Rich and Rare: Conservation of Threatened Species Follow-up Audit

Executive Summary

Report 16: September 2017

This performance audit follows-up our 2009 report, *Rich and Rare: Conservation of Threatened Species*. We assessed whether the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW), now the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), had implemented changes to address the concerns identified in our 2009 report. Our fieldwork included visits to the Wheatbelt and South West regions.

Our 2009 report concluded that in many areas threatened species were not being effectively protected and recovered and that the number of threatened species was rising with only a few species improving.

Background and developments since 2009

Western Australia (WA) is nationally and internationally significant for its biodiversity. It has 8 of Australia's 15 biodiversity hotspots as measured by the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Energy. The South West is one of 36 internationally recognised biodiversity hotspots and one of a few in a developed country.

WA covers 253 million hectares, of which 29 million hectares are national parks, marine parks and other reserves managed by DBCA. DBCA is responsible for protecting and conserving the State's natural environment. It is also responsible for protecting and recovering threatened species on reserved, private, commercial, local government and other landholdings.

We addressed the recommendations in our 2009 report to the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), which was then the responsible agency. Following a restructure in 2013, DPaW was formed and assumed conservation responsibility. On 1 July 2017, DBCA took on this function.

In 2009, we made 10 recommendations to DEC covering legislation, listing processes, prioritisation and evaluation of conservation activity, and information management and reporting (Appendix 1).

Threatened species are covered by the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* (WC Act), which is currently being replaced by the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (BC Act). Native plants and animals are formally recognised as threatened species when listed under the WC Act (and will be under the BC Act). Listing provides a legal framework for their protection and management. They can also be listed under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

Ecological communities are naturally occurring groups of native plants, animals and other organisms that interact in a unique habitat. They can be formally recognised under the EPBC Act and will be recognised under the BC Act.

A Commonwealth Threatened Species Commissioner was appointed in 2014 and leads the national Threatened Species Strategy 2015 to 2020. DBCA contributes to this strategy through:

- inclusion of several WA species as key targets for recovery action and for recovery funding
- participation in a joint national and state cooperation program to develop common processes and practices to nominate and recover threatened species.

Audit conclusion

The scale of the task facing DBCA has increased since we reported in 2009. The number of threatened species has increased by 12%, in part due to greater knowledge of biodiversity drawn from DBCA's continuing research.

A major positive change since our last audit has been the passing of the BC Act. This was a significant milestone, replacing outdated legislation and bringing WA into line with current conservation practice. When fully enacted it is expected to support DBCA to better manage threatened species, their habitats and threats.

DBCA has also made progress in increasing its commitment to broad-scale conservation and improving its processes for listing threatened species. The new legislation provides more ways to tackle the growing task, but DBCA still has much work to do to address our 2009 findings about reporting, knowledge management and prioritising of its recovery effort.

Key findings

The number of threatened and priority species has increased

Since our 2009 report, the number of threatened species has increased by 12% to 672, while the number of listed threatened ecological communities has remained stable at 66. DBCA also maintains a register of 'priority species' that are possibly threatened but which need more knowledge. WA is the only State to maintain such a register. At January 2017, there were 3,352 priority species, up from 2,604 in 2009. There were also 389 priority ecological communities, up from 255 in 2009. In part this increase is due to DBCA's continuing research providing increased knowledge of the State's biodiversity.

DBCA has less resources for managing threatened species conservation activities

DBCA conservation services including those aimed at threatened species are operating with fewer resources than in 2009. Both expenditure and staffing are below 2009 levels while the conservation task has grown as more species are listed as threatened.

New legislation has been passed to better support conservation activities

In 2009, we recommended that the Department continue to press for legislative change, as it and its predecessor agencies had since 1992. The BC Act received Royal Assent on 21 September 2016 and is being proclaimed incrementally. DBCA does not expect the new related regulations to be finalised until 2018 but is implementing new provisions as they come into force.

The new Act replaces the WC Act, which did not recognise modern conservation categories, ecological communities, or critical habitat. The BC Act provides penalties of up to $500,000 for individuals and $2.5 million for corporations, compared to a maximum of $10,000 under the WC Act.

DBCA delivers broad-scale conservation activity for threatened species, ecological communities and habitats, in line with current practice and the new legislation

Current conservation and protection practice requires action at many levels. These include individual species, local 'patches' and broad geographic areas, or 'landscapes'. The BC Act also gives legal standing to this range of activity. DBCA has been developing a more broad-scale approach focusing on environments while also maintaining key species level actions.

Western Shield is a long-standing broad-scale program that received a Premier's Award in 2016, and aims to reduce the numbers of introduced predators, particularly foxes and feral cats. DBCA has also released the 2011 Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy, the 2016 Pilbara Conservation Strategy and the 2010 Biodiversity and Cultural Conservation Strategy for the Great Western Woodlands, part of the Goldfields. These involve broad biodiversity and threat management, and have led to changes in regional resourcing.

In addition, DBCA has increased its use of islands and mainland enclosures to protect key animals. It has also created flora 'seed banks' and established new populations in secure locations.

