FOG ACT Election Priorities 2024

Introduction

Friends of Grasslands election priorities focus on the longer-term priorities to strategically improve conservation of grassy ecosystems, while deconflicting broader development decisions in Canberra. We argue that implementing these priorities can better support the wellbeing of the Canberra community in three key ways, namely:

1. Improving the quality of the environment that distinguishes Canberra as the bush capital and a good place to live;
2. Reducing costs to the community through early action to address looming problems and to reduce longer term management costs; and
3. Identifying and conserving lands of high conservation value so as to steer development to uncontroversial lands where development may be expedited.

Due to the knowledge, resources and integrated nature of the community and government in the ACT, we have the opportunity to set the standard for conservation and sustainable development in Australia. We list here conservation priorities for the next ACT government, followed by a description of the context.

Priorities

Legislation changes

1. Implement legislative protection measures for off-reserve "Conservation Areas" that meet defined ecological criteria to ensure these sites are not developed or damaged (and enable development on lower value lands).
2. Support the introduction of voluntary covenants on leased land to protect areas that meet criteria.
3. Include in the updated Nature Conservation Act changes that support better conservation of biodiversity on and off reserve.

Administrative changes

4. Integrate all land and water management agency responsibilities into one Directorate, and separate them from Planning responsibilities enabling the Conservator role to be separated from the Planning directorate.

Planning

5. Negotiate with the Commonwealth to facilitate implementation of the funding such as the Restoration Contribution Fund on leasehold land in the ACT.

6. Quarantine conservation areas from development ('no go' areas): align the expansion of the city of Canberra with areas of low conservation importance through financing strategic regional assessments of areas to first identify and then quarantine all areas that are of conservation value, to ensure such areas are not subject to or compromised by development; this will reduce planning time and ensure offsetting is not required.

7. Provide funds to protect key areas inside the current reserve system, including:

    a) Declaration of new nature reserves:
        - Belconnen Naval Transmission Station in North Lawson, once it is Territory Land;
    b) Integration of adjoining lands into nature reserves:
        - Glenloch interchange into Aranda Bushland Nature Reserve;
        - Ainslie Volcanics into Mt Ainslie Nature Reserve
        - Woodland to the east of Mt Ainslie into the Mt Ainslie Nature Reserve

Resources

8. Provide for on-ground staff to be highly skilled and trained in applying best practice ecological management and restoration on all unleased conservation areas.
9. Provide for advisory staff to work with leaseholders that take responsibility for best practice management of conservation areas on land that they manage; this includes rural and urban leased land, including land managed by organisations such as universities, schools, commercial companies.
10. Support Ngunnawal and other Indigenous people of the ACT to continue their cultural practices in land management and provide opportunities for the population of the ACT to become more involved in caring for Country.

Volunteer support

11. Provide better and more secure support to the three ACT catchment management groups to in turn support and guide the close to 100 volunteer groups working on conservation activities in urban parks.
12. Appoint additional volunteer coordinators skilled in ecological management to better support our Canberra community to care for conservation areas on public lands.
13. Maintain support for Canberra Nature Map, a highly successful citizen science program that has provided data of the abundance and distribution of native, naturalised and invasive plant, animal (including invertebrates and fish) species.

Ecological management and restoration

14. Increase the Biosecurity Program to control environmental and agricultural pest plants and animals.
15. Ensure new pest species incursions are managed.
16. Undertake and fund strategic and effective restoration of lands.
17. Plant native 'gardens' (moving beyond just trees) to improve amenity and increase biodiversity in the urban environment.

Context for the Proposed Election Priorities

Conserving the ACT's biodiversity across the Territory: Implementing a Biodiversity Network

Since the proposal for the introduction of a Biodiversity Network was launched in early 2023 there has been considerable government, political and community interest and support towards implementing a network of protected and ecologically managed "conservation areas", that occur across all tenures. Areas with conservation values include unleased land including Urban Open Space, other areas such as horse paddocks, urban corridors and leased and urban lands. Government and community have been working together to identify how conservation areas that are off-reserve may be managed and retained for their conservation values.

Of particular value are the grassland and grassy woodland remnants that occur on the lower elevation parts of the ACT, that are particularly susceptible to change in land use. These most threatened and insufficiently conserved ecosystems and species lie in the flatter lands where Canberra is located and on surrounding rural lands.

Building biological resilience against climate change

Impacts of climate change on biodiversity

Climate change is a threat to biodiversity[1], through impacts of higher than the long-term average temperatures and lower than the long-term average rainfall, with the connected impact of new weed invasions and increase in weed infestations, erosion and loss of water quality.

Biodiversity specifically and environmental values more generally are deteriorating in part due to increasing pressures from climate change, habitat loss, invasive species, pollution[2]. The report states that multiple pressures create cumulative impacts that amplify threats to our environment, and abrupt changes in ecological systems have been recorded in the past 5 years.

