

Private conservations

Land trusts, also known as heritage, private or statutory conservation trusts, have led the recent growth of conservation on privately held land. They seem to be well organised, well informed and financially viable and now, collectively, hold stewardship over hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, chosen for its high conservation value. How do these trusts work, what have they achieved, and where are they headed?

There's no doubting the value of National Parks and other public reserves to the conservation of Australia's ecosystems, but in the last few decades these relatively modest provisions funded by government contribution are increasingly being complemented by conservation on private lands, facilitated through a range of non-government organisations. It's a quiet conservation revolution.

Australia has exceptional levels of plant and animal diversity and is one of the world's 17 mega-diverse nations. The United States and Australia are the only developed countries in the group and, as a consequence, have a unique responsibility in terms of global conservation.

Official figures indicate that only about 10 per cent of Australia's landmass lies within formal protected areas – most of the continent remains outside the system, much of this being private land. The traditional approach of a formal parks system alone, therefore, is insufficient to meet the emerging challenges facing our environment.

Last year, Penelope Figgis, then Vice-President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, produced an IUCN paper entitled 'Conservation on Private Lands: the Australian Experience'¹, in which she discussed the subtle shift from public sector nature conservation to a new focus on



Doug Humann, CEO of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, with a Thorny Devil at Cravens Peak. Humann sees the urgency for conservation groups to work together to secure the future of Australia's biodiversity.

Wayne Lawler/Epix, courtesy Bush Heritage

private lands and the involvement of private landholders. Figgis is currently the Vice-Chair for Australia and New Zealand of the World Commission on Protected Areas.

'There is now a broad consensus that, while we must continue to add to the formal national reserve network, we must also turn to other lands, especially private lands, and produce workable mechanisms



Above: The harshness of Cravens Peak country belies its precious diversity.

Wayne Lawler/Epix, courtesy Bush Heritage

which will stem the decline and result in long-term biodiversity gains,' Figgis said. 'Personally, I believe this whole area of private-sector reserves is a critical component if we are to achieve really long-lasting conservation.'

One of the drivers of this change in approach is a lack of representativeness in the reserve system. Reserves tend to be in steep, unproductive land, so that there are major gaps in the reserve areas that coincide with landscapes most desirable for cropping or pastoralism.

According to Figgis, the 'charismatic landscapes' of the coasts, forests and mountain wildernesses have, in the past, received more priority in our formal reserves than less dramatic inland environments. She says

¹ See www.acfonline.org.au



we need to achieve conservation in the more productive lands and this means working with private landholders.

If we want 80 per cent of Australia's ecosystems represented in reserves then we need to protect another 22 million hectares, according to a 2002 report to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC)². That's another three per cent of Australia's landmass.

Private initiatives gain strength

Doug Humann is CEO of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund (known as Bush Heritage), the private land conservation body with the largest supporter base in Australia. He says 'to achieve that PMSEIC target we've got to harness the spirit of

conservation within the Australian community, find the right partners and work collaboratively. The challenge is to raise sufficient funds in time to protect the threatened places.'

Only two per cent of the 2.8 billion dollars donated to non-profit organisations in Australia are currently given to the environment, but Humann thinks this can change. 'Private land conservation is a vibrant, dynamic and growing sector, and it's possible that it will expand the size of the philanthropic pie.'

Trust for Nature (TfN), Australia's oldest land trust organisation, began life in 1972 as the Victorian Conservation Trust. Although its core work remains in Victoria, TfN has become the model for creation of land trusts in four other states.

Dr Chris Williams is the Conservation Manager for TfN. 'Our mission is to protect all significant natural areas in

private ownership and if our overall ambition is to capture representative examples of all vegetation communities, we have no choice but to engage with private landholders,' he says.

'Ecosystems on privately owned lands far outweigh public reserves in Australia so, at TfN, we work with landholders and our conservation partners to permanently secure and then integrate valuable fragments of habitat into functioning landscapes,' Williams told *Ecos*.

The commonwealth government, meanwhile does support private conservation, seeing it as a cost-effective way to meet biodiversity conservation targets. The National Reserve System program under the Natural Heritage Trust assists in funding the establishment of private protected areas and contributed, for example, \$1.8 million to the purchase of Cravens Peak. The taxation regime has also

2 Setting Biodiversity Priorities. See: www.dest.gov.au/sectors/science_innovation/publications_resources/indexes/prime_ministers_science_engineering_innovation_council.htm

Progress



The Ned's Corner Station holding includes 35 kilometres of high habitat-value river frontage.

