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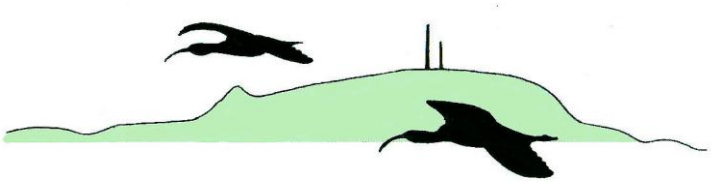

Native Vegetation Regulation Review

Orange Field Naturalist and Conservation Society Inc. has been an advocate for the environment, especially in the Central West, since its inception in 1974. The passing of the Native Vegetation Act 2003 was seen by the Society as a long overdue step towards arresting the decades of rampant land clearing and its associated ravages on biodiversity. The Society is therefore highly concerned about, and opposes, the proposed major changes to the Act which it considers will allow a return to unmitigated destruction of native vegetation and wildlife habitat.

There has been near a decade of land management under the Act and its intentions for conservation purposes and the integrity of the Act for policing it has shown its value and workability. The Society is appalled that an extreme minority of farmers has incited the proposed major changes to the Act which it foresees will weaken the underpinning integrity of the Act and lead to further incremental destruction of native vegetation, loss of critical habitat and large scale clearing in many parts of the State.

The well scientifically documented decline in woodland birds in New South Wales, eg Ford, *et al.* (2001) is just one example of how biodiversity is being negatively impacted by clearing of native vegetation. Fragmentation of habitat has also been scientifically shown as the key driver of biodiversity decline in farming landscapes.

One facet of the proposals to weaken existing protections in the Act, by allowing clearing of invasive native species and thinning of native vegetation without advice and approval from Catchment Management Authorities, has the potential to result in the loss of hundreds of thousands of hectares of native vegetation. Likewise ecological burning, if used routinely for management, has the potential to adversely impact on native flora and fauna species as well as endangered ecological communities over vast areas of the State.

Besides fostering biodiversity, native vegetation provides essential environmental, social and economic benefits, including protecting water quality, maintaining soil health and its protection from salinity and erosion. Our threatened and declining animals and plants are dependent on the important remnant vegetation dotted across the already heavily cleared landscapes. Retention of these remnants is critical for conservation and remediation. One could argue that some of these remnants are not worth preserving, but it has been recently shown that even small, linear remnants can provide very good quality avian habitat (Lentini *et al*. 2011).

Retention of shelterbelts and other planted native vegetation is also important. It is known that windbreaks and eucalypt plantations not only provide good habitat for birds in Australia (Kinross 2004; Kavanagh *et al.* 2005) but also bats (Bonifacio *et al.* 2011) and other fauna and flora (Ryan 1999). It is well known that they are also of benefit to farmers, helping to minimize salinity, erosion, providing shelter for stock and crops, but less well known that they provide certain ecosystem services such as pollination in crops (Arthur *et al.* 2010) and there is the potential for pest control. There is some new evidence to show that native vegetation, including planted, can harbour parasitoid insects that prey on pest species and that these can beneficially spill over onto adjacent croplands (Perovic *et al.* 2011; Perovic & Gurr 2012).

The benefits of retention and planting of native vegetation for carbon sequestration should also be stressed and any weakening of the laws in relation to vegetation clearance should be avoided at all costs if we are to minimize impacts on global warming (Mackey *et al.* 2008).

For all of these many sound environmental reasons the Society strongly condemns the proposed changes to the Native Vegetation Act. Regulations need to be strengthened, **NOT** weakened as proposed. Moreover the Society looks to the government of the State for strong and sound leadership to protect the natural environment. The Society also supports the need for education of land managers to act as stewards to conserve and reap benefits from native vegetation rather than to continue to willfully and unsustainably destroy it.

John Austin
President

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