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WWF fires a warning shot over Australia's land-clearing record

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Eastern Australia's forests could be a hotspot for deforestation in the future - just like these forests in south east Asia. William Laurance

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When we think about global deforestation, certain hotspots spring to mind. The Amazon. The Congo. Borneo and Sumatra. And... eastern Australia?

Yes, eastern Australia is one of 11 regions highlighted in a new chapter of the [WWF Living Forests report](#), "Saving forests at risk", which identifies the world's greatest deforestation fronts – where forests are most at risk – between now and 2030.

The report uses projections of recent rates of forest loss to estimate how much we are on track to lose over the next 15 years. The estimates for eastern Australia range

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from 3 million to 6 million hectares. In particular, it points the finger of blame at recent and foreshadowed changes to environmental legislation. These changes have already removed protections for well over [a million hectares of Queensland's native vegetation](#).

The WWF scenario is, of course, just a projection. This future need not come to pass. We can decide whether or not it happens. And it turns out that Australia has already formulated an alternative vision of the future. This vision contrasts starkly with the gloomy projections in WWF's report.

Rhetoric in the right direction

[Australia's Native Vegetation Framework](#), endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in 2012, has five goals. Goal 1 is to "Increase the national extent and connectivity of native vegetation" – and according to the framework, we'll do it by 2020. This turns out to be exactly what WWF is proposing: a goal of "Zero Net Deforestation and Forest Degradation" by 2020.

This seems perfectly aligned with Australia's vision. So why is WWF putting Australia in the naughty corner?

Well, we are not yet practising what we preach. Australia's rate of vegetation clearing still dwarfs our efforts to replant and restore bushland by much more than 100,000 hectares every year. This is mostly driven by vegetation loss in Queensland. And although these rates of loss were, until recently, slowing, recent reports suggest they have rebounded sharply.

In a [recent article](#) on The Conversation, we wrote of the alarming figures suggesting large increases in land clearing, which coincided with the changes to vegetation protections under the former Newman Government in Queensland. The state's new Labor government is currently considering whether or not to revoke these changes. There have been [suggestions](#) that they may not reinstate the previous protections for native vegetation.

So to comply with our own national strategy, we have less than five years to turn around significant net deforestation, and actually start restoring more native vegetation than we clear - but the trend is in the wrong direction.

Land clearing the greatest threat

Australia's Native Vegetation Framework recognises unambiguously the importance of native vegetation. It represents a clear, government-endorsed statement that halting the loss of native bushland cover is pivotal to sound environmental management.

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Land clearing is the greatest current threat to Australia's biodiversity, and is also a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, degradation and reduced water quality in waterways and estuaries, and dryland salinity.



Black-throated finches (here in captivity) are threatened by land clearing for development in Queensland. Chris Williamson/Wikipedia, CC BY

For wildlife, land clearing means smaller and more fragmented populations, and such populations are more vulnerable to extinction.

This is basic ecology. As habitat is lost, animals don't simply move elsewhere or fly away. This solution [was suggested](#) in response to the impending loss of endangered black-throated finch habitat in Bimblebox Nature Refuge in Queensland as it is [converted to a mine](#).

But where would the finches fly to? If there is other habitat left that is suitable, then chances are it's already got its fill of finches. Simply put, less finch habitat equals fewer finches.

Even regrowth forest is critically important for many species. The iconic Brigalow woodlands of southeast Queensland can only be removed from the endangered list by protecting younger, regrowing stands.

But if allowed to mature for more than 30 years, these stands [support bird species](#) similar to those of remnant brigalow that has never been cleared. The [abundance of native reptiles is also boosted](#) by allowing brigalow regrowth to mature. In the most overcleared landscapes, regrowth vegetation contributes to the critical functions of maintaining soil integrity and even buffering against drought.



The bridled nail-tailed wallaby is one of the endangered inhabitants of Queensland's threatened brigalow woodlands. Bernard DUPONT/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Time to choose our future

Most of the nations highlighted in the WWF report, such as Papua New Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are in a starkly different economic situation to Australia. At least some deforestation will be an inevitable part of their economic and social development.

Arguably, it is the responsibility of wealthier countries to help such nations to follow more-sustainable development pathways—though we will face [many challenges in doing so](#). But should Australia, as a wealthy, developed economy, continue to rely on deforestation for our own development, [we can hardly ask differently of others](#).

It is time to think about the end-game of land clearing in Australia, and what we are willing lose along the way. If we genuinely want to achieve a reversal of deforestation by 2020, then we need to see significant policy changes. And they need to happen now—sooner rather than later.

So which future for us? Will we choose the path endorsed by Australia's Native Vegetation Strategy, with the tradeoffs it requires, but also the lasting rewards it will bring?

Or will we sacrifice environmental sustainability for short-term gains, as underscored in the alarming projections of the WWF report? These are vital decisions with starkly different futures, and we can only hope that our state and federal governments make the right choices.

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