

# The Woodlands Declaration

**An open letter to Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett  
and  
Western Australian Environment Minister Donna Faragher**

**20<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

We, the undersigned Australian and international scientists, write to you concerning the future of the Great Western Woodlands. Securing long term conservation is essential for this internationally important and biologically rich landscape.

We endorse the leadership that your Government has already shown in committing to develop a conservation strategy for the region. We encourage you to implement an effective on-ground strategy for the Great Western Woodlands as rapidly as possible.

From the Rabbit-proof Fence, east to the plains of the Nullabor, this intact and healthy landscape is of global ecological significance. An area nearly three times the size of Tasmania, this 16 million hectare region is a mosaic of temperate eucalypt woodland, heathland and mallee vegetation.

It is the largest remaining temperate woodland of its type on Earth. Once widespread in other continents, Mediterranean-climate woodlands and shrublands have become highly fragmented and degraded through clearing for agriculture and urbanization. Less than 3% of this ecosystem is formally protected worldwide<sup>1</sup>. As a consequence, protecting this type of ecosystem is a high national and global priority for biodiversity conservation<sup>2</sup>.

Thousands of native species live in the Great Western Woodlands, many of them largely or totally restricted to the region. It forms the largest remaining area of bushland in the south-west botanical region, a region of global 'mega-diversity'<sup>3</sup>. The Western Australian Herbarium has records of over 4200 plants from the woodlands. This is more than 20% of Australia's plants in an area of less than 2% of the nation<sup>4</sup>.

In Australia, over 85% of temperate woodlands have been cleared since European settlement. The remaining areas outside the Great Western Woodlands are considerably degraded. This habitat loss and fragmentation has caused accelerating extinctions amongst wildlife<sup>5</sup>. Wildlife such as the Regent Parrot, Crested Bellbird and Carpet Python, are now regionally extinct over much former habitat across Australia. Fortunately, these and many other species remain common in the extensive, intact habitat of the Great Western Woodlands<sup>6</sup>.

The woodland component of the region is globally unique. No other area of similar rainfall in the world supports woodland vegetation with trees of such size<sup>7</sup>. However, due to the low rainfall, these mature woodlands are slow growing and can take at least 300 years to develop.

Trees and soils provide a major bank of carbon in the Great Western Woodlands. An estimated 950 million tonnes of carbon are stored in the soils, six times Australia's greenhouse emissions. If the woodlands are allowed to mature, free from uncontrolled wildfires and other disturbances, the region has the potential to store an additional 600 million tonnes<sup>8</sup>.

The region is exceptional in that it has remained relatively undisturbed, intact and in good ecological health since European settlement. However, it is now threatened by altered fire regimes, and the spread of noxious invasive weeds and feral animals<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the accumulated effects of road construction, mining exploration, mining and logging will cause ecological fragmentation of the region, compromising its now unique ecological integrity.

Protecting the Great Western Woodlands provides a rare opportunity to invert the usual approach to conservation in Australia. Instead of conserving biodiversity in isolated conservation parks, within a landscape dominated by human use, we can support sensitively-designed human use within a healthy landscape dedicated to conservation.

We recognise that the region is of great social, cultural and economic importance to its traditional owners, to all the people of the region, all Western Australians, and the nation as a whole. It is a major, active mining province, has significant pastoral holdings and supports a range of other industries. We know that its residents value the beauty and nature of the woodlands.

With good policy and strong management we believe that the future of these industries, and related economic development, can be compatible with the long term conservation of this globally significant region.

Protecting the Great Western Woodlands is of international importance. We understand that your Government is currently finalising a conservation plan for the region.

Appropriate protective tenures and effective land management are needed to secure the biodiversity, ecological integrity, carbon stocks and the other social and economic values of the entirety of this extraordinary landscape. Protecting and managing the Great Western Woodlands as a whole and intact functioning landscape would be a world leading, innovative, conservation solution.

We urge you to act decisively.



**Dr Denis A Saunders AM.**

President of WWF-Australia, Member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. Ecologist and conservation biologist with more than 30 years of experience of the fauna of the south west of Western Australia.



**Professor Stephen D. Hopper**

Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England, the world's leading botanical garden. Fellow of the Linnean Society. Former Director of Kings Park and Botanic Garden in Perth. Botanist and conservation biologist with more than 30 years experience of the flora of the south-west of Western Australia.

