

A Roadmap to Ecosystem Restoration Success

Statement from Australia's Restoration Decade Alliance at the 10th World Conference on Ecosystem Restoration Darwin Australia

29 September 2023

Background

Despite ongoing efforts, biodiversity is deteriorating both in Australia and worldwide at rates unprecedented in human history, necessitating urgent and concerted action on ecosystem restoration. The Australian government is a signatory to two major international initiatives directly calling for ecosystem restoration, both of which are in response to the intensifying global biodiversity crisis that threatens both people and nature. The first is the United Nations [Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#) (2021-2031) (UN Decade) which aims to “prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean”. The second is the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) under the UN Convention Biological Diversity, including the Framework’s ‘Target 2’ which commits each signatory nation to have at least 30 percent of areas of degraded terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine ecosystems under effective restoration by the year 2030. Other international initiatives Australia is a signatory to and where ecosystem restoration is relevant include the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [Paris Climate Agreement](#).

In response to these international initiatives, 21 peak Australian non-profit restoration organisations have formed the [Restoration Decade Alliance](#) (RDA), to actively support the goals of the UN Decade and accelerate action on restoration in Australia. Member organisations of the RDA are deeply involved in promoting, planning, implementing and scaling-up ecosystem restoration projects in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems across Australia.

However, the total scale of our Member organisation’s collective efforts, even when combined with the substantial efforts of federal, state and local governments, is inadequate to match the scale of current ecosystem degradation and decline. Most individual ecosystem restoration projects in Australia remain largely disconnected and relatively small scale for the following reasons:

- Absence of large and sustainable funding to support long term and large-scale, multi-landscape programs;
- Suboptimal resourcing and integration of First Nations knowledge and leadership in restoration efforts;

- Cumbersome approval processes that delay and, at times, disallow worthwhile restoration projects;
- Lack of consistent criteria and procedures for assessing restoration projects across the various levels of government;
- Inadequate funding for practitioners and researchers to monitor projects over time to generate new knowledge about restoration performance;
- Suboptimal understanding of the scale and consequences of biodiversity and ecosystem loss, degradation and fragmentation;
- Gaps in education and training, particularly those arising from a paucity of 2-way sharing of knowledge between science and practice;
- Barriers to delivery of high-quality restoration at scale due to limited availability of skilled practitioners, access to sites, and adequate native seed supply; and,
- Absence of effective incentives and technical support for landholders to carry out ecologically effective restoration on their land, which would generate benefits for people and nature.

Roadmap to Restoration

Members of the Restoration Decade Alliance are calling for a **National Restoration Plan** to guide actions for restoration in Australia carried out by governments, non-government restoration organisations, industry practitioners and communities.

A key purpose of the Plan would be to optimise the potential for our nation to meaningfully meet our international biodiversity commitments and obligations across Targets 1, 2 and 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework. The Plan's functions would be to provide (i) national goals, targets and priorities for restoration consistent with Australia's Strategy for Nature; (ii) broad guiding principles to assist interpretation and adaptation, (iii) a framework for action by governments, industry and community, and (iv) recommendations for resourcing.

The Plan would recognise the value of community-led action, prioritising the genuine, early and ongoing involvement of First Nations peoples, recognising the foundational role of such involvement to the successful development and implementation of restoration across Australia.

Advisory Panel

We recommend that a panel be appointed to advise the federal government on the content of the Plan. This Advisory Panel should include independent ecosystem restoration experts with long and successful experience in the restoration sector. Such advisors are best placed to identify actions that are likely to result in outcomes that align with Australia's national and global environmental and climate commitments.

Suggested roles for the Advisory Panel would include:

- Review and comment on any proposed new legislation or regulation that could support or impinge on ecosystem restoration objectives and outcomes.
- Provide traditional knowledge, expert science, and practitioner advice to identify national targets and priorities for ecosystem restoration programs, application assessment criteria, conditions of project approval and monitoring requirements.
- Provide expert advice on the development of an appropriate funding program for scaling up ecologically meaningful restoration and identify multiple funding sources.

A plan that takes into account the following elements will reduce the risks of Australia failing to meet our international commitments and increase the potential for our collective investments to result in nature-positive outcomes through coordination, motivation, integration, valuation, review of regulation, and funding:

Coordination: A major limitation to the delivery of successful, large scale ecosystem restoration across Australia is the lack of a holistic approach to coordination, particularly a lack of cohesive direction at state and federal levels. This could be overcome by the federal government's development of a National Restoration Plan (as described above) advised by all levels of government, industry and community.

