

Meeting communiqué February 2019



Advisory Committees for the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area

CONTEXT

The Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area is a serial cross-jurisdictional property consisting of some 40 reserves across northeast New South Wales and southeast Queensland including the iconic Lamington, Springbrook, Main Range, Mount Barney, Border Ranges, Wollumbin, Nightcap, Washpool, Gibraltar Range, Dorrigo, New England, Oxley Wild Rivers and Barrington Tops National Parks.

Inscribed on the World Heritage list for outstanding universal natural value, it contains remnants of the rainforests that once covered the supercontinent of Gondwana. The area now contains endemic relict species found nowhere else in the world and closely related to those in the fossil record from millions of years ago. The dramatic landscapes tell the story of the development of the continent, including the Tweed Shield volcano, which is the best-developed erosion caldera in the world. The diversity of habitats and ancient species mixing with those newly evolved, makes this area one of Australia's biodiversity hot-spots containing some of the most important habitats for species of Outstanding Universal Value for conservation and science.

The Gondwana Rainforests Advisory Committees are appointed by the NSW and Queensland environment ministers to provide advice to the ministers and managing agencies on the protection and management of the World Heritage property. The chairs of the Advisory Committees are jointly appointed by the NSW, Queensland and Australian Government environment ministers. There are two Advisory Committees: a Community Advisory Committee appointed to provide advice on the protection and management of the property from the viewpoint of the community, and a Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee appointed to provide scientific advice for conservation management of the property, including advice on research and monitoring.

A joint meeting of the Gondwana Rainforests Advisory Committees was held in Brisbane on Thursday 21 and Friday 22 February 2019. The adaptive management of the Gondwana Rainforests to ensure World Heritage obligations are met continues to be the focus of the committees. The following key matters considered at this meeting were climate change adaptation planning and the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property from the potential impacts of increasing visitation and commercial development.

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION PLANNING

Presentations

Mandy Hopkins, Knowledge Broker, CSIRO, provided an update on the project underway by the **Earth Systems and Climate Change Hub** (ESCCCH) of the National Environmental Science Program (NESP). This project has identified climate information and projections that will assist in undertaking climate change impact assessments of cool temperate rainforests in the World Heritage Area. Further studies are

proposed to evaluate climate projections and develop a greater understanding of projected moisture inputs from cloud and mist.

Moira Rice, Queensland Department of Environment and Science, provided an update on the intent and options for progressing work for climate change adaptation planning for the Queensland section of the Gondwana Rainforests under the **Queensland Biodiversity and Ecosystems Sector Adaptation Plan**. Main Range National Park will be used as a case study for communicating climate projections to managers and the community, ahead of developing adaptation plans.

Polly Mitchell, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, provided background to the **NPWS climate change adaptation pathways tool**, which was developed as part of the National Parks Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. The adaptation pathways tool uses systems thinking to identify on-ground actions and research needs. Advisory Committee members and attendees from the managing agencies developed draft adaptation pathways for key Gondwana Rainforests values, which had been identified by the Advisory Committees Climate Change Working Group, led by Dr Melinda Laidlaw, Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee.

Jon Day, James Cook University, and Scott Heron, US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, presented their work on the **Climate Vulnerability Index**, a risk assessment tool which has been applied in Shark Bay World Heritage Area and is being promoted as a tool for potential use in all Australian World Heritage properties as well as internationally.

Advisory Committees' response and advice

The Advisory Committees:

- Were heartened to see climate change impact assessment and adaptation planning being undertaken across all three jurisdictions
- Commended the managing agencies for their cooperative approach in seeking opportunities to collaborate and avoid duplication
- Encourage the ESCCH to provide advice on the best available projections for use in climate change impact assessments for the Gondwana Rainforests
- Acknowledge the work of NSW and Queensland managing agencies and appreciated the expertise of the various biodiversity management experts to workshop climate change adaptation pathways for the property
- Commend the NPWS climate change adaptation pathways tool for climate change adaptation planning
- Recommend the development of specific adaptation pathways for the World Heritage values of the Gondwana Rainforests
- Commend the managing agencies' planned climate change communications strategies and recommend the development of a specific, whole-of-property, climate change communication strategy for the Gondwana Rainforests, with coordination and delivery of key messages across the property
- Warn that climate change presents significant immediate risk to the Outstanding Universal Value of the property and recommend the allocation of resources to undertake further assessment and planning to ensure World Heritage obligations continue to be met.
- Noted a range of views about the value of the Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI), including the likelihood that every natural heritage property will come out with high risk ratings. However, a trial of the CVI in the serial cross-jurisdictional Gondwana Rainforests would be a useful test of its utility and would assist the IUCN in undertaking comparative analyses of climate risk in World Heritage Areas globally.