***For and on behalf of the biological experts on the attached list who have expertise on the ecology of the temperate woodlands, and who are signatories of the Woodlands Declaration.***

**Professor Andrew Bennett**, Professor of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University.

**Professor Hugh A Ford**, Professor of Zoology, University of New England, Armidale.

**Professor Stephen Garnett**, Director, School for Environmental Research, Charles Darwin University.

**Professor Richard Hobbs**, Australian Laureate Fellow, University of Western Australia

**Professor Chris Johnson**, School of Marine and Tropical Biology, James Cook University.

**Professor David Lindenmayer**, Professor of Ecology and Conservation Science, ANU.

**Professor Jonathan Majer**, Head of Department of Environmental Biology, Curtin University.

**Professor Ralph MacNally**, Director of Australian Centre for Biodiversity, Monash University.

**Assistant Professor Pieter Poot**, Lecturer in Plant Conservation Biology, School of Plant Biology, University of Western Australia.

**Professor Hugh Possingham**, Director of the Ecology Centre, University of Queensland.

**Professor Philip Rundel**, Distinguished Professor of Biology, University of California United States of America.

**Professor Michael Soule**, Emeritus, University of California, United States of America.

**Ms. Christine Adams-Hosking**, PhD student, Centre for Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Science, University of Queensland.

**Ms. Margarita Arianoutsou**, Faculty of Biology, Department of Ecology and Systematics, University of Athens, Greece.

**Dr. Sandra Berry**, Vegetation ecologist, Visiting Fellow, The Australian National University.

**Ms. Alice Blackwood**, Research Assistant, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales

**Dr. Michiala Bowen**, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, The University of Queensland.

**Mr. Keith Bradby**, Director, Gondwana Link Ltd.

**Dr. Susan Campbell**, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Melbourne.

**Dr. Viki Cramer**, Assistant Research Professor, School of Plant Biology, University of Western Australia.

**Dr. Paul Caplat**, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, The Ecology Centre, The University of Queensland.

**Ms. Paula Deegan**, Senior Research Associate University of Queensland.

**Ms. Susie Duncan**, Ecological Consultant.

**Dr. Eddie van Etten**, Senior Lecturer, Environmental Management, Edith Cowan University.

**Ms. Megan Evans**, Research Assistant, The Ecology Centre, The University of Queensland.

**Dr James Fitzsimons**, Conservation Manager (Australia Program), The Nature Conservancy.

**Dr. David Freudenberger**, Director of Science and Major Projects, Greening Australia

**Dr Carl Gosper**, Fire Ecology Research Scientist, Western Australia.

**Ms. Christine Hay**, Consulting Botanist..

**Mr Dean Ingwersen**, Woodland Birds for Biodiversity Officer, Birds Australia.

**Dr. Liana Joseph**, Post-doctoral Fellow, University of Queensland.

**Dr Heather Keith**, Ecologist, The Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University.

**Mrs. Carissa Klein**, Ph.D. Student, Conservation Planning, Ecology Centre, University of Queensland.

**Ms. Anya Lam**, Environmental Officer, WA Department of Water.

**Dr. Robert Lambeck**, Landscape Ecologist, University of WA School of Plant Biology.

**Dr. Ian Lunt**, Associate Professor, Institute for Land, Water & Society, Charles Sturt University.

**Dr. Nicola Markus**, Chief Conservation Officer, Bush Heritage Australia.

**Dr. Martine Maron**, Lecturer in Environmental Management, University of Queensland.

**Mr. Gary McMahon**, Principal Consultant, Ecosystem Solutions Pty Ltd

**Dr. Lucy Nairn**, Research Fellow, Australian Wetlands & Rivers Centre, University New South Wales.

**Mr. James O'Connor**, Research Manager, Birds Australia.

**Ms. Allison O'Donnell**, PhD student in bushfire ecology, University of Western Australia.

**Dr. Alex Petrie**, Conservation Veterinarian.

**Dr. Suzanne Prober**, Woodland Ecologist, Western Australia.

**Dr. Jim Radford**, Ecologist, Bush Heritage, Australia.

**Dr. Doug Robinson**, Conservation Biologist

**Ms. Kate Schindal**, Former Special Projects Officer, Gondwana Link.

**Dr. Rachel Standish**, Research Assistant Professor, School of Plant Biology, University of Western Australia.

**Dr. Judit Szabo**, Research Fellow, The Ecology Centre, University of Queensland

**Dr. Graham Thompson**, Centre for Ecosystem Management, Edith Cowan University.

**Mr. Charlie Thorn**, Director, Australian Sustainable Development Institute.

**Dr. Barry Traill**, Director, Wild Australia Program, Pew Environment Group.

**Ms. Ayesha Tulloch**, Ph.D. Student, The Ecology Centre, University of Queensland.

**Dr. Alexander Watson**, Consulting Wildlife Ecologist.

**Dr. James Watson**, Senior Research Fellow, University of Queensland.

**Dr. Kerrie Wilson**, Senior Lecturer, School of Biological Sciences, University of Queensland.

## References

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