DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT

POLICY STATEMENT NO. 50

SETTING PRIORITIES FOR THE CONSERVATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S THREATENED FLORA AND FAUNA

This Policy should be read in conjunction with Policy Statements No. 9 (Conservation of threatened flora in the wild), 29 (Translocation of threatened flora and fauna), 33 (Conservation of endangered and specially protected fauna in the wild) and 44 (Wildlife Management Programs).

1. OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE

To ensure that conservation resources are allocated on a priority basis to the most threatened taxa of plants and animals.

2. DEFINITIONS

In this Policy Statement:

"Conservation Dependent" means taxa that are not Critical, Endangered or Vulnerable, but which are the focus of continuing conservation management, the cessation of which would result in the taxon qualifying for threatened status.

"Critical" means taxa that are facing extremely high probability of extinction in the wild in the immediate future and in need of immediate research and/or management actions.

"Endangered" means taxa that are not Critical but are facing a very high probability of extinction in the near future and in need of urgent research and/or management actions.

"Susceptible" means taxa that are of concern because their range area is restricted (typically less than 100 km^2) and/or they are found at few locations, rendering them prone to the effects of human activities or to introduced plants, animals or diseases.

"Taxon" (plural taxa) is a term for any classificatory group of organisms such as families, genera or species. When referring to threatened species, taxon implies either a formally described species, subspecies or variety, or an undescribed entity of uncertain status.

"Threatened taxon" means any extant animal taxon declared under Section 14(2)(ba) or any extant plant taxon declared under Section 23F(2) of the *Wildlife Conservation Act* as "likely to become extinct or is rare". Threatened encompasses the terms critical, endangered, vulnerable and susceptible.

"Vulnerable" means taxa that are not Critical or Endangered but are facing a high probability of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future and are in need of research and monitoring.

3. BACKGROUND

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has statutory responsibilities for ensuring the survival of Western Australia's plant and animal taxa and of the ecological communities they form. The Department's effectiveness in fulfilling this task will depend to a large degree on its ability to direct its expertise and resources and marshal other resources to those species and communities that are most threatened with extinction.

Since Europeans settled Western Australia there has been a significant loss of indigenous species. As well, many natural ecological communities have disappeared or have been significantly degraded. While we can regret that species and communities were lost, it is of no value to attribute blame for these events; effectively they resulted from the actions of society as a whole. We must now learn lessons from the past and look to the future.

It is clear that many species and communities are currently threatened and in recent years there has been much scientific research aimed at clarifying conservation status and prescribing remedial action.

Biodiversity is essential to the ecological stability of the Earth, and should be maintained. In our comparatively wealthy society, we should be able to maintain almost all existing biodiversity. As a result of the introduction of many plants and animals, Australia's biodiversity is, in some places, probably higher now than it was 200 years ago; however, these introduced species have often caused a loss of indigenous species at both local and national levels. The loss of many endemic species has meant that our contribution to global biodiversity has decreased

The goal of biodiversity conservation is to conserve all three levels of biodiversity: ecosystem diversity, species diversity and genetic diversity.

While it will not be possible to document and manage, on an individual taxon basis, all the biodiversity that exists among the non-vascular plants (e.g. the many thousands of species of mycorrhizae) and invertebrates (it has been estimated that over 95% of all living taxa are invertebrates), we should aim to conserve all taxa of vascular plants and vertebrate animals and endeavour to conserve as many species of non-vascular plants, invertebrates and micro-organisms as possible. In most cases, non-vascular plants, invertebrates and micro-organisms are best conserved by the protection and management of ecological communities in conservation reserves and on private land, but where particular taxa within these groups are identified as threatened they will be ranked and managed.

CALM has procedures in place for listing flora and fauna as threatened (see Policy Statements 9 and 33) and has many scientific research projects and management projects that are addressing the conservation of particular species or communities. This Policy Statement adopts a system for setting priorities for the management of threatened species and lays down procedures to ensure that resources are directed in the most efficient way to conserve threatened species. A ranking system for ecological communities will be developed in the future.

