Land clearing in Queensland triples after policy ping pong

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Recent increases in land clearing threaten Queensland's biodiversity. Bill Laurance

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In 2013, a group of 26 senior scientists in Queensland (including ourselves) expressed serious concern that proposed changes to vegetation protection laws would mean a return to large-scale land clearing. The loss of these protections followed a Ministerial announcement in early 2012 that investigations into and prosecutions of illegal clearing would be halted.

Our statement of concern pointed out that tens of thousands of hectares of Queensland's woodland and forests were being lost every year, even before the vegetation protections were wound back. Just two years later, it appears we must

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now measure the annual losses in hundreds of thousands of hectares.

Last month, early figures were reported suggesting that 275,000 hectares were cleared from Queensland in the last financial year – a tripling of land clearing rates since 2010.

Land clearing is the main cause of biodiversity loss. It also exacerbates erosion and salinity, reduces water quality, worsens the impacts of drought, and contributes significantly to carbon emissions. Indeed, vegetation protection laws enabled Australia to meet its Kyoto Protocol target for emissions reductions.

The re-acceleration of land-clearing in Queensland puts Australia on the world stage. Bill Laurance

Australia already has alarmingly high rates of land clearing. And Queensland is responsible for more land clearing each year than any other state. So, the re-acceleration of land clearing in Queensland puts the state on the world stage – and not in a good way.

Playing policy ping-pong

How did we get to a situation where land clearing rates in a country like Australia—wealthy, developed and once a global conservation leader—are increasing, rather than declining? Regulation and enforcement play an important role.

Deforestation-related legislation in Queensland started with an amendment to the Land Act in 1994. Over the next 18 years, governments across the political spectrum progressively strengthened protection of native vegetation.

High rates of deforestation persisted until the Vegetation Management Act was amended and broadscale clearing of remnant (old-growth) forest and woodland was phased out by 2006. But many ecosystems had already been so heavily cleared that their recovery would depend on retaining older (more than 20 years old) regrowth vegetation.

Protection of both this old regrowth of endangered ecosystems, and the protective regrowth along watercourses, was introduced in 2009. Queensland finally had an enforceable system to regulate the clearing of almost all native vegetation. The result was a dramatically lowered loss rate during 2006-2011.

But in 2012, a newly elected Liberal-National government rapidly set about watering down many aspects of environmental legislation. The Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Act 2013 brought back broadscale land clearing for agriculture, and the protections for high-value regrowth on freehold and indigenous land were removed.

Council and various other scientific and philanthropic organisations. In addition to his appointment as Distinguished Research Professor and Australian Laureate at James Cook University, he also holds the Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. This chair is co-sponsored by Utrecht University and WWF-Netherlands.

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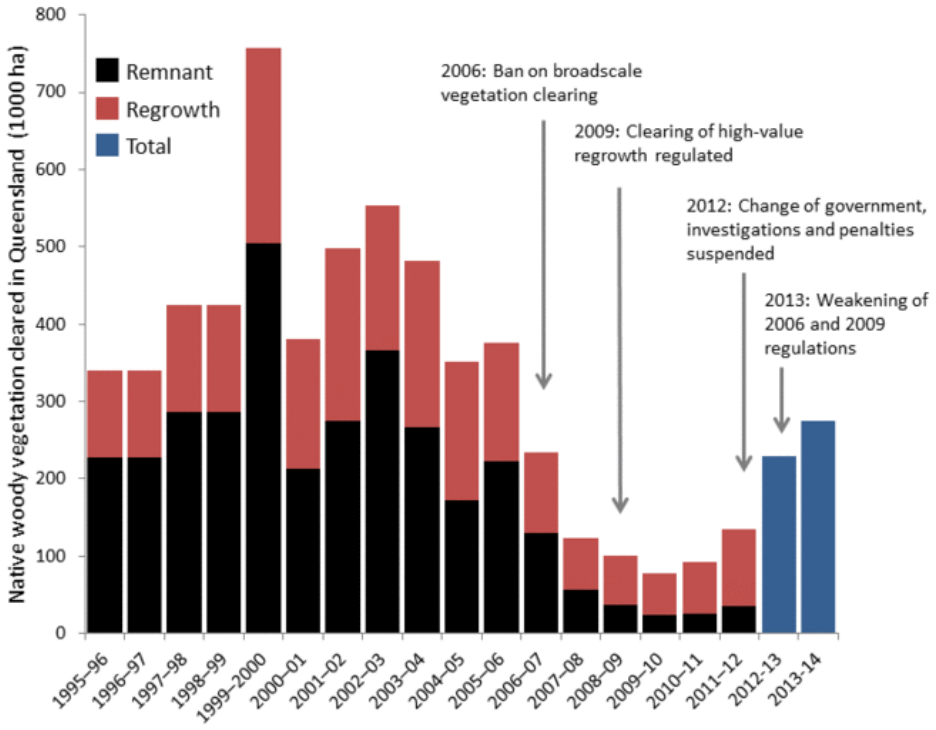
Carla P. Catterall receives funding from the Australian Research Council and other nonprofit sources. Her research group investigates how changes to land and forest cover interact with wild plants and animals. She is a past president of the Ecological Society of Australia and has affiliation with various ecological, conservation, and ornithological societies.

James Watson receives funding from Australian Research Council. He is affiliated with the Wildlife Conservation Society and is president-elect for the Society for Conservation Biology.

Jonathan Rhodes receives funding from the Australian Research Council, Australian Commonwealth Government and the Queensland Government.

Now, a minority Labor government has been elected, amidst promises to reinstate environmental protections. But a recent ministerial announcement appears to signal some backpedalling.



History of vegetation clearing in Queensland showing recently-reported increased clearing rates in blue from http://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/news/agriculture/general/healthcare/drought-drives-mulga-hunger/2724451.aspx. data: SLATS/Queensland Country Life

Why should we worry?

Until the full reports from the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study are released, we cannot know how much of the recent land clearing consists of remnant and high-value regrowth habitat, or how much was legal. However, last year, a single approval allowed the clearing of 28,000 hectares of remnant habitat. That single loss on its own exceeds the annual loss of remnant vegetation statewide in the two years prior to 2012.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the long-term impacts of increased deforestation. These include dire consequences for our unique biodiversity. There are 778 species listed as “Vulnerable” or “Endangered” in Queensland. Loss of habitat is a major threat to most of them. In addition, 45% of Queensland’s ecosystems are threatened because of land clearing.

To give just one well-known example, the current population trend of Queensland’s Koalas would see them disappear from parts of the state within a decade. Maintaining sufficient habitat is critical. Koalas rely on the forest and woodland that is left to survive droughts, stay safe from ground-based predators and cars, and to have enough food.

Loss of koala habitat increases their vulnerability to other threats, such as cars. Graham van der Wielen, CC BY-NC-SA

The same challenges are faced by numerous other species. When habitat is permanently removed, the animals that lived there die – or move elsewhere to displace others.

The consequences of further deforestation for stream and river health and atmospheric carbon levels are similarly worrying.

In attempts to redress the damage done by past habitat loss, landholders across the country have been working for decades to replant trees and restore land. A national program seeks to plant 20 million trees over four years at a public cost of A$50 million. But this is dwarfed by the 50 million-plus trees lost to clearing in just one year, in one state - Queensland.

Weakening of habitat protections was rationalised by its proponents as achieving a better “balance”. But for most vegetation communities, the ecosystem services that they perform, and the threatened species they contain, the balance was tipped long ago. We’re in danger of “balancing” our rare ecosystems and species into extinction.

Koala | Koalas | Deforestation | Queensland | Wildlife conservation | habitat loss | land clearing

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