



The Royal Society of Queensland

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STATEMENT TO THE CONVENTION ON BEHALF OF THE SOCIETY Delivered by Representative Dr Anne-Marie Smit

COP 14 Theme: “Investing in biodiversity for people and planet”.

RSQ Theme: Localising international biodiversity policy – Queensland

Authority: The Royal Society of Queensland is the senior learned academy in the State, 1884.

Background: The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s global call to protect biodiversity for people and planet is the third notice to humanity for urgent changes to stop global biodiversity loss and progress to sustainable prosperity since 1988^{1,2,3}. Still, after 30 years, Australia’s performance as stewards in SDG 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 7 & 2 continues to decline against the World Risk Index⁴. Within this national assessment, Queensland does not rank well.

This statement presents a vision of invigorated environmental stewardship (SDG 13, 14, 15) and sustainability (All SDGs) by establishing forums to embrace the knowledge of community groups and scholarly expertise, allowing involvement in policy formulation.

Observations on the current state of biodiversity conservation in Queensland

Urgent transformational changes are required to enable Queensland to implement the Convention’s anticipated expectations.

1. *Constitution (SDG 9, 15, 16):* When six British colonies federated in 1901 to form Australia, the States retained virtually all powers over land, natural resources and infrastructure. The Commonwealth is responsible for foreign affairs and collects the major proportion of taxes. There is a mismatch between external treaties and the States’ capacity to implement them.
2. *Media (SDG 13, 14, 15):* The dominant media company, News Corp Australia, has taken a consistently hostile editorial approach to climate scientists in particular and environmental protection and regulation in general. This stance unavoidably skews public opinion. In Queensland, News owns the only daily capital city newspaper.
3. *Climate Change (SDG 13, 15):* Queensland’s unique pattern of settlement and its fragmented landscape make it a global hotspot for World Risk. Rising temperatures and climatic variability put a range of species in peril, threatening their mass decline, already evident for invertebrates in northern Queensland⁵, mirroring declining invertebrate numbers worldwide⁶.
4. *Vegetation clearing (SDG 15, 16):* Clearing native woodlands for broadacre pastoralism has continued long past the pioneering era to the present. Queensland clears more land each year than the rest of Australia combined (~0.45% of its remaining wooded areas per annum, compared with deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon of ~0.25% each year)⁷. Significant offsite impacts of deforestation contribute majorly to climate change through GHG emissions and abnormal episodic rainfall and temperature dynamics which may soon be compounded under a predicted El Niño. Pressure from conservationists has caused Labor (centre-left) governments to introduce controls, against fierce opposition from graziers, expressed in rollback during a conservative government of 2012-15.

5. *Incremental progression (SDG 13, 14, 15)*: Biodiversity is lost not just through major active interventions such as deforestation, or the invasion of exotic self-propagating species such as feral pigs, feral cats and Prickly Acacia, but also through accumulation of actions that by themselves are minor, ancillary or unintended. For example: catchments hardened by overgrazing; visibility clearing along railway lines; peri-urban residential development assessed case-by-case with weak strategic planning to protect corridors; road construction by single-minded authorities and ill-educated contractors; off-target environmental impacts of pesticides by insensitive practitioners.
6. *Split between science and government expertise (SDG 9)*: Landholders (State leasehold – 50% of Queensland – and freehold) rely on external mediators to translate complex land use, scientific and policy information, that arrives disaggregated along sectoral lines and siloed between scientific disciplines and government portfolios. Accountability for protecting biodiversity on private land is separated from government involvement in management of public land for conservation purposes with no obligation on private landholders to participate in conservation strategies. Commodity markets don't reward landholders for biodiversity gains. A bioregional conservation strategy should include incentives for private landholders to participate in conservation of biodiversity.
7. *Governments promoting development (SDG 9, 14, 15, 16)*: Scientific literacy and awareness of community groups including scientific societies is coming to outweigh the knowledge of the authorities especially in a neoliberal era of downsizing government. It is imperative that these groups become involved in economic development including infrastructure and extractive industries as official impact assessment is failing to halt continuing damage.

Purpose: To urge the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that: 1) **Governments at all levels need to craft durable policy** to reconcile external treaties with the capacity to implement them. 2) Governments need to **adopt feasible pathways**⁸ that can be implemented at ground level to incentivise actions by citizens (e.g. private landholders) towards the SDG targets. 3) **Independent SDG performance reviews** (by a new forum of sustainability commissioners) are required on government and industry decisions, with transparency of progress reporting towards the 2020 Aichi Biodiversity Targets and the SDGs. These reviews should be **measurable** under the SDG Indicator Framework, and monitored to assess progress.

Expected Outcome: For the CBD to consider 1) Government reports all too often articulate lofty ideals without assigning appropriate resources to implement them, or without reconciling opposing objectives⁸. 2) Lofty ideals in international biodiversity policy need translation into the hands of place managers (both private landholders and public authorities; specialist experts and the policy community. 3) An independent review of Queensland's progress in biodiversity conservation given current land use practices and inadequate policy settings should be funded post the submission of the sixth national report to the CBD.

Reporting: Outcomes from COP 14, COP 9 and COP 3 will be summarised in a report to be submitted to the: 1) 2019 *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, an international journal of record, explaining how to implement international policy locally. 2) Queensland Government embodying the findings of the Convention explaining what needs to be done to apply these findings at ground level.

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¹ *The New York Times Archives*, Pg 00001. *Global Warming has begun, Expert tells Senate*. 24th June 1988.

² *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice*. Ripple et al, *BioScience*, Vol. 6:12, 1 December 2017, Ps 1026-1028.

³ *Global warming acceleration Plus Miscellaneous*. James Hansen Blog. 15 October 2018.

⁴ 2018 *World Risk Index Report*

⁵ *ABC News Report* 24 February 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-24/insect-on-billy-button-flower/9481192>.

⁶ *Climate-driven declines in arthropod abundance restructure a rainforest food web*. B.C. Lister & A. Garcia, *PNAS*, Vol. 115:44, 30 October, 2018, E10397-E10406.

⁷ *The Guardian*, 4 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/05/global-deforestation-hotspot-3m-hectares-of-australian-forest-to-be-lost-in-15-years>.

⁸ *Feasible Paths: How to implement solutions to problems*. Presidential Address. G. Edwards. 2018. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*. Vol. 123, In press.