Trust for Nature

been improved, with more effective tax incentives for gifts of land and for any loss of land value created by entering into a conservation covenant.

What do land trusts get up to?

A number of these non-government, non-profit land trusts operate in Australia, with the best known probably being Trust for Nature, the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and, based in the United States, The Nature Conservancy. Other non-government organisations also purchase land for conservation purposes, including Birds Australia and Greening Australia.

Trust for Nature concentrates on landscape-scale conservation and it employs a set of three mechanisms to achieve this; namely, Conservation Covenants (land title-tied conservation agreements), a Revolving Fund (for the purchase, covenanting and then turnover of private properties) and Land Acquisition (for the long-term acquisition of privately held land with unique conservation value).

Chris Williams is enthusiastic about the value of covenants in the Trust's conserva-

tion toolbox. He says the simple explanation for covenants is that the landholder donates away certain property rights, such as clearing, subdivision or other uses that are a threat to the land's biodiversity. Covenants remain on property titles in perpetuity, therefore binding all subsequent owners of covenanted properties to the conservation aspirations of the original titleholders.

'The beauty of covenants is that they are a very efficient way to conserve or promote biodiversity because part or all of the property is conserved,' Williams says. 'The landholder still retains ownership of the property and continues to manage and care for it, but the Trust doesn't wear the expense of purchasing all of the land.'

'However, Trust for Nature, through its stewardship program, conscientiously helps landholders with ongoing management of their land. In this way, good conservation outcomes can be achieved by covenanting without the Trust needing to spend its

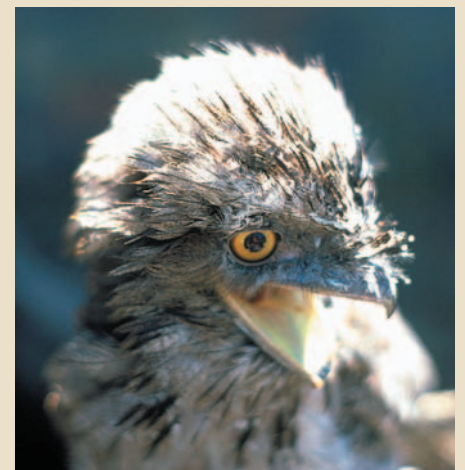
precious funding on outright acquisition.'

As well as not-for-profit organisations (such as the land trusts), government agencies or local councils can also act as covenanting bodies. Covenanting and related conservation incentive mechanisms now operate throughout Australia³ and about 2000 landholders nationally now manage all or part of their land under a conservation covenant.

Trust for Nature's Revolving Fund is another conservation tool that essentially 'recycles' funds from donations, bequests and the Natural Heritage Trust fund. Parcels of land supporting threatened ecosystems, such as grassland or woodland, are purchased, protected by covenant, and then sold again – to replenish the revolving fund for future land purchases (see the case study on page 24).

'To date, we have bought some 42 properties through the revolving fund,' says Zoe Davies, Communications Manager at TfN. Asked if putting a covenant on the land diminishes their market value, Davies says that, to the contrary, there is a lively boutique market for protected properties blessed with native vegetation and wildlife. The property advertising service in the Trust's online magazine gets about 10 000 hits every three months.

The revolving fund model – first used by



A young Tawny Frogmouth. Trust for Nature's covenanting program aims to help ensure that the older trees on properties that provide crucial nesting habitat for many animals are protected.

Trust for Nature

the US-based Nature Conservancy and pioneered here by TfN – is gaining acceptance. Several states have in operation or are setting up equivalent bodies. Australia-wide, the commonwealth has allocated at least \$5 million to promote revolving funds.

³ The October 2005 issue of *Bush*, published by the Department of Heritage and Environment and *Australian Farm Journal*, through the Natural Heritage Trust, features a number of conservation covenant systems in each state and territory.



The original cottage at the Trust for Nature's flagship property, Ned's Corner Station, on the Murray River, Victoria. Trust for Nature

Protection by purchase

All land trusts share the fundamental strategy of purchasing private land for retention as protected areas.

During its 33 years of operation, Trust for Nature has acquired 110 key conservation properties under its Land Acquisition program. One of these was Ned's Corner Station, Victoria's largest freehold property, bought during 2002 with assistance from the National Reserve System program, the RE Ross Trust and The Nature Conservancy.

This property alone features 30 000 hectares of high-value, semi-arid and riverine native vegetation and 35 kilometres of Murray River frontage. Ned's Corner is becoming an important research resource for university scientists on a range of subjects from conservation science to future management of privately held reserves.

