

COMMUNITIES FOR COMMUNITIES

Issue 2: December 2005



Ecological communities and the EPBC Act

Introduction

Native bush and grasslands have both commercial and conservation value. Some of the unique plants and animals found in these areas are under threat of extinction and we need to protect them and their habitat. Loss of habitat is the main cause for plants and animals being lost from local areas. If this happens across many regions, it can lead to total and permanent extinction of these species.

One of the tools used by the Australian Government to protect native plants and animals and their habitats is the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) (EPBC Act). Under this legislation plants, animals and ecological communities threatened with extinction are identified as one of seven matters of National Environmental Significance and provided protection.

What are ecological communities?

Ecological communities are unique and naturally occurring groups of plants and animals. Their presence can be determined by factors such as soil type, position in the landscape, climate and water availability.

An example of an ecological community is the Swamp Tea Tree Forests of South-East Queensland. This forest contains Swamp Tea Tree thickets under a cover of Eucalypt trees. The Swamp Tea Tree Forests of South-East

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Queensland grow on poorly drained clay soils on the plains and low hills of the Moreton Basin.

A new approach to listing ecological communities

Defining and identifying an ecological community for listing under the EPBC Act is a complex task.

Definitions must be scientifically rigorous yet straightforward enough for the general community to use. It is especially difficult to define ecological communities that occur over large areas, exist in a range of conditions and blend with other similar ecological communities. They may also be described and mapped differently in different states, territories or regions.

To improve the clarity of definitions for listing, a new approach has been developed that takes into account the impact of degradation and regional variation in widespread ecological communities.

