



The Honourable Tony Abbott MP  
Parliament House,  
Canberra, ACT

12<sup>th</sup> March 2014

### **An open letter to the Prime Minister**

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to you as 114 members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, the world's leading organisation of protected area professionals covering senior figures from academia, public land/sea management agencies and the NGO community. We believe protected areas deliver on many priorities of your government: a sustainable national economy, regional economies, Indigenous employment and national health and well-being goals among them.

As Australians, we are all custodians of one of the most remarkable places on earth. The majority of Australia's plants and animals are not found anywhere else. Our land, seascapes and unique animals are valued by Australians, attract visitors from all over the world and are a defining part of who we are as people. The most effective protectors of these national assets are our World Heritage Areas, national parks and other protected areas.

The Australian Government and its leader, the Prime Minister, have a special responsibility on behalf of the people of Australia, and the people of the world, to safeguard this richness and pass it on to future generations by taking a lead in conservation and sustainable development.

However, the Australian members of the World Commission have expressed rising concern about policy reversals and regressive legislative and management changes affecting conservation and protected areas at both state and federal level in the past two years in Australia. This retreat from many years of leadership and achievement by governments of all political persuasions is both unfortunate and unprecedented.

We believe science and the national interest require instead a strong commitment to Australia's leadership in conservation and continued building of our systems. The IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney in November, the world's largest and most influential meeting on nature conservation through protected areas, will be an excellent opportunity to showcase this commitment. The main aim of the Congress will be to articulate the vital role of protected areas in conserving nature while delivering essential ecosystem services and position protected areas within goals of economic and community well-being.

An important fact is that Australia has not completed its protected area system. As signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Australia and 168 other countries, have agreed, through the Aichi Targets, to continue to build fully representative, effectively and equitably managed terrestrial and marine protected area systems. This is a result of global recognition of the rapid decline of the natural fabric of the earth and species caused by human impacts.

Despite significant progress over past decades, Australia is a long way from achieving a fully representative protected area system with nearly 40% of bioregions (35 of 89) having less than 10% representation and over 10% of subregions having no representation at all in the National Reserves System. Only 20% of threatened species are adequately represented in our protected areas. The task of building a truly comprehensive network of Marine Protected Areas is also unfinished. Almost 20% of Australia's marine bioregions (16) have no representation at all in marine sanctuaries. Achieving representativeness of inshore and continental shelf systems should be a priority.

We therefore do not agree with any idea that our protected area system is sufficient or that we have too many protected areas. This suggestion goes against the great efforts of many Australians over the last decades to protect and restore land for conservation. These include farmers and other landholders who have chosen covenants on their lands as wildlife refuges, Indigenous communities who have embraced the concept of Indigenous Protected Areas which now make up 36% of the National Reserve System, and tens of thousands of individuals and families who have donated to conservancies to purchase critical land. It also challenges the major efforts of state and territory governments who have been systematically building their national parks systems for over a century.

We do not accept the description of protected areas as being 'locked up', which implies that the only beneficial use of land or ocean is for the extraction of commodities. It ignores the reality that protected intact ecosystems are highly productive of multiple benefits. It also leads to the erroneous view that protected areas exclude people. With well over 100 million visits a year, protected areas in fact 'open up' access to land for healthy recreation. Importantly Indigenous Protected Areas also get Traditional Owners back on their country as well as generating significant employment and measurable improvements to community health and well-being – vital national goals.

A key benefit of healthy, thriving nature is the multi-billion dollar tourism industry with international nature tourism responsible for \$19.5 billion in foreign exchange and strong employment, particularly in regional Australia...The Australian Alps skiing and mountain based tourism industry contributes at least \$280 million per year while tourism in the Great Barrier Reef creates over \$5 billion in economic activity.

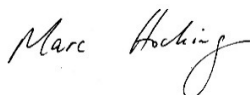
Protected areas produce many other social values and services, from cultural connection, health, wellbeing and adventure, to freshwater catchments and filtration, erosion prevention, pollination, carbon capture and resilience to climate change, fishery nurseries and many more. For example the clean, clear water from catchments of the Australian Alps national parks contributes an estimated \$9.6 billion worth of water annually.

