

SOCIAL ACTION OFFICE

CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES, QUEENSLAND

ABN 93 551 337 677



Briefing Note

Vegetation Clearance in Queensland – Updated

Why Land Clearing?

Vegetation clearance and accompanying habitat loss has been happening in Queensland at a rapid rate for many years. Vegetation clearance is driven by the imperatives of economic development. In Queensland the extension of pastoral activities is the main reason for the massive clearance of native vegetation. During the period 1999-2001, 94 percent of woody vegetation change was due to clearing for pasture [Department of Natural Resources, *Statewide Land Cover and Trees Study (SLATS) 2003*]. Arguably, pastoral activity should not be occurring on some of the arid marginal land that is being cleared in Queensland. It is just not suitable for a sustainable pastoral industry. Other farming activities and urban development in coastal areas also contribute to this high rate of land clearance, although to a lesser extent than pastoral activity.



Koala and baby in a bulldozed tree

The most recent official figures estimate that between August 1999 and August 2001, 1,136,000 hectares were cleared in Queensland. The rate of vegetation clearance reached a record 758,000 hectares the first year and 378,000 hectares were cleared in the next year [SLATS 2003]. The SLATS document attributes the decline in the clearing rate to the proclamation of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*. The peak during the first year could be attributed to “panic clearing”.

More than 75% of Australia’s land clearing occurs in Queensland. Most of the land clearing occurs in the brigalow and gidgee open forests and woodlands. Where the dominant vegetation type is brigalow, estimations show that of the original six million hectares, only about 5% remains [State of the Environment Report 2001 (SoE)]. Nearly half of the State’s land clearing is accounted for in the Murray-Darling river system found in the southern part of Queensland. The areas most at risk are in the Murray-Darling catchment, the Fitzroy catchment and the Burnett catchment. Re-vegetation initiatives in comparison with clearance rates are limited. In 1998 Prime Minister John Howard pledged to plant one billion trees over a ten-year period across Australia. It is now estimated that this number of trees is needed in the Murray-Darling Basin alone (*The Age*, 29/5/99).

The Aboriginal meaning of Woolloongabba is Whirling Waters

JUSTICE PLACE, 84 PARK ROAD, WOOLLOONGABBA QLD

CARPARK: 5 ABINGDON STREET, WOOLLOONGABBA QLD POSTAL: PO BOX 8304, WOOLLOONGABBA QLD 4102
PH: 61 7 3891 5866 FAX: 61 7 3891 6944 EMAIL: sao.clriq@bigpond.com WEBSITE: <http://sao.clriq.org.au>

In the State's "frontier" past, most people did not fully appreciate the consequences that would accrue as a result of widespread land clearance. Scientific knowledge was limited and the domination of nature was a key and unquestioned tenet of the "frontier" ethos. Times have changed. Much more is now known about the natural world and the importance of preserving biodiversity. There is much greater appreciation of the inter-connectedness of all creation and of how one intervention in an eco-system can radically alter that eco-system and place it, and others, at serious risk.

The Effects of Vegetation Clearance

... stopping the broad-scale destruction of remnant native vegetation is the single most important action the Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmanian governments can take to protect the future of Australia's landscapes.

Blueprint for a Living Continent – A Way Forward from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

November 2002, p 11

There are many adverse effects of vegetation clearance, especially because of the magnitude of clearing that has been occurring in Queensland. The main ones are:

a) *Loss of Habitat and Biodiversity*

The State of the Environment Australia 1996 (SoEA) suggested that: *The loss of biological diversity is perhaps (Australia's) most serious environmental problem. Whether we look at wetlands or saltmarshes, mangroves or bushland, inland creeks or estuaries, the same story emerges. In many cases, the destruction of habitat, the major cause of biodiversity loss, is continuing at an alarming rate.*

Dramatic changes in vegetation-cover (through total or selective land clearing) are a major cause of loss of biodiversity. These changes affect the trees, the associated plant communities and the wildlife that inhabit the areas. A recent study [Cogger, Ford et al, 2003] estimates that approximately 100 million native mammals, birds and reptiles die yearly in Queensland as a result of the broad-scale clearing of remnant vegetation. Animals and plants are killed immediately or shortly after their habitat has been cleared. But due to habitat shrinkage, fragmentation or degradation, vulnerable native species face extinction in the longer term. Whole ecosystems may disappear.

