



Office of the Auditor General Western Australia

RICH AND RARE: CONSERVATION OF THREATENED SPECIES

Report 5 – June 2009

Background

Western Australia (WA) is globally significant for its biodiversity, of both flora (plants) and fauna (animals). WA has over half of Australia's biodiversity hotspots and the South West is internationally recognised for its biodiversity. In 2008 there were 601 species listed as threatened in WA.

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is the primary agency responsible for conserving this biodiversity. DEC estimates that in 2007-08, it spent \$8.2 million directly on threatened species activities, including evaluating the conservation status of species, developing and implementing recovery plans, monitoring species, and managing data.

DEC has other areas of activity which influence the conservation of threatened species. For example, creating reserves protects threatened species' habitat. DEC's nature conservation programs can also address processes that pose risks to threatened species. DEC's programs to manage dieback and salinity are an example of this. These programs are not targeted at threatened species directly, but contribute to their conservation.

We focused on whether DEC is effectively protecting and recovering threatened species; whether it has clear strategies, plans, policies and procedures in place to support threatened species conservation activities, and whether those activities are conducted in line with relevant legislation, plans, policies and procedures. We included terrestrial threatened species and excluded marine species.

Examination conclusion...

In many areas DEC is not effectively protecting and recovering threatened species. The number of threatened species is rising and only a few species are improving. Recovery action is not happening for most threatened species. The majority of resources and effort are allocated to critically endangered species, placing vulnerable and endangered species at risk of further decline.

DEC has some successful programs to address broad scale threats to multiple species, but in other areas that underpin conservation, such as habitat protection, DEC is facing significant challenges.

DEC cannot demonstrate the overall effectiveness of its threatened species conservation activities. This limits assurance that it has effective management and conservation processes and programs to ensure the protection and recovery of WA's threatened species.

Much of DEC's threatened species activities are not enabled by existing legislation and DEC has created policies to cover these gaps. The *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* does not provide species with adequate protection.

What the examination found...

- *601 species in WA are listed as threatened with extinction and this number is increasing. Only a handful of species are improving.*
- *Only one in five threatened fauna and less than half of threatened flora have a recovery plan, while full implementation of the plans that are in place often does not occur. Without a recovery plan, the needs of threatened species may not be identified and addressed.*
- *Multi-species approaches to conservation are an effective response to the growing number of threatened species. DEC has a number of multi-species programs.*
- *Creating reserves is a key habitat conservation mechanism, but less than half the amount of land agreed under the national target has been reserved in WA. On average, it takes a decade for acquired land to become a reserve.*
- *DEC cannot demonstrate the effectiveness of its threatened species conservation activities for all threatened species.*
- *Since 1987 DEC and its predecessor agencies have sought to replace the 1950 Wildlife Conservation Act with new legislation that would provide greater support for conserving biodiversity.*

What the examination recommended...

DEC should:

- consider changing how it prioritises species for conservation attention to ensure existing resources are used to maximum long-term effect
- continue to identify and acquire land of conservation value and work with other agencies to achieve reservation more quickly
- implement an evaluation framework and supporting systems to assist in measuring threatened species conservation effectiveness
- continue its efforts to replace the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* with a new Biodiversity Conservation Act.

**A copy of the report can be accessed at www.audit.wa.gov.au
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