Most threatened species now have recovery plans or interim recovery plans, but these plans are not always resourced, so do not guarantee activity or improved outcomes

There has been an increase in the number of threatened species with recovery plans or interim recovery plans since 2009. At January 2017, 91% of critically endangered species and

ecological communities and 55% of all threatened species and ecological communities had a recovery plan or interim recovery plans.

These plans have long been key to DBCA actions to help threatened species or ecological communities survive and recover. However, these plans are not always activated because funding for action does not automatically or systematically follow when they are created.

There has been little progress since 2009 in reserving land for conservation

In 2009, we recommended that the Department improve its approach to reserving land for conservation purposes. This has long been a key departmental objective to protect biodiversity and social values. While there has been some movement in the types and categories of land DBCA manages, we found minimal planning documentation around objectives, identification of reservation targets and processes or procedures.

At June 2016, DBCA managed 29 million hectares of land and water, an increase of 2 million hectares from 2007-08. DBCA can purchase available private land and is the agency that identifies land and initiates the process for reservation. However, this relies on support from other agencies and Ministers. At least 23 instances since 2012 did not receive this support and were therefore not reserved.

Nomination and listing processes have improved

Since 2009, DBCA has improved its process for listing threatened species. This new process has been largely adopted by the national working group as the preferred nomination method for all states, territories and the Commonwealth. Quicker listing reduces the risk of inaction for threatened species.

There are still gaps in the evaluation and reporting of outcomes of activity to conserve threatened species

Knowing outcomes and reporting on results is key for a large, regionally dispersed organisation like DBCA managing complex issues. In 2009, we recommended the Department develop comprehensive reporting frameworks for threatened species.

While there was some good reporting for particular programs we found no coordinated approach to evaluating outcomes, little output reporting, weaknesses in species-level reporting and minimal reporting to senior management. This decreases visibility to senior management and accountability for management of threatened species.

DBCA does not make the best use of its substantial information about threatened species

Seven DBCA divisions deliver 8 interrelated services through 9 geographic regions. This decentralised management structure increases the need for information. However, DBCA has vast amounts of information on threatened species held in multiple locations and in separate systems, some of which are managed locally, making it inefficient to manage. DBCA has recognised the need to improve this approach. It expects to begin implementing new systems and processes by June 2018.

Because DBCA has not documented its prioritisation process, it cannot demonstrate that it is being applied or that resources are directed to highest priorities

Our 2009 report recommended that the Department consider changing how it prioritises species for conservation to ensure existing resources are used to maximum long-term effect. While we acknowledge the difficulty of allocating priorities to elements of complex biological systems, we expected to find a management-approved structured approach to this important activity. However, this was not evident.

DBCA has several levels of administrative, conservation and organisational policies and strategies that identify key principles for regions to plan for conservation, including the need to prioritise action effectively. However, there is no clear articulation or documentation of how this prioritising should be, or is being, done.

Recommendations

DBCA should:

1. **As soon as possible, finalise regulations and associated processes and procedures to take full advantage of the powers and intent of the BC Act.**
2. **By June 2018, complete and begin implementing core responses to its current data management review, which includes:**
    a. **all new requirements of the BC Act**
    b. **integration of databases**
    c. **regional office needs**
    d. **management reporting**
    e. **recovery plan management**
    f. **all relevant information sources.**
3. **By June 2018, develop and begin implementing reporting and evaluation guidelines to enable effectiveness to be assessed and inform planning for:**
    a. **nature conservation plans including regional outputs and outcomes**
    b. **recovery plans and recovery actions.**
4. **Set and communicate clear expectations for regional leaders when prioritising conservation and recovery activities for threatened species, ecological communities, critical habitats and threatening processes.**

Response from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions

Western Australia has a rich and diverse flora and fauna, with a global biodiversity hotspot and eight national biodiversity hotspots. The high diversity, natural fragmentation patterns, extensive spatial scale and considerable development pressures makes the task of managing threatened species and communities substantial, involving complex biological systems and interacting threats. The Department considers that its management of threatened species and communities is effective given the large number of species and communities involved, the complexity of the task and the resources available.

The Department achieved a key outcome in 2016 with the proclamation of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 that provides a modern legislative basis for management of threatened species and communities. It is continuing to work with the State Government to finalise the regulations and other supporting documents, such as Ministerial Guidelines, that will support the management of threatened species and communities and formalise processes for listing of threatened species and communities, critical habitat and threatening processes.

The Department acknowledges there is scope for an increased level of reporting in some situations and seeks continual improvement in this regard, although the Department does not consider that the current level of reporting is a limiting factor in effective threatened species management. Effective prioritisation across all aspects of threatened species management is challenging, and the Department considers that recent development of corporate frameworks and policies provide appropriate guidance for prioritisation of management actions at a range of scales. The Department is continuing to refine and document its processes to support effective decision making regarding conservation actions.

The Department recognises its data management processes reflect a dispersed organisational structure yet considers that the relevant information is available to staff as required. The Department acknowledges that it can take advantage of advances in database design to develop a centralised database containing a range of information on threatened species and has already scoped the development of such a system that will be implemented in a modular fashion as priorities and resources allow.