VISITATION AND TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

- Barbara Webster, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, presented on the **Tweed Hinterland Walks** project. The Advisory Committees appreciated the comprehensive nature of the NPWS process in developing the Tweed Hinterland Walk, with strong community engagement. The Advisory Committees can provide advice on risk and protection of OUV in the development of the Masterplan and Environmental impact Assessments, if required.
- The Advisory Committees' **Scenic Rim Trail** Working Group, led by Mr Paul Donatiu, gave an update on the current approval for the development under the EPBC Act and raised discussion points for consideration by the Advisory Committees. There is continuing community concern about several aspects of the Scenic Rim Trail development, particularly in the light of the precedent that this development sets. Concerns which have not been addressed by the documentation and planning to date include:
 - The outstanding universal value of the property does not appear to have been explicitly considered in the assessment process, apart from the assessment of threatened species impacts;
 - the ability of the proponent to comply with their own consent conditions is questionable, given the flaws in the preliminary reports (including lack of baseline data for vegetation condition and threatened species populations);
 - the hygiene consent conditions currently apply only to walkers being guided by the proponent, the consent conditions are silent on the requirements for vehicles and on other users of the facilities.
- The Community Advisory Committee is seeking a Statement of Reasons from the Department of Energy and the Environment, ahead of further consideration of these issues.
- An Advisory Committees working group is seeking to develop generic guidelines to assist the Advisory Committees in their deliberations when reviewing **ecotourism proposals** in the Gondwana Rainforests.
- It is strongly recommended that the agencies develop a **Gondwana Rainforests Tourism Masterplan** as a matter of urgency, to maximise opportunities for world-class visitor experiences while ensuring no incremental loss of heritage values.

IUCN WORLD HERITAGE OUTLOOK REPORT

A working group, led by Professor Michael Mahony, has identified numerous papers that would inform the most recent and future **IUCN Outlook assessments** of the Gondwana Rainforests, and is working to update existing information in the report for provision to the ministers and managing agencies. The Advisory Committees recommend additional resources to support the required research and monitoring gaps highlighted in successive Outlook reports and periodic monitoring of the property, as well as the collation of the existing information identified by the working group in an accessible database.

RESEARCH AND MONITORING

Dr Eren Turak, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, provided an update on the development of a **framework for monitoring the OUV of the Gondwana Rainforests**, including recommendations for projects to obtain and collate the necessary data. The research and monitoring working group, led by Professor Nick Reid, will be reviewing these proposals ahead of the next meeting in June 2019.

CLOSING REMARKS

The Advisory Committees are pleased to support the continued efforts of the New South Wales, Queensland and Australian Governments to transmit the Outstanding Universal Value of the Gondwana Rainforests to future generations. As chairs we wish to:

- **Acknowledge** the attendance of agency observers and convey our appreciation for their assistance to the work of the Advisory Committees through their sharing of information and expertise.
- **Commend** the Executive Officer for organising such a large, complex and successful meeting. Her capability and commitment are highly valued.
- **Commend** the work of all members for sharing their expertise, knowledge and skills, and particularly wish to acknowledge the work completed by the working groups, who are investing significant time and energy to prepare advice to the ministers on key issues relevant to the protection and management of the OUV of the World Heritage Area.

Sincerely,

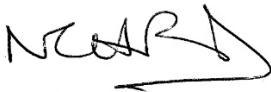


Dr Mahri Koch

Chair, Community Advisory Committee

02 6734 4257

kochmahri@gmail.com



Professor Nick C. H. Reid

Chair, Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee

W: 02 6773 2759/M: 0428 711 360

nrei3@une.edu.au