Private sector initiatives boost conservation reserves

The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund recently donated $2 million to Bush Heritage Australia to support a project that will protect the Tasmanian Midlands' mixed grasslands, woodlands and wetlands, a wildlife habitat type poorly represented in the national reserve system.

The project is a joint effort between Bush Heritage Australia, local landowners, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries and Water.

'The Tasmanian Midlands is a stunning but fragile landscape and we need to take urgent action to ensure its significant conservation values are preserved,' said Bush Heritage Australia CEO Doug Humann.

Another not-for-profit organisation dedicated to conserving Australian ecosystems and wildlife, the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, has bought two cattle stations totalling more than 837 000 ha in what is thought to be the largest-ever private conservation buyout of land.

The two cattle stations are Cape York's 170 000 ha Piccaninny Plains Station – with the largest and most intact area of tropical grasslands in the high rainfall belt of northern Australia – and the 667 000 ha Kalamurina Station in South Australia.

Cape York's 170 000 ha Piccaninny Plains Station has the largest and most intact area of tropical grasslands in northern Australia. Ecopix

The stations abut national parks on Cape York Peninsula and the South Australian–Queensland border, including south-west Queensland's Simpson Desert National Park.

The national park and conservancy areas together comprise an area larger than Tasmania, and will allow animals and plant species to migrate unhindered over thousands of square kilometres.

In related news mecu, one of Australia's largest credit unions, has initiated a Conservation Landbank with the purchase of property in Victoria's Wimmera region that will be managed by Landcare Australia to protect habitat and wildlife.

All properties purchased and 'deposited' into the Landbank will be protected from future development by a Trust for Nature Conservation Covenant. The Landbank is funded with a percentage of mecu's annual profits.

Need for 'more honest' environmental accounting

Only through balanced reporting of both negative and positive outcomes of conservation policy can we hope to properly manage dwindling environmental resources, according to Australian research recently published in *Science*.

'The current global standard of reporting gains but not losses is unjustified and potentially misleading,' said lead author Dr Eve McDonald-Madden from the University of Queensland. 'It is worrying that little attention has been given to deriving rigorous metrics for reporting on conservation investments.'

A study of land-clearing in Queensland showed the need to factor in losses from conservation policy as well as gains. Willem van Aken/Sciencelmage

The University of Queensland researchers used a case study of land clearing in Queensland from 1997 to 2003. Traditional reporting methods showed small but positive conservation gains. But alternative metrics that took loss into account 'tell a markedly different story', according to co-author Professor Hugh Possingham.

Dr McDonald-Madden added: 'An auditor from the financial sector would be appalled. Governments around Australia, and all over the world, need to get their environmental accounts cleaned up.'

Local seed not the best for revegetation

Successful revegetation of native flora lies in sourcing genetically diverse seed, not necessarily relying on seed sourced from remnant local native vegetation, according to a recent study.

'It has been presumed that local seed is adapted to local conditions and therefore provides the best results for restoration projects,' says CSIRO scientist Dr Linda Broadhurst.

'However, the research shows that where vegetation loss is high and across large areas, "local" seed sources are often small and isolated and can be severely inbred resulting in poor seed crops. This can lead to germination failure and poor seedling growth.'

The research findings are reported in a paper by Dr Broadhurst and others from the ARC-NZ Research Network for Vegetation Function, which was recently published in the journal *Evolutionary Applications*.

'Capturing high quality and genetically diverse seed will ensure that restored populations across Australia have ample genetic diversity to respond to changing environments over the coming decades,' Dr Broadhurst concludes.

Landscape restoration may be more successful with genetically diverse seed, rather than locally sourced samples. CSIRO