Since 1972, Trust for Nature has also transferred nearly 60 properties (more than 5000 hectares) to the Victorian Government for inclusion in the parks and reserves system. However, the Trust plans to retain Ned's Corner as a flagship property.

Similarly, the Australian Bush Heritage

Fund is a national, independent, non-profit business committed to protecting unique animals and plants in habitats of high conservation value. It acquires land and water of outstanding ecological significance, by purchase, gift or bequest. Bush

Ned's Corner is becoming an important research resource for university scientists on a range of subjects from conservation science to future management of privately held reserves.

Heritage was born in 1990 when environmentalist (now Senator) Bob Brown donated \$50 000. Today it has assets of around \$14 million and is supported by more than 14 000 donors. Monies are raised by tax-deductible donations from the public and funding organisations, including government support.

Bush Heritage doesn't muck around. It now has 21 reserves across the country and

in 2004 the organisation purchased a huge property, known as Ethabuka Station, on the edge of the Simpson Desert, south-west of Boulia, in far western-Queensland. This month it settled on its largest acquisition to date, Cravens Peak, to the north of Ethabuka. The new reserve is the size of metropolitan Sydney and, together, the two properties cover 4500 square kilometres. (See page 26.)

The biological diversity on these reserves is astounding. More than 220 animal species have been recorded. The sand dune country alone supports the richest assemblage of reptile fauna of any desert in the world.

As with all Bush Heritage reserves, after detailed ecological assessments a cooperative management plan is being implemented with neighbours and traditional owners – including the management of cultural heritage. Actions for the reserves include: ecosystem restoration, monitoring and control of feral animals and weeds, fuel-reduction burning, revegetation, wildlife surveys, scientific research, and so on.

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), a public charitable organisation

Progress



From left: the Tiger Orchid, Blue Wire Lily and Pink Fingers Orchid at one of Trust for Nature's covenanted properties in Fernbank, Victoria.

Lionel Rose/Trust for Nature

with origins tracing back to wealthy businessman Martin Copley, is particularly active in Western and northern Australia. It now owns and manages 13 sanctuaries covering 655 000 hectares. It has taken over many of the properties owned by John Wamsley's Earth Sanctuaries venture and is currently discussing a partnership with Birds Australia to run Newhaven Station in the Northern Territory. AWC sanctuaries now protect at least 132 ecosystems, 40 threatened ecosystems and 135 threatened animal species.

Although not on quite the same scale as the other land trusts, being principally an ornithological society, Birds Australia has purchased two properties to date. Gluepot Reserve was purchased in 1997 and is part of the Bookmark Biosphere Reserve in South Australia's Riverland region. It contains 50 000 hectares of virgin mallee and helps protect six nationally threatened bird species and 17 regionally threatened

birds, including the Major Mitchell Cockatoo.

Newhaven Station is some five times larger than Gluepot at 262 000 hectares

Five groups are working together to link a 700-kilometre belt of bushland corridor from the Karri forests to Kalgoorlie.

and lies in the arid zone, north west of Alice Springs. It provides refuge for at least 15 nationally threatened species of animals and plants, possibly including the elusive Night Parrot, and boasts 10 vegetation communities and an array of landforms.

Alexandra de Blas, of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, says the sheer scale of the land conservation challenge means there is room for a range of players in the private sphere. 'There's a mix of healthy

competition and collaboration amongst them, but if we're to connect up the country on a landscape scale, groups have to work together,' she says.

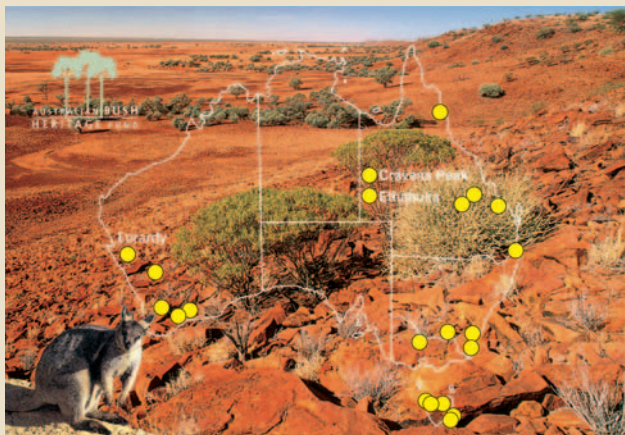
The Gondwana Link project in south-west Western Australia is one of the best illustrations of this idea. Five groups are working together to link a 700 kilometre belt of bushland corridor from the Karri forests to Kalgoorlie (see www.gondwanalink.org).