It is important to note that there is not, and probably never will be, a perfect system for ranking threatened taxa. The system adopted here is designed to be simple and the resulting rankings easily grouped into readily understood categories. The rankings are modifiable as necessary according to scientific, social, and political priorities.

It should be emphasised that the scoring system is affected by current successful management actions, and to some extent, scientific knowledge. Animal and plant species whose biology and ecology are well understood and are being successfully managed by CALM (often in conjunction with other agencies and individuals) tend to score lower than those for which few data and/or management actions exist. The score sheet and resulting rankings produce priorities for future allocation of resources; comparatively low scores for currently-managed species such as the Numbat, Noisy Scrub-bird and Rose Mallee will not necessarily mean that resources currently allocated to their management should be removed - reallocation could mean that such species will immediately start to increase in rank, i.e., they will become more threatened with extinction.

This Policy completes Strategy 5.1 of Policy Statement No. 44.

4. POLICY

The Department will:

4.1 At least every two years, rank threatened taxa according to the procedures laid down in this Policy Statement.

4.2 Ensure that all taxa identified as Critical are conserved, through the preparation and implementation of Recovery Plans or Interim Wildlife Management Guidelines (see Policy Statement No. 44) and that taxa identified as Endangered and Vulnerable are allocated research and management resources in priority order.

4.3 Ensure that conservation action for taxa identified as Critical commences as soon as possible and always within one year of endorsement of that rank by the Minister.

5. STRATEGIES

To accomplish the above objective and policies, the Department will:

5.1 Set up a Ranking Panel consisting of six to ten scientists, from CALM or other organisations as appropriate, with a wide knowledge of the conservation status of the Western Australian fauna and flora. Each threatened taxon will be scored using a scoring sheet; the current one is provided at Appendix 1. The Panel will then review the scores by asking questions such as:

   (i)   Is there a single over-riding threat, e.g., *Phytophthora*, predation or habitat destruction, that is likely to lead to the early extinction of the taxon? If so, the score will be compared with those of other taxa, and increased in rank as appropriate.

   (ii)   Is the taxon rare and geographically restricted, but not subject to immediate threats? If so, the score will be compared with those of other taxa, and decreased in rank as appropriate.

   (iii) Does the taxon exist only in small remnant(s) with no suitable habitat elsewhere? If so, the score will be compared with those of other taxa, and increased in rank as appropriate.

(iv)   Does the taxon have a high degree of habitat specificity and is that habitat rare or threatened? If so, the score will be compared with those of other taxa, and increased in rank as appropriate.

The Panel will then allocate all declared threatened taxa with populations known to occur in Western Australia to the following categories, using the scores and the draft IUCN criteria (Appendix 2) as guidelines: Critical (CR), Endangered (EN), Vulnerable (VU), Susceptible (SU) and Conservation Dependent (CD).

5.2   For those Western Australian taxa categorised as Critical or Endangered, list and prioritise for conservation action each known population.

5.3   Forward the rankings allocated by the Panel to CALM's Corporate Executive for endorsement and then to the Minister for approval.

5.4   Immediately rank any presumed extinct taxa that are rediscovered.

5.5   Review all rankings at least every two years.

5.6   Prepare Recovery Plans or Interim Wildlife Management Guidelines for all taxa ranked as Critical and for as many taxa ranked as Endangered as resources permit.

5.7   Annually review resource allocation in CALM to threatened species and communities and ensure changes as appropriate.

5.8   Ensure that applications by CALM for external funding for research into or management of threatened taxa are in accordance with determined priorities.

5.9   Monitor the development of internationally accepted criteria for listing threatened species and modify the method of allocating species to categories as necessary once IUCN adopts a new system.

5.10 Revise the score sheet and ranking system described herein if experience suggests it can be improved.

5.11 Disseminate information concerning the ranking of taxa and about the conservation actions being undertaken to conserve threatened species.

Syd Shea
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Distribution Lists: A, B, D, E & L