Biodiversity Act 2024 – Discussion and Comments by Joan Gibbs & Terry Reardon

February 12, 2024

The following comments are intended to support the SA Government to draft a Biodiversity Act that will achieve real outcomes to save and restore Biodiversity values on South Australian lands under both public and private ownership. Pre-existing acts for public lands have attempted to protect flora and fauna, water and soils, but they are inadequate for stemming the rising tide of extinctions and ecosystem collapse. This discussion is an opportunity to make serious changes in attitudes of Society and Industry toward saving the future for a liveable planet, thus avoiding economic and systems collapse predicted (World Economic Forum 2024; Independent Review of the EPBC Act – Final Report 2020).

We appreciate this opportunity to give input and would follow up on any actions suggested. We also appreciate that DEW cannot make this act effective with the present low staffing, absent funding and lack of support by key Ministers, influential developers and past Parliaments that have previously prioritised the industrial economy at the expense of environment. The new Act must be above politics and private gain, to facilitate resilient and viable ecosystems that can accommodate **respectful** Human activity (*First Knowledges Series*, M. Neale).

A Biodiversity Act should delineate the actions necessary for these purposes:

1. Assess and properly monitor the current **state of Biodiversity and Human impacts on Nature**. The SOE reporting does not adequately explain how & why ecosystems are collapsing and how to stop the degradation, so we need to monitor the key trends that indicate where we should place resources in the short term, medium term and long term. All reports say this monitoring is URGENT.
2. Educate the public about **what actions can be taken by everyone** to improve the State of the Environment to achieve real targets for Biodiversity restoration in South Australia. Since about 70% of the landscape is in private ownership, landowners can potentially achieve more than government can on the 30% of already protected government land. Government managed land (Conservation Parks, SA Water, Forestry SA) is significantly under-resourced for biodiversity monitoring.
3. Incorporate the teachings of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) by Aboriginal Clan Groups for the local care and management of ecosystems in a **two-way Learning on Country,** incorporating Landcare SA and government departments for land use and environmental care. Give respect and space for the genuine cultural leaders who pass forward the traditional stories that interpret instructions for the care of land and local totemic species.
4. Provide for equal opportunities for all SA cultures and politics to be involved in building legislation that ensures the perpetuation of Humans to live within **the rules of healthy, functional ecosystems**.
5. Demonstrate **how the Biodiversity Act will interact with all other acts** to modify how the present culture of exploitation and decline must change to accommodate a new culture of working with Nature for future, regenerative economies and professions. The Biodiversity Act must not be superseded by other acts, e.g. CFS, Mining, Planning, Infrastructure, Forestry, Water, Agriculture. No amount of compensation or offsets should allow degradation of any functional ecosystems or remnants.

6. Make a **future plan of action for Biodiversity Restoration** firstly for critical or threatened ecosystems, especially those that support threatened species and indicators of healthy biodiversity. Financing the activities will be an investment for future survival of key species, which will lead to debate on how to value and pay for BR in the correct way.

To achieve the above purposes, we propose the following actions and structures, by legislation:

1. Create a **SA Biodiversity Unit** to define and publicise the vision to identify, protect, regulate and restore South Australian ecosystems: Arid Lands, Mallee, Forests & Woodlands, Coastal, Riparian, Heathlands, Wetlands and Urban. This Unit would take the SOE reports and work out solutions to address the threats, obstacles and mistakes causing environmental degradation and give instructions to society for preventing and correcting ecosystem loss and for repaying the Ecological Debt of the past culture.
2. Provide **Incentives and Partnerships** for Nature that will enable landholders, community groups and Local Governments to complete the work of linking up isolated, remnant ecosystems in a network of strategic, cooperative corridors, statewide, with a focus on cultural and ecological indicators like flagship species, Songlines, vulnerable habitats and future species after Climate Change.
3. Invent a **Central Information Hub** to cross-share openly the databases of BDBSA (BioDataSA), TERN, NatureMaps, SA Museum, publications, journals, grey literature and to make a place for community knowledge-sharing. Community groups would be inspired by information, resources, guidelines and directions for restoring Biodiversity, based on knowledge and understanding of protected Reference Ecosystems. Novel Ecosystems (R. Hobbs) must be derived from knowledge of past ecosystems, in order to create future, resilient systems.
4. Establish the **SA Environmental Defenders Office** with legal powers to clearly specify the non-negotiable protection of Biodiversity and sites of functioning ecosystems. Define violations and penalties that DO NOT ALLOW leeway for offsets, remediation after destruction, community service, replacements or alternative compensation, on the basis that many ecosystems or extinctions cannot be recovered or replaced. We are able to quantify the significance of the current loss of genetic diversity, so the EU has declared crimes against Biodiversity are punishable, requiring restoration. Punitive measures should be judged by the long-term threats to future biodiversity, genetic material and resilience of ecosystems.
5. Fund an **Institute of Ecological Restoration** that supports the science and practice of ecosystem renewal according to the principles of SERA (Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia). The regeneration of landscapes will depend on the most effective and economical ways to achieve the target ecosystems in the shortest time possible. The Institute should include research and practices of: regenerative farming, toxic land reclamation, minesite replacement, urban wilding, carbon-debt correction, *Novel Ecosystems* (R. Hobbs) and landholder guidance.

With great respect for the job ahead, we look forward to the next DRAFT for comment. Thank you.

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