THE CONVERSATION
AU
AU UK beta

24 May 2013, 6.34am EST

Our national parks must be more than playgrounds or paddocks


Euan Ritchie
Lecturer in ecology at Deakin University


Bill Laurance
Distinguished research professor and Australian Laureate at James Cook University


Corey Bradshaw
Director, Ecological Modelling at University of Adelaide


David M Watson
Associate Professor in Ecology at Charles Sturt University


Emma Johnston
Associate Professor of Marine Ecology and Ecotoxicology at University of New South Wales


Hugh Possingham
Director ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions at University of Queensland


Ian Lunt
Associate Professor, Vegetation Ecology and Management at Charles Sturt University


Michael McCarthy
ARC Future Fellow at University of Melbourne

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Bill Laurance receives funding from the Australian Research Council and other scientific and philanthropic organisations. In addition to his appointment as Distinguished Research Professor and Australian Laureate at James Cook University in Cairns, Queensland, he also holds the Prince Bernhard Chair in International Nature Conservation at Utrecht University, Netherlands. This chair is co-sponsored by Utrecht University and WWF-Netherlands.

Corey Bradshaw receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

David M Watson receives funding from the Australian Research Council. He is affiliated with Charles Sturt University.

Emma Johnston has received research funding from the Australian Research Council, Bluescope Steel, Sydney Water, Port Kembla Port Corporation, state environment and fishery departments, and a range of other scientific and philanthropic organisations.

Hugh Possingham has received major funding (directed to The University of Queensland) from the Australian Research Council and the Australian federal environment department (DSEWPaC). He sits on the board of governors of WWF Australia and advises many other NGOs, philanthropists, governments and community groups.

Ian Lunt has received funding from the Australian Research Council and a number of government conservation agencies to assess the effects of grazing and burning regimes on biodiversity. He also provides advice on these matters to a number of scientific advisory panels to government and non-governmental agencies.

Michael McCarthy receives funding from the Australian Research Council, and state and federal environment departments.

Euan Ritchie does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

We have to get smarter about the way we manage Australia's national parks. Nic Prins

It's make or break time for Australia's national parks.

National parks on land and in the ocean are dying a death of a thousand cuts, in the form of bullets, hooks, hotels, logging concessions and grazing licences. It's been an extraordinary last few months, with various governments in eastern states proposing new uses for these critically important areas.

Australia's first "National Park", established in 1879, was akin to a glorified country club. Now called the "Royal National Park" on the outskirts of Sydney, it was created as a recreational escape for Sydney-siders, with ornamental plantations, a zoo, race courses, artillery ranges, livestock paddocks, deer farms, logging leases and mines.

Australians since realised that national parks should focus on protecting the species and natural landscapes they contain. However, we are now in danger of regressing to the misguided ideals of the 19th Century.

Parks under attack

In Victoria, new rules will allow developers to build hotels and other ventures in national parks. In New South Wales, legislation has been introduced to allow recreational shooting in national parks, and there is pressure to log these areas too.

Late last year, NSW announced a new trial to re-instate grazing in the new Millewa National Park and other reserves, following Victoria's unsuccessful attempt to allow grazing in the Alpine National Park.

And just this week, the Queensland government passed new laws that allow graziers to feed their stock in national parks during droughts.

Mutawintji National Park. Slider_1980/flickr

It's not just the land that's under assault. NSW recently lifted bans on shore-based recreational fishing in most state marine sanctuaries. Coastal marine parks in Australia are mostly young, small (particularly the sanctuary zones), and poorly resourced. But they are vital for regulating human activities and making coastal ecosystems resilient to pollution, invasive species, resource extraction and climate change.

The picture is grim and set to get worse. In Queensland and Victoria, land clearing laws (outside of national parks) are being "relaxed", with at least two major impacts. First, it will place an even higher value on our reserves, as more land is cleared and further degraded. Second, it will decrease connectivity between remaining patches of native vegetation, further threatening species that require large, connected habitats.

Set against a background of rapidly changing climates (and associated changes in storm and fire frequency, droughts and floods), many imperilled species will face range contractions at best, and full extinction at worst.

Parks already doing too little

Why should all this matter?

It's widely acknowledged that our current reserve system and efforts to conserve our native biodiversity are eminently praiseworthy, but hopelessly inadequate. Indeed, prolonged government failure to implement existing environmental laws and draw up plans for threatened species has recently resulted in court action.

The problem isn't limited to Australia. Biodiversity in many protected areas around the world is declining due to encroaching threats from surrounding areas. There is no free lunch; as parks suffer, their biodiversity suffers too.

Management interventions such as feral animal control, fire management and at times, grazing management, can be useful tools to achieve conservation goals in some circumstances. However, these need to be based on the best available ecological knowledge and practice and be aimed at conserving biodiversity. This is not the motivation for any of the recent changes.

Exploitation of our parks, without scientific evidence for positive biodiversity outcomes, will hasten losses. These areas need to be in the best shape possible to cope with the intensifying pressures imposed by a disrupted climate and likely increases in the frequency of species invasions.

Australia's rich biodiversity is one of the few things our country has that is truly, globally unique. It is worth billions of dollars to our economy, and provides crucial natural services that are not easily replaced. Beyond their value to plants and animals, our national parks, wild

places, and nature in general, are "good for us".

Litchfield National Park. Pete Hill

Desperate times call for smarter measures

To illustrate how we, and the governments representing us, are failing to make use of the best available science to aid park management, and the consequences this has, we draw attention to two issues: grazing and pest animal control.

Nobody questions the stress graziers face when their stock begins to starve as drought intensifies in parts of southern and eastern Australia. But simply opening the fences to national parks is a dangerous precedent that provides, at best, a Band-Aid solution to a recurring problem.

Moving stock from pastures to parks increases the risk of spreading weeds and further degrading natural habitats for birds and mammals, as well as sensitive water resources on which we and our livestock depend.

The current trend in drought-relief programs is helping farmers prepare for droughts. We no longer rely on emergency measures to cope with droughts that are expected and recurrent. Opening parks to grazing does not fit this model.

Australia needs to get smarter. We should do more to encourage flexibility in our agricultural and aquaculture systems. Why don't we produce animals better suited to the unique Australian conditions?

Making better use of Australian species could also help us deal with the pest animals, overabundant herbivores (goats, camels, buffalo, deer and kangaroos) and introduced predators (cats and foxes) overrunning our parks. We have been using bullets and poison for a long time, with little evidence for an overall gain. In some cases, this approach has generated new problems.

In many regions, the best available weapon to control pest animals is the dingo. Abundant research now demonstrates that dingoes strongly limit goat, kangaroo and fox populations. Dingoes are an unrelenting and ultimately free service.

Dingoes therefore provide the perfect example of how we can start making better use of our native species to protect biodiversity more broadly, build more resilient landscapes and shift our approach from the reactive, ineffective, costly and interventionist approaches we often see at present, to more proactive, longer-term, integrated and effective conservation and management solutions.

Our parks are the last vestiges of Australian nature – a final refuge for our irreplaceable biodiversity and ecosystems. A return to the outdated views of the 19th century – when parks

were little more than playgrounds for city dwellers to escape the urban *malaise* – would run counter to everything that Australians have learnt about environmental conservation in the last 150 years.

Border Ranges National Park. Michael Dawes