b) *Impact on the Great Barrier Reef*

The impact of native vegetation clearance can be far-reaching. Scientists now make a clear connection between land clearance for agriculture and urban development on the Queensland coast as posing a real threat to the ongoing viability of the Great Barrier Reef. Sediment and nutrient run-off into the Reef is reaching alarming proportions, contributing to the deterioration of the coral and the loss of seagrass and benthic (sea-bottom) plants. (*The Marine and Coastal Community Network – Information Leaflet*)

c) *Soil Degradation*

Land clearing increases the risks of water and wind erosion. While water erosion drives loose topsoil to the streams, dust storms blow away millions of tonnes of nutrient-rich topsoil every year. Replacement of trees with shallow rooted pastures and crops is a primary cause of dry-land salinity. Without trees, rains raise the water table and bring the salt to the surface. This situation is nearly impossible to rectify. The Australian Bureau of Statistics says that 40,000

hectares of land in Queensland can no longer be used for farming because of salinity (Salinity on Australian Farms ABS 11/12/2002).

Disturbance of ecological systems also has other adverse effects on forests and agriculture. For example, natural pest control is lessened when an ecosystem is dysfunctional.

An example of what can happen when this delicate balance is upset was reported by Claire Miller in *The Age* on 29 May 1999:

A plague of tiny insects is draining the life from the grand gums dotted around Canberra. The native psyllids, or lerps, fluctuate in number but for the last few seasons, the little sapsuckers have been out of control. Scientists are worried that the trees – already stressed by age, disease, salinity, livestock pressures and their exposure to a largely cleared landscape – may never recover from the onslaught. Yet, they are helpless to do much: the scale of the plague is too great for human intervention. The birds that used to eat the lerps and other pests have almost disappeared because clearing and grazing have destroyed their habitat in bushy understorey plants. Livestock has also stopped young trees taking root, so when the old gums finally succumb – well, the aesthetic and ecological sterility hardly bears thinking about. The ecological imbalance evident in the rolling hills around the national capital is typical of the legacy of extensive land clearing across the nation since white settlement. And without vegetation, there is worse to come. The dimensions of this ecological crisis are mind-numbing.

d) Disturbance of the Water Cycle

Vegetation clearing interferes with the water cycle. Trees bring rain but trees also play an important role in the control of runoffs, and the recharge of the aquifers. Water erosion leads to the siltation of rivers and waterways. In Australia, *50,000kms of streams have been degraded by sand deposition and sediments [Wentworth Group].*

e) Perturbation of the Carbon Cycle and Emission of Greenhouse Gases

As trees are destroyed significant greenhouse gases are emitted which act as carbon sinks for greenhouse gases. It is estimated that 13% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions are generated by land clearing and subsequent soil emissions (WWF).

f) Loss of Cultural Values and Human Heritage

“The bush” has always played an important role in a people's psyche. Indigenous people have always had a strong connection to the land and for generations now many families have invested their whole lives in the land. Governments have acknowledged this by placing many areas of Australia's natural environment under an international heritage listing.



Greater awareness of Indigenous culture and its connection to the land also helps in understanding that these precious eco-systems have to be safeguarded. Woodlands are not just a source of timber but are also a source of traditional food and medicine and have potential, if well governed, as a source for new scientific discoveries that will benefit the total earth community.

The ecological crisis is a moral issue ... Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation ... we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations. (Pope John Paul II, 1990)

Economic Impacts of Land Clearing

The negative consequences of uncontrolled land clearing are now costing the nation millions of dollars. The Murray-Darling Basin Commission has ascertained that salinity currently costs \$64 million dollars a year and estimate that salinity will cost Australia between \$600 million and \$1 billion every year for the next century for the Murray-Darling Basin alone (The Murray-Darling Basin Salinity Audit). *Revegetation costs an average of \$10,000 per hectare, which means revegetating a year's worth of clearing in Queensland could cost more than \$5 billion!* (QCC and TWS brochure, July 2003). This is unsustainable economically, socially and culturally.