Thinking globally

The Nature Conservancy sees itself as a leading force in developing creative and cooperative options for financing conservation internationally. Working with other land trusts and government agencies, it has helped to protect 117 million acres worldwide. The Conservancy began in the 1950s as a small land trust in the United States and has now evolved into one of the country's largest charities. It has been operating in Australia since 1999.



Left: Some of Trust for Nature's covenantors also operate environmental businesses, such as the team at Wetland Creations based at Boogoolum, on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria. Right: Nursery grown natives await planting for wetland restoration at the Boogoolum property. Trust for Nature



The Australian Bush Heritage Fund now manages 21 properties of high conservation value across Australia.

Australian Bush Heritage Fund

Director of the Conservancy's Australian program, Mr Kent Wommack, says that the organisation made a decision to work with existing Australian land trusts rather than to duplicate them.

'Through our Conservation Fellowships program, which seconded senior Conservancy staff with Australian land trusts for the exchange of skills and expertise, we can convey the benefit of our 50 years of experience in both great successes and occasional mistakes,' says Wommack. 'Recent fellowships have assisted partner groups with conservation planning methodologies, fundraising, and conservation tax policies, among other issues critical to conservation in Australia.'

The Conservancy has also given major grants to Trust for Nature, the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, and the Gondwana Link project for specific land acquisitions. To date, The Nature Conservancy has donated over \$5 million to support these groups' efforts. This funding has helped the land trusts acquire over 400 000 hectares of land in the last two years alone.

Wommack told *Ecos* that for the first time in its long history, the Nature Conservancy is now in the process of setting a truly global conservation goal that is almost breathtaking in its scope.

'We are still crunching the numbers, talking to scientists, and looking at feasibility, but the Conservancy's tentative target is to work with others to "effectively conserve" 10 per cent of every major habitat on Earth by 2015,' Wommack said.

'Given its unique biodiversity and different habitats – from rainforest to deserts, grasslands to Mediterranean ecosystems – Australia will figure very prominently in this goal. It is a daunting challenge, but it might just be achievable if

we work in collaboration with other conservation organisations, communities and governments,' he said.

Some challenging issues

In the broad context of private conservation, Penelope Figgis raises a number of issues that need resolution. 'I am concerned,' she says, 'that the growing incorporation of private lands into our national conservation effort could blur public expectations of a protected area and create a Trojan horse for forces like the extractive industries, such as mining and forestry, to build opposition to strictly protected areas like National Parks. This would defy good science.'

'Similarly, the entry of private interests into conservation could be used to promote privatisation of the management of National Parks ... which could mean the domination of commercial imperatives over those of conservation,' she says. 'I am certainly not saying that people in our land trust organisations think this way, but we need to be cautious of any unintended consequences.'

In fact, according to Figgis, it can be argued that private organisations can be more focussed on ecological management of reserves as they are not distracted or diverted by the need to manage large numbers of visitors and by the infrastructure costs of public parks.

On a positive note, she concludes that the transformation that we are witnessing in biodiversity conservation, as a whole, will draw into active conservation a much broader cross-section of society. The many protected ecosystems that result will be critical components of sustainable landscapes and a bio-diverse future. Our land trusts seem to be playing an important part in working towards this vision.

'In Australia,' he says, 'we must work more closely with private land holders to help ensure that activities like forestry and grazing outside reserves become truly sustainable in their operations.'

Speaking of the future, Wommack says the Nature Conservancy sees a need for more focus on freshwater and marine conservation worldwide. Australia is perhaps leading the way with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, but more needs to be done both here and in other parts of the world.

'In Australia,' he says, 'we must work more closely with private landholders to help ensure that activities like forestry and grazing outside reserves become truly sustainable in their operations. The fate of Australia's wildlife will be determined in large part by how well private lands are managed in the future.'

● Steve Davidson

More information:

Australian Bush Heritage Fund:
www.bushheritage.org

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy:
www.australianwildlife.org

Birds Australia: www.birdsaustralia.com.au

Gondwana Link: www.gondwanalink.org

Figgis, P. (2004) *Conservation on Private Lands: the Australian Experience*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK.

Possingham, H., Ryan, S., Baxter, J. and Morton, S. (2002) *Setting Biodiversity Priorities* (background paper). See www.dest.gov.au/sectors/science_innovation/publications_resources/indexes/prime_ministers_science_engineering_innovation_council.htm

The Nature Conservancy: www.nature.org
Trust for Nature: www.tfn.org.au

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