The role of biodiversity in mitigating against climate changes

On the other hand, biodiversity provides resilience against climate change, as native vegetation is perennial, mitigates against erosion and subsequent water quality loss and is more resilient to recovery from bushfires than many introduced species.

Protecting and restoring biodiversity is one solution as they are carbon sinks that help absorb greenhouse gases. Plants, including grasses and other small plants absorb carbon dioxide; clearing vegetation releases that carbon back into the atmosphere.

Three key issues regarding the biodiversity of the ACT must be addressed (Wood 2009)[3]:

- protecting and nurturing the diverse ecosystems around the ACT;
- better integration of the natural and human environments; and
- closely following the 18 year plan set out in the ACT Climate Change Strategy 2007 – 2025.

Restoration of ecosystems

Ecological restoration has three elements of recovery of ecosystems and species habitat, depending on the degree of degradation, damage and/or destruction[4]. It aligns and overlaps with conservation to repair damaged ecosystems.

1. *Facilitate natural regeneration*: where damage to the natural ecosystem is low, remove degrading practices including removal of native vegetation and inappropriate management Recovery may occur through seed banks and through movement of fauna back into the ecosystems.
2. *Apply assisted regeneration*: at moderate levels of degradation, control invasive species, reintroduce ecological processes that facilitate natural regeneration (burning regimes, other herbage mass treatment), reinstate habitat features such as logs, rocks. Assisted regeneration also facilitates natural regeneration and reestablishment of fauna.
3. *Apply reconstruction*: where damage is high, all causes of degradation need to be removed or reversed, and a major proportion of species need to be re-established through remediation of soils and landforms to improve soils, retention of water run-off and reintroduction of local indigenous species. This element of regeneration will be particularly important to improve connectivity between remnants and thus facilitate less expensive, more effective natural regeneration.

All three approaches require ongoing adaptive management until recovery is secured.

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[1] ACT Climate Change Strategy - Climate Choices

[2] State of the Environment report - DCCEEW

[3] Wood D., 2009. The role of biodiversity in climate change adaptation. Canberra Environment and Sustainability Resource Centre for the ACT Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.)

[4] Australia Standards Reference Group, 2018. National standards for the practice of ecological restoration. Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia (SERA0).

Weed and pest animal control

While changes in land use including urban development remain the highest threat to lowland grassy ecosystems, control of pest plants and animals is the next highest threat.

Failure to identify and eradicate incursions of invasive species in the past now costs society dearly. For example, African Lovegrass was not controlled when it entered the ACT late last century and now greatly exacerbates bush fire risk, diminishes primary production, and will fundamentally and irreparably degrade local ecosystems if not addressed. Significant advances in strategic control of biosecurity threats have occurred in the past four years, successfully eradicating numerous incursions of dangerous new weed species, including Coolatai Grass and Madagascan Fireweed. This work to control "sleeper" weeds in the ACT, and introduction of better recording to map weed incursions and record management efforts have been vital but funding for these programs is due to expire in 2025..

It is our belief that measures to reduce invasive plants (including currently identified species and potential 'sleeper' weeds) and animals, particularly rabbits, pigs and feral cats, will safeguard biodiversity, increase amenity, reduce bushfire risk, improve health of waterways and reduce management costs.

Utilising resources for applying change

Existing and potentially forthcoming funds from the Commonwealth, such as the Natural Resource Management Program and the Restoration Contributions Fund are important resources to facilitate improvement and protection of native ecosystems and species. Management and reduction of costs may be reduced through strategic and prioritised planning.

The big gains for both improving conservation of biodiversity and facilitating sustainable development will come from deconflicting land use in the Canberra urban area and adjacent lands earmarked for future development. The time taken for development approvals in Canberra is often exacerbated because high conservation value lands are not clearly identified upfront to enable developers to focus on unconflicted lands. A proactive program to identify land for conservation and development could provide greater certainty for all stakeholders.

Friends of Grasslands

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of native grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

Among other activities, FOG is the lead community organisation partner for the ACT Government in managing high conservation value ACT lands at sites that include Budjan Galindji Reserve in Franklin, Blue Gum Point in Yarralumla, and Hall Cemetery. In other words, our advocacy is informed by our sweat on the ground, working shoulder to shoulder with ACT Government staff to conserve the ACT's environment. FOG members also work with the ACT Government in policy and program implementation.

FOG is a member of the Conservation Council ACT Region. We support their broader election priorities paper. Our priorities focus on FOG's mission of conservation of native temperate grasslands and grassy woodlands. Conservation of these ecosystems is a particular challenge because they are listed as critically endangered and also contain a multiplicity of threatened flora and fauna species under ACT and Commonwealth law, and because Canberra is built on these ecosystems. Many remnants of threatened communities or threatened species habitat occur outside the reserve system and are unprotected from loss and degradation.