The short-term economic benefits which might accrue to an agricultural or urban development must be measured against the cumulative and long-term consequences of vegetation clearance (McDonald, Thomas & Horstman M, 1999, pp 12-13). Prevention is the most cost effective option.

Farming families need practical and financial assistance to make the necessary changes to more sustainable farming.

Queensland is in a unique position compared to other Australian States whose incident of salinity is much higher. Some Salinity Management strategies found in Queensland from the ABS study on salinity were:

- Queensland had 331,000ha of crops, pastures and fodder plants for salinity management;
- It had 126,000ha of trees for salinity management or prevention of salinity;
- 27,000ha of land was fenced for salinity management or prevention of salinity;
- Queensland had 15,000km of earthworks (levees/banks and drains) for salinity management or prevention of salinity. (Salinity on Australian Farms ABS 11/12/2002)

Controls on Land Clearing

International Controls

Australia's land clearing is only exceeded by four other countries: Brazil, Indonesia, DRC (Congo) and Bolivia (*Blueprint for a Living Continent* – Wentworth Group p.10). This indicates the serious responsibility Australia has to abide by two international conventions on the environment:

The Convention on Biodiversity. This Convention came into existence at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (the "Earth Summit") in Rio de Janeiro. Australia signed the Convention in June 1992 and ratified it in June 1993. 187 countries have signed this Convention which sets out commitments for maintaining the world's ecological underpinnings as we go about the business of economic development. The Convention establishes three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Convention came into force on 21 March 1994 with 166 countries signatories to it. The parties to the convention meet annually to monitor the implementation of the convention and to continue to explore how best to tackle climate change. This Convention has been strengthened with the *Berlin Mandate* of 1995 and the *Kyoto Protocol* in 1997. Negotiations continue each year – *The Buenos Aires Plan of Action* (1998), the *Bonn Agreement* July 2001 and the *Marrakesh Accord* November 2001. Australia signed the Convention in June 1992 and ratified it in December 1992. It signed the Kyoto Protocol in April 1998 but is yet to ratify this protocol.

National Controls

The National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS) was first issued in December 1992. It pursues 11 broad national goals: *Conservation, Wood production and industry development, Integrated and coordinated decision-making and management, Private native forests, Plantations, Water supply and catchment management, Tourism and other economic and social opportunities, Employment, workforce education and training, Public awareness, education and involvement, Research and development, and International responsibilities.*

One of the outcomes of the NFPS was the setting up of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs). RFAs are 20-year agreements between the Commonwealth and State governments which provide a blueprint for the future management of our forests and the basis for an internationally competitive and ecologically sustainable forest products industry. They protect forests with an adequate reserve system based on nationally agreed criteria, a support for innovative forest industries and sustainable forest management of the whole forest estate. All RFAs are based on scientific Comprehensive Regional Assessments of the environment, heritage, social and economic uses and values of the forests. In Queensland, there is one RFA in the south-east of the State.

In 1996 the *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity* (Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, 1996) had proposed two key targets for the year 2000:

- Australia will have avoided or limited any further broad-scale clearance of native vegetation, consistent with ecologically sustainable management and bioregional planning;
- Australia will have arrested and reversed the decline of native remnant vegetation.

Clearly these targets have not been met. Since the late 1990s however, the situation has been changing fast both nationally and in Queensland. A consolidation of the legislation dealing with biodiversity, the (Commonwealth) *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) came into force in July 2000. Due to the effect of vegetation clearing on dry-land salinity, there is ongoing pressure from the Commonwealth Government to develop effective controls on vegetation clearing in risks areas. Following the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality*, released in October 2000, “any Commonwealth investment in catchment or region plans will be contingent upon land clearing being prohibited in areas where it would lead to unacceptable land or water degradation” (SoE 2001). In the same way, the Commonwealth may withhold the support it gives through the Natural Heritage Trust.

