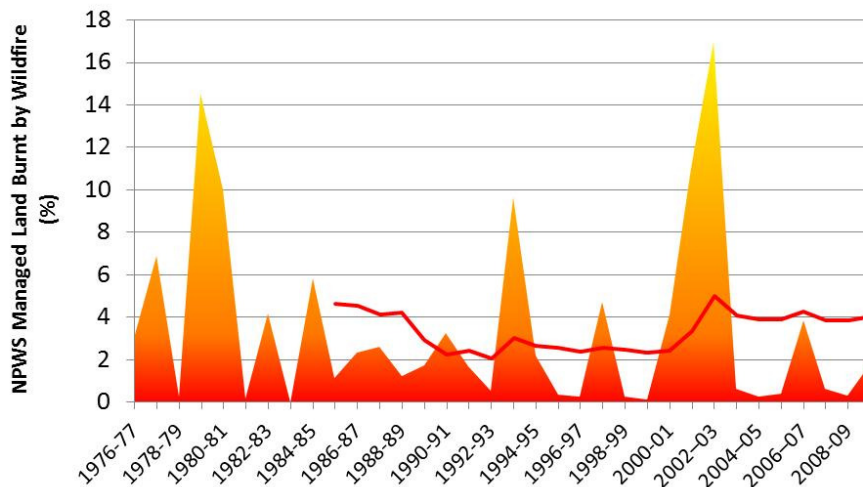
Back in the bush little changed, apart from less timber harvesting. Pests and weeds continued to run rampant. The government regulators of pests and weeds remained focused on agriculture and the public forest agencies were left to manage their own estates. Even now control of pests and weeds remains uncoordinated and out of balance.

Expenditure on Pests and Weeds by NSW public forest agencies

Sources: NPWS media release, Forestry Corporation and Crown Land Division internal data

Changed fire regimes are a major threat to biodiversity. Government spending on forest fire management is at an all-time low while the cost of fire emergency management has reached record highs. Wildfires are now seen as the norm despite being mostly caused by humans. When the latest mega-fire threatens life and property we take comfort in the words of our decorated fire commissioners with footage of water bombers working in the background. There is little consideration of the impacts on our wildlife. Do we question whether the catastrophe could have been avoided through well planned hazard reduction on the forest floor?

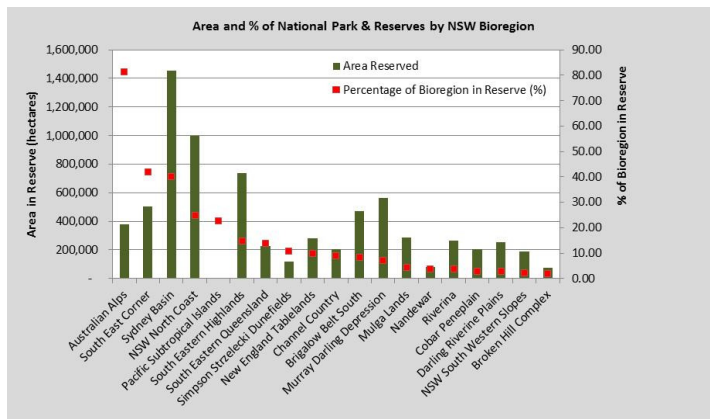**Percentage of National Park burnt by wildfire (1976 – 2010)**

*Note – red line is 10 year rolling annual average
Data source: NPWS Annual reports http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/whoweare/decannualreport0304.htm

New National Parks east of the Dividing Range continue to be popular but come at a serious cost. In the last ten years the value of the NSW native timber industry has declined by 45% while regional NSW towns surrounded by large tracts of National Park have become the most socially disadvantaged in Australia (Socio-economic index for areas, 2011). In March this year the NSW Opposition election policy was the creation of the world's first koala national park. Had they won the election the NSW north coast timber industry would have been decimated with around 3,000 job losses and no real change to koala populations.

National Parks alone are not capable of preventing the decline in biodiversity. In NSW there are 7.3 million hectares of National Park & Reserves which equates to 9.2% of the State. These areas cost $385M or $53 per hectare to manage each year. In the last thirty years billions of dollars have been used to expand them. More of the spend has been directed to new coastal reserves where conservation targets have been well exceeded. Meanwhile 61% of the state's bioregions (11 of 18) have less than 10% of their area represented in conservation reserve – all are located west of the Great Dividing Range.

The unbalanced nature of our conservation reserve system demonstrates why we need to move beyond the tenure model and focus holistically on the common issues which threaten our native forests.

A single governance model would provide an opportunity to improve accountability supported by a landscape scale monitoring and reporting system. This is not achievable without making changes to the state's existing tenure system.

Native forests are dynamic. They have evolved with fire, drought and floods. Today's regrowth forests will be tomorrow's old growth forests. Native forests are not static museums that can be locked up forever. Like your own garden or backyard they need careful management to keep them healthy. Through preventative measures like ecological thinning and fire mitigation, the timber industry can play an important role in active, adaptive management to tackle common threats across all tenure types.

As has happened in the Northern hemisphere we need a rethink of our native forest management that reflects the true balance of environmental, social and economic values.

Mitchell's hopping mouse, brush-tailed bettong (or woylie), golden bandicoot, burrowing bettong