

Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ)

POLICY STATEMENT CONSERVATION OF NATIVE VEGETATION

This is a policy statement on Conservation of Native Vegetation adopted by the Council of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand, 9 February 2000

Background

Since the arrival of Europeans in Australia, almost 70% of all native vegetation has been removed or substantially modified (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996). Australia continues to clear substantial tracts of native vegetation, including some of the most fertile areas, to make way for urban development, agriculture, forestry and infrastructure. Current estimates are that between 400,000 and 600,000 hectares are cleared annually in Australia (Carmody 1998: National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Committee 1998) and in some agricultural areas, less than 10% of native vegetation remains (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996). Some old growth forests continue to be logged despite research showing that this practice is not sustainable (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996) and some ecosystems such as the grassy white box woodlands have been almost entirely eliminated (0.01% remains) (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996).

The importance of in-situ vegetation for maintenance of biodiversity is recognised in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and in the National Biodiversity Strategy. In addition the role of vegetation as a carbon sink is an integral part of the National Greenhouse Gas Strategy. Undisturbed native vegetation can also have important values in terms of catchment protection, recreation, wildlife and landscape. However, despite land clearance being known to have a detrimental effect on soil and water quality, broadscale clearance continues. The CBD is perhaps one of the most important conventions to guide Australia towards an ecologically sustainable future. Whilst the nation's protected areas network plays a major role in protecting biological diversity, only 11% of native forests are in conservation reserves (Bureau of Resource Sciences 1998) and native vegetation on more productive soil continues to be threatened by clearing for agriculture and urban development.

There is widespread recognition in scientific circles that native vegetation outside protected areas must be conserved and managed in a way that supports the role of protected areas. This applies to both public and private lands. Broadscale native vegetation clearance can have irreversible impacts on the viability of ecosystems within bioregions, potentially compromising the maintenance of biodiversity.

Policy of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ)

The EIANZ is of the view that native vegetation retention and revegetation initiatives should receive the full support of Government at all levels.

The EIANZ advocates the application of legislative controls to ensure that clearance of native vegetation is regulated by Government. The EIANZ takes the position that incentives such as rate relief should be available to private landholders to retain

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native vegetation intact as a contribution to maintenance of biodiversity, catchment protection and scenic landscapes.

The EIANZ is of the view that Government at all levels has a clear role in ensuring that further clearance of native vegetation on public land only proceeds when cost-benefit analysis demonstrates a net benefit to the regional community (including assessment of economic, social, cultural, biophysical and environmental costs and impacts).

The EIANZ believes regional vegetation plans should be prepared where catchment and property management plans are absent. Such plans should be based on scientific assessment and mapping of the presence, distribution and abundance of species composition and condition of native plants.

The EIANZ opposes the clearing of native vegetation communities containing rare and threatened species.

The EIANZ is of the opinion that native vegetation clearance on all tenures should be subject to public scrutiny and appropriate controls. The attitude of 'Freeholders Rights prevail over all else' is now dated as we take a more holistic approach to management of the nation's natural resources. Where there is community consensus that clearance of native vegetation on private land should be constrained for the public good, it is appropriate that some recompense is made to the landholder. More positively, incentives, such as rate relief and subsidised fencing, should be available nationally to secure retention of native vegetation. This should encourage more landholders to place conservation covenants on their title.

References

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Adopted by the Council on 9 February 2000