State Controls

Historically, Queensland Governments have been slow to legislate for controls on vegetation clearing. For decades Queensland had no vegetation clearance controls at all. In effect, inaction was seen as tacit consent to this widespread practice. As more information about the adverse effects became known and as conservation groups became more politically active on the issue, the Government finally acted.

In 1994, the Goss Government introduced *The Land Act 1994* which, in part, required that policies and guidelines be developed to give effect to controls on tree clearing on leasehold land and other land owned or administered by the State Government. When this task was completed in 1997 the total area of the State which required a permit to clear trees was estimated at around 133.5 million hectares or 77% of the State's land mass (detailed in *Vegetation Management - State of the Nation* (Draft), pp 17-18).

Significantly, the legislation encompassed two policy instruments for sustainable vegetation management, which were to be developed in consultation with key stakeholders. These were:

- (i) the process for developing Local Tree Clearing Guidelines;
- (ii) the process for developing a Broad-scale Tree Clearing Policy.

It took from March 1995 to October 1997 for both processes to be finalised. In that time the average rate of land clearance in Queensland increased significantly (Zethoven, p 19) pointing to a rash of panic clearing prior to the introduction of controls.

The *Broad-scale Tree Clearing Policy* that was finally proclaimed was limited. The new regime included the following key principles:

- vegetation is regarded as "endangered and vulnerable" if less than 10% of the pre-European extent remains in an intact condition. Clearing in this category is prohibited (it is now recognised that anything less than 10% is endangered);
- vegetation is regarded as "of concern" if between 10 and 30% of the pre-European extent remains in an intact condition. Clearing in this category is allowed up to 50-80% of the original extent on leasehold properties, depending upon the vegetation type;
- vegetation is regarded as "not of concern" if more than 30% of the pre-European extent remains in intact condition. Clearing in this category may be up to 80% of the original extent on leasehold properties;

and, overall,

- vegetation cannot be cleared if such clearing resulted in moving the category of a vegetation community into another more vulnerable category – for example, from "not of concern" to "of concern".

In the end, neither the conservation movement nor the pastoral industry was satisfied with the end result of this policy development process – although for different reasons.

Towards a vegetation management framework for freehold land

The general dissatisfaction with this leasehold policy led the current ALP Government to review the policy and to establish a Vegetation Management Advisory Committee to assist in the development of a "*comprehensive framework for vegetation management to apply consistently across all tenures*" (Zethoven, p 19). This objective culminated in the introduction of the *Native Vegetation Bill* in December 1999 and the Act being proclaimed in September 2000.

The *Vegetation Management Act 1999* made vegetation clearing on freehold land assessable under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*. Its aims included the preservation of vulnerable ecosystems, the protection of biodiversity and the sustainable use of the land. It intended to protect remnant regional ecosystems according to their level of degradation. Tree clearing restrictions also applied on areas declared as 'of high nature conservation value' or 'vulnerable to land degradation'.

Landowners wishing to clear trees in these vulnerable ecosystems or areas would have to apply for an approval. They would be required to prepare a Property Vegetation Management Plan (PVMP) providing details of remnant native vegetation that is proposed to be cleared.

The same Act provided that the Minister must prepare:

A State Policy for Vegetation Management and Regional Vegetation Management Plans (RVMPs) for the different ecological regions of the State. There are currently 24 RVMPs and community consultation and participation strategies are used in these regions.

This action offered some hope that Queensland would finally have effective controls over land clearance in all tenures. The State Government expected that the Commonwealth Government would contribute financially to ensure that farmers and pastoralists affected negatively by the new

management regime would be compensated. The Commonwealth refused to come to the party, claiming that the State Government acted precipitously and unilaterally.

In the meantime panic vegetation clearing was occurring at an alarming rate.

(Other Acts involved in vegetation management include the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*, the *Water Act 2000* and others Acts aiming at specific ecosystems, e.g. coastal ecosystems.)

The present legislation, especially the *Land Act 1994* and the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*, along with the State Policy and the RVMPs, form the State's framework for the management of native vegetation. The legislation is currently under review in Parliament (*Natural Resources Amendment Bill 2003*). Changes made from this review are to improve the enforcement of the existing regulations.

Current Situation (as at July 2003)

On 22 May 2003, a proposal to:

- a) rapidly end broad-scale clearing of remnant (or mature) bushland in rural areas of Queensland by 2006,
- b) provide a \$150 million financial assistance package for farmers affected by proposed controls,
- c) place a moratorium on new applications to clear bushland in Queensland,

was agreed upon by the Federal Environment Minister David Kemp and Queensland Premier Peter Beattie.

What this proposal does not include is:

- a) protecting remnant bushland in urban areas close to cities and towns;
- b) protecting important re-growth bushland that might be needed to prevent salinity, or protect rare plants and animals.

This is just a proposal at this stage with negotiations between political parties and rural lobbying groups still taking place. A final decision has yet to be made by both levels of government. If the proposal does come to fruition, up to 20 million hectares of remnant bushland will be protected as well as millions of native birds and animals. This could be the single biggest action ever taken to protect Australian bushland.

At this point in time there is great hope:

- hope that land clearing, as it has been, will come to an end;
- hope that immediate action is taken to prevent uncontrolled land clearing in urban area;
- hope that the type of negotiation that has taken place between Federal and State governments continues;
- hope that for those who have for generations invested their lives on the land will be supported and compensated appropriately in the movement to more sustainable agriculture;
- hope that property rights are redefined as regards land and vegetation management;



Almost all remaining 'remnant' bushland on private or leasehold land inside the green areas above would be protected from land clearing under the Joint Government proposal.

- hope that the issues around land clearing, salinity, free-flowing rivers and biodiversity are taken seriously and not marginalised;
- hope that there is an increased understanding of the interdependence of all of life;
- hope that our heritage-listed areas will be preserved.



Theological Insights

The newness of the call to *ecological conversion* within the Christian message, reflects the same type of changes that have had to be made in confronting the *frontier/dominating* mentality of earlier days in this country. In recent years church leaders, from the Pope to local Bishops to theologians and scripture scholars, have challenged people to face this mentality and accept responsible stewardship of the whole of creation – to come to know in their minds and hearts “*the endless interdependence between human beings and their environment*” (Pope John Paul II – World Peace Day Message, 1999).

Columban priest Sean McDonagh has said that the Catholic Church has been one of the last major global institutions to respond to the gravity of the ecological crisis confronting the Earth Community (1999). He notes, however, the papal document, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation*, which the present Pope issued in January 1990 and in which the Pope calls the Catholic Community to “*realise that their duty towards nature and Creator are an essential part of their faith*”.

As part of fulfilling this duty, Sean McDonagh notes the necessity for Christians to lend their voices to those movements and campaigns directed at bringing the serious despoliation of the natural world to an end. He points out that this will involve engagement in both the political and corporate world.

The Social Action Office Kit – *Catholic Social Teaching and the Environment* (March 2002) – is a valuable resource in exploring the theological aspect of environmental issues.

Suggested Action

There are a number of actions which can be taken to bring political pressure to bear on the proposal at hand:

- (i) Write to (email or hard copy) the Prime Minister and the Premier of Queensland congratulating them on the proposal and telling them that you support the proposal. Tell them that you are concerned that future generations must be able to enjoy our rivers, farms and wildlife, that the social and cultural heritage and future of farming families needs to be carefully considered, and that energy and resources need to be directed to the development of sustainable agriculture.
- (ii) Sign a postcard sending the above message. Get your family, friends and workmates to sign one as well. Bundles of cards are available from The Wilderness Society – Ph 07 3846 1420 or email Ian at ian.gittus@wilderness.org.au
- (iii) Get involved by learning more from the information provided on the following websites:
 Australia & its Biodiversity: <http://chm.environment.gov.au/australia/stateofbio.html>
 State of the Environment Australia – Report 2001: <http://www.ea.gov.au/soe/index.html>
 Biodiversity Theme Report: <http://www.ea.gov.au/soe/2001/biodiversity/>