Motivation: Effective restoration needs a whole-of-community approach that engages First Nations people, community-based 'care' groups, private conservation organisations, not-for-profit restoration organisations and their supporting networks. Research shows that the average Australian does not fully understand the relationship between ecosystems and biodiversity nor the scale of the ecosystem loss and degradation that have occurred and continue to occur. A better understanding of the relationship between healthy ecosystems and the many benefits they provide to people is required to inspire public support for, and involvement in, restoration.

Case studies need to be more widely shared to convey more clearly what restoration provides in terms of improving overall ecosystem function, curbing extinctions, enabling the return of native animal species, improving the productivity and resilience of our soils, farmlands and fisheries, retaining important cultural values, and benefiting the health and wellbeing of people.

An opportunity exists to align this element to the motivational framework provided by the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. It is therefore recommended that the Plan's consultation, writing and promotion be set within the framework of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

Integration: Most ecosystems requiring restoration are located on private and leasehold land, including First Nations lands. Understanding what drives and motivates landholder engagement and demonstrating the benefits of ecosystem restoration activities for local and First Nations communities is essential for scaling up restoration. In addition, integrating ecosystem restoration across all government portfolios that intersect with restoration will yield expanded benefits. These include portfolios ranging from disaster resilience and climate adaptation and mitigation to agriculture, water resource management and employment, including Indigenous employment.

Valuation: Internationally, expenditure on ecosystem restoration yields greater benefits relative to expenditure on industries more traditionally supported by governments. Understanding the economic value of restoration in terms of revenue and employment opportunities is essential. The contribution to our economy of restored healthy ecosystems and the ecosystem services they provide can also now be documented and valued through the use of the [UN System of Environmental Economic Accounting - Ecosystem Accounting](#) framework. An immediate task is to support Australian-specific work on ecosystem valuation including benefit-cost analyses of ecosystem restoration using approaches such as those outlined in the [CSIRO Natural Capital Handbook](#).

Review of Regulation: Some elements of environmental protection legislation are impeding restoration, particularly for aquatic systems. Regulatory changes to existing state and federal legislation need to be developed in these cases to define the issues the restoration activities need to address and to support the implementation of restoration as a management tool.

Funding: Despite programs being in place in Australia to support ecosystem restoration since the early 1990s, biodiversity has continued to decline. The available funding for ecosystem restoration is inadequate and needs to be increased, along with the development of a range of new funding mechanisms with clear design principles. Such programs must;

- Have a funding base that is separate from annual and political funding cycles.
- Ensure that funding is of sufficient duration to ensure their outcomes are secured.
- Incentivise private landholders to participate in ecosystem restoration projects.

Diverse funding mechanisms are required to ensure all potential sources are accessed. Funding needs to include non-market approaches (such as grants programs and natural capital accounting), as well as market-based mechanisms, (such as biodiversity certificates and green sovereign bonds).



Australian restoration organisations supporting the
United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration
2021 - 2030

Summary Statement

Members of the Restoration Decade Alliance share the concerns of many Australians about the ongoing degradation of ecosystems and the negative implications for future generations. Conservation alone is not enough. In response, the Alliance calls for the development of a National Restoration Plan to repair degraded and/or damaged ecosystems across Australia to achieve nature-positive outcomes and benefit the health and well-being of people. The Restoration Plan would provide a framework in which national targets, priorities and principles can be identified along with avenues for securing the required funding. It would provide a cohesive vision and action framework to guide all players involved in restoration in Australia - whether the players be state, federal and local governments, specialist restoration NGOs, industry or community.

To assist the Federal Government with the design, implementation and management of the Restoration Plan, the RDA recommends the establishment of an Advisory Panel of ecological restoration experts - with consultation with all states and territories, all restoration non-government organisations, First Nations land and water managers and other key stakeholders - to ensure that restoration knowledge, experience, and guidance by these players inform the Plan. The Advisory Panel would also assist the Federal Government align the National Restoration Plan with Australia's 2030 commitment to the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework, set within the context of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to optimise buy-in from governments, industry and communities.

A Discussion Paper is in preparation to encapsulate the findings of RDA's 2023 series of four workshops on 'Towards a National Restoration Plan' and will be released for further consultation with stakeholders.

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