Australia's actions with regard to protected areas should therefore be in step with an increasing global and strategic understanding of the immense values and benefits derived from intact healthy ecosystems over the long term. They should be recognised and highly valued as the core of the 'natural capital' of our country, rather than damaged through uses, which while appropriate elsewhere, do not belong in nature reserves such as logging, mining, grazing, hunting or inappropriate tourist development.

Australia should continue the positive trajectory of innovation, good governance and management that our nation has established and for which it has been internationally acknowledged. These include outstanding initiatives such as Indigenous Protected Areas, management effectiveness methodologies, support for the National Reserve System and private reserves and the inclusive 'whole of landscape' approach to connectivity conservation corridors which involve thousands of individual community and landholder initiatives working with park agencies.

Senior representatives of WCPA would welcome meeting with you to discuss these issues and explore ways of ensuring continued progress. We have made this an open letter as the issue has recently become a live debate in the community and members have expressed their desire to have their views contributed.

Yours faithfully,



Professor Marc Hockings, Vice Chair for Science and Management



Dr. Graeme Worboys, Vice Chair for Connectivity Conservation and Mountains



Penelope Figgis AO, Vice Chair, Oceania

**IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, PO Box 528, Sydney 2001**

## **WCPA signatories**

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Dr Rebecca Koss, Co-Chair IUCN Task Force for the Intergenerational Partnerships for Sustainability

## **FACT SHEET**

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization. Within IUCN, the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) is the world's premier network of protected area expertise with over 1,700 members, spanning 140 countries. The once in a decade premier global event on protected areas, the IUCN World Parks Congress, will be held in Sydney in November 2014. The Australian Government and NSW governments are co-hosts.

[www.worldparkscongress.org](http://www.worldparkscongress.org)

## **Evidence for information provided in the letter:**

### **Policy reversals**

Some of Australia's leading scientists have written an editorial in *Conservation Biology* saying policy reversals "represent a serious about-face for government policy on nature conservation".

Ritchie EG, Bradshaw CJA, Dickman CR, Hobbs R, Johnson CN, Johnston EL, Laurence WF, Lindenmayer D, McCarthy MA, Nimmo DG, Possingham HH, Pressey RL, Watson DM, Woinarski J (2013) Continental-scale governance failure will hasten loss of Australia's biodiversity, *Conservation Biology*, 27(6) 1133–1135

<http://euanritchie.org/2013/12/04/continental-scale-governance-failure-will-hasten-loss-of-australias-biodiversity/>

### **National Reserve System**

Despite considerable progress many gaps remain in the National Reserve System:

- 40% of bioregions (35 of 89) having less than 10% representation and over 10% of subregions having no representation at all in the National Reserves System.

Source: <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/land/national-reserve-system/science-maps-and-data/australias-bioregions-ibra>

- 20% of threatened species are not adequately represented in protected areas

Source: Watson, J.E., Evans, M.C., Carwardine, J., Fuller, R.A., Joseph, L.N., Segan, D.B., Taylor, M.F., Fensham, R.J. and Possingham, H.P. (2011). The capacity of Australia's protected-area system to represent threatened species. *Conservation Biology*, 25(2): 324-332.

### **Indigenous Protected Areas**

See <http://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/ipa/>

### **The Australian Alps national parks**

The Australian Alps national parks help contribute:

- 9,600 Gigalitres of water or 30% of the annual average water yield of the Murray Darling basin worth an estimated \$9.6 billion annually;
- \$280 million per annum Australian Alps ski based tourism industry (Worboys and Good, 2011).

Source: Worboys, G.L. and Good, R.B. (2011). *Caring for our Australian Alps Catchments, Summary Report for Policy Makers*, Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, Canberra.

### **Great Barrier Reef tourism economic benefit**

The Australia-wide economic contribution (direct and indirect) generated by tourism is \$5.2 billion

Source: Deloitte Access Economics (2013). *Economic contribution of the Great Barrier Reef*, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Townsville.

### **Nature tourism in Australia**

Across Australia international nature is responsible for \$19.5 billion in foreign exchange.

Source: Dept. Resources Energy and Tourism (2009) *Snapshots 2009: Nature tourism in Australia* ([http://www.tra.gov.au/documents/Snapshots\\_2009\\_Nature\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.tra.gov.au/documents/Snapshots_2009_Nature_FINAL.pdf))