CSIRO Land and Water: <http://www.clw.csiro.au/>
 CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems: <http://www.cse.csiro.au/>
 Land & Water Australia: <http://www.lwa.gov.au>
 Forestry in Queensland: <http://www.forests.qld.gov.au/>
 Australian Conservation Foundation – Land Clearing & Woodlands:
<http://www.acfonline.org.au/asp/pages/intro.asp?IdTopic=12>
 Queensland Conservation Council Bushland Protection Campaign:
http://www.qccqld.org.au/land_clearing/index.htm
 The Wilderness Society: <http://www.wilderness.org.au/>
 WWF: <http://www.wwf.org.au/>
 National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity:
<http://www.ea.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/strategy/index.html>
 The Convention on Climate Change and Kyoto Protocol:
<http://unfccc.int/resource/convkp.html>
 Convention on Biological Diversity: <http://www.biodiv.org/default.aspx>

- (iv) Keep a media watch on the issue and, when opportunities arise, write 'Letters to the Editor' of local, regional newspapers.
- (v) Make a donation to the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC) or The Wilderness Society to support their vegetation clearance campaigns. The QCC's postal address is PO Box 12046, Elizabeth Street Post Office, Brisbane 4002; Ph (07) 3221 0188. The Wilderness Society can be contacted by Freecall 1800 030 641 or at: PO Box 5427, West End Qld 4101.

References and Bibliography

Author Unknown (1999), *Native Vegetation Management – Clearance, Controls, Revegetation and Monitoring – State of the Nation* (Draft), February.

Boulter, Sarah et al (Eds) (2000), *Native Vegetation Management in Queensland – Background, Science and Values*, Department of Natural Resources & Mines.

Catterall C & Kingston M (1993), *Remnant Bushland of South East Queensland in the 1990s – Its Distribution, Loss, Ecological Consequences and Future Prospects*, Griffith University and Brisbane City Council.

Cogger, Dr Hal; Ford, Pr Hugh et al (2003), *Impacts of Land Clearing on Australian Wildlife in Queensland*, WWF Australia Report.

Ecos, 113, October-December 2002, *Facing Extinction*, pp 24-30 (CSIRO).

Kault D & McAlpin S (1998), *Habitat Destruction in Queensland – The Effect on Our Native Wildlife*, June, QCC.

Kirkpatrick J (1996), *A Continent Transformed*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

McDonagh Sean (1999), *How have the Churches responded to the Despoliation of Creation?* Presentation 2 to the ACLRI National Assembly, May.

McDonald M, Thomas G, & Horstman M (1991), *The Urgent Need for Clearing Controls of Native Vegetation in Queensland: A Submission to the Queensland Government*, Australian Conservation Foundation, and Cairns and Far North Environment Centre.

Department of Natural Resources & Mines (NRM), Queensland (All documents available on NRM's website): <http://www.nrm.qld.gov.au/>

- (2003a) *Land Cover Change in Queensland, A Statewide Landcover and Trees Study Report (SLATS 2003)*, Jan 2003 (1999-2001 Vegetation Change Report).
- (2003b) *Land Cover Change in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin 1999-2001*, July 2002, revised Jan 2003.
- (2002) *State Policy for Vegetation Management on Freehold Land*, November 2002.
- (2002) *Broad-scale Tree Clearing Policy for State Lands*, November 2002.
- (2001) *A Guide to Vegetation Management Policy in Queensland*, Nov 2001.

State of the Environment (2001) (SoE 2001), Chapter on Biodiversity.

The Age (1999), 'Bleak forecast for life on the land', 29 May.

The Marine & Coastal Community Network (n.d.), *Vegetation Loss: Impacts on the Great Barrier Reef* Information Leaflet.

The Wentworth Group (2002), *Blueprint for a Living Continent: A way forward from the Wentworth Group of concerned scientists*, Publisher: WWF Australia.

Zethoven I (1999), *Slashing Land Clearing in Spinifex*, March, p 19.

**© Social Action Office – CLRIQ
July 2003**

*Acknowledgements: Photos above from The Wilderness Society (used with permission)
Photo below by Cathy O’Keeffe pbvm (used with permission)*

