

## **Fifty Years of Conservation Leadership in Australia by Private Land Managers**

Over the past 50 years, two people and the organisations they founded have taken a leading role in conservation of threatened species in Australia. The current and former NSW environment ministers have certainly not missed the photo opportunities resulting from great work of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and its staff.

It is a good time to be reminded that the NPWS claim: "The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is undertaking a **world-leading project** to establish a network of large feral predator-free areas across the national park estate is potentially overstated, when looked at from the historical perspective.

### **John Wamsley Earth Sanctuaries**

John Wamsley, the man with the feral cat skin hat, purchased a dairy farm in South Australia in 1969 and this property became his first sanctuary. He pioneered the use of predator proof fencing in Australia, to allow locally extinct species to be returned to a feral predator free environment. In 1988, he set up the Earth Sanctuaries Ltd (ESL) company to expand his private conservation estate.

John battled with government bureaucrats and other environmentalists, to show what was needed to stem the tide of faunal extinctions in Australia. At an Earth Forum conference held in Canberra in February 1999, John said that groups set up to protect Australia's wildlife were often its greatest threats to its continued existence.

John Wamsley, the managing director of Earth Sanctuaries Ltd, said the salvation for Australia's endangered species lay in the involvement of the private sector, not in "red tape and bureaucrats with their little books."

One of the other complaints opponents about his conservation strategy was that he built fences. They argued the land should be free and open to everyone, yet fences had done far more to save endangered species than their regulations.

ESL managed a series of properties around Australia. One alone, Scotia in western NSW, had the potential to increase the population of more than one quarter of the world's endangered mammal species. Yet, he said, the company was constantly running into problems with the inflexible application of guidelines.

We are trying to rebuild an ecosystem over 5,000 square kilometres of country, which we want to return to what it was like 200 years ago.

Its spinifex grass country, and 200 years ago there was a species of wallaby living there which is now extinct. There is another species that is so close that many people believe it is really the same. But we can't introduce it because the regulators say it would not be restoring the environment to exactly what it was.

### **The Australian Wildlife Conservancy**

In 2002, John Wamsley sold four properties totalling more than 85,000 hectares to the Western Australian based Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC). In early 1991, Martin Copley established AWC's first sanctuary, Karakamia, in the Perth Hills. The AWC's program



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to halt Australia's extinction crisis and reverse the decline of native wildlife, was partly inspired by the work of John Wamsley.

Martin wanted to start a sanctuary free of feral predators in Western Australia where native mammals could once again flourish, similar to Wamsley's Warrawong Sanctuary in South Australia. When Martin died in 2014, the AWC had 23 sanctuaries across Australia covering more than 3 million hectares. Currently, the AWC is actively managing more than 6.5 million hectares.

The AWC entered into a partnership with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and in August 2019, fencing of an area of 9,570 hectares was completed in the Mallee Cliffs National Park. It took 10 months to remove all feral predators within the fenced area and Greater Bilbies have been returned to NSW after an absence of over 100 years.

## **NSW Environment Protection Authority State of the Environment 2021 Report**

The report provides some information on the threat feral animals pose to biodiversity in NSW.

### **Threats to National Parks and Reserves**

"Pest animals and weeds cause some of the most significant problems for flora and fauna across lands of all tenures, with impacts on threatened species and ecological communities, as well as Aboriginal sites such as rock engravings and grinding grooves.

In April 2021, the most significant widespread pest animals threatening environmental values in reserves were:

- foxes
- feral cats
- feral goats
- rabbits
- deer (five species)
- feral pigs.

Predator-proof fences protecting just under 20,000 hectares of land from feral pests, such as foxes, cats and other pest species, in the Sturt National Park, Mallee Cliffs National Park and the Pilliga State Conservation Area were completed during 2018-19. Eradication of feral cats and foxes is complete at Sturt and Mallee Cliffs, while a single fox delayed the reintroductions outside of a smaller feral-free breeding area in the Pilliga.

From the available information, it seems the AWC did the majority of work on the development of the first three feral free areas on public land, while the former NSW energy and environment minister appeared to take most of the credit.

In December 2020, the Minister for Energy and Environment announced the establishment of a further four predator-free areas across NSW. The new sites will be partly funded by the NSW Environmental Trust through a grant of \$20.3 million over 10 years, with matching funding from NPWS. See the map below for the general location of the existing and proposed areas.



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After the bureaucratic obstruction encountered by John Wamsley and the ground breaking conservation work undertaken by Earth Sanctuaries and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, it is ironic that the NPWS website states: "The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is undertaking a **world-leading project** to establish a network of large feral predator-free areas across the national park estate. Four new feral predator-free areas will pave the way to return wildlife lost from our national parks due to feral cats and foxes.

More than 50 threatened species are expected to benefit. This includes over 25 locally extinct species and more than 30 threatened species currently surviving in national parks. Species include the [bilby](#), the [numbat](#) and the eastern bettong, which are currently listed as extinct in NSW.

Four new sites across the state have been identified for the project:

North Coast: [Ngambaa Nature Reserve](#) near Macksville, fenced area approx. 3000 ha

Central West: [Yathong Nature Reserve](#), near Cobar, fenced area approx. 40,000 ha

South East NSW: Eden–Bombala region, fenced area approx. 2000 ha

Western Sydney: Shanes Park, fenced area approx. 500 ha

These 4 new areas will combine with [3 existing areas in Western NSW](#) to establish almost 65,000 hectares of feral predator-free bushland.



The first chief executive of the AWC was Atticus Fleming, who held the position from 2002 until July 2018. In January 2019, Atticus joined the NSW NPWS and is currently Deputy



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Secretary. In 2020, Atticus was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for significant services to the conservation of endangered wildlife and habitats.

We can only speculate as whether the major step forward in conservation on public land in NSW, over the past four years, would have happened without the leadership of the people and the privately owned conservation organisations recognised in this article.

The two conservation organisations and three visionary leaders have shown public sector conservation bureaucracies, including the NSW NPWS how active and adaptive management can be implemented, to restore threatened species to a small portion of their former range. This is just the first step needed to turn the threatened species Titanic.

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/news/new-plan-to-turn-back-the-tide-of-extinction#:~:text=Four%20new%20feral%20predator%20free%20areas%3A%20Castlereagh%20Nature,Macksville%20North-east%20NSW%2C%20fenced%20area%20approx.%203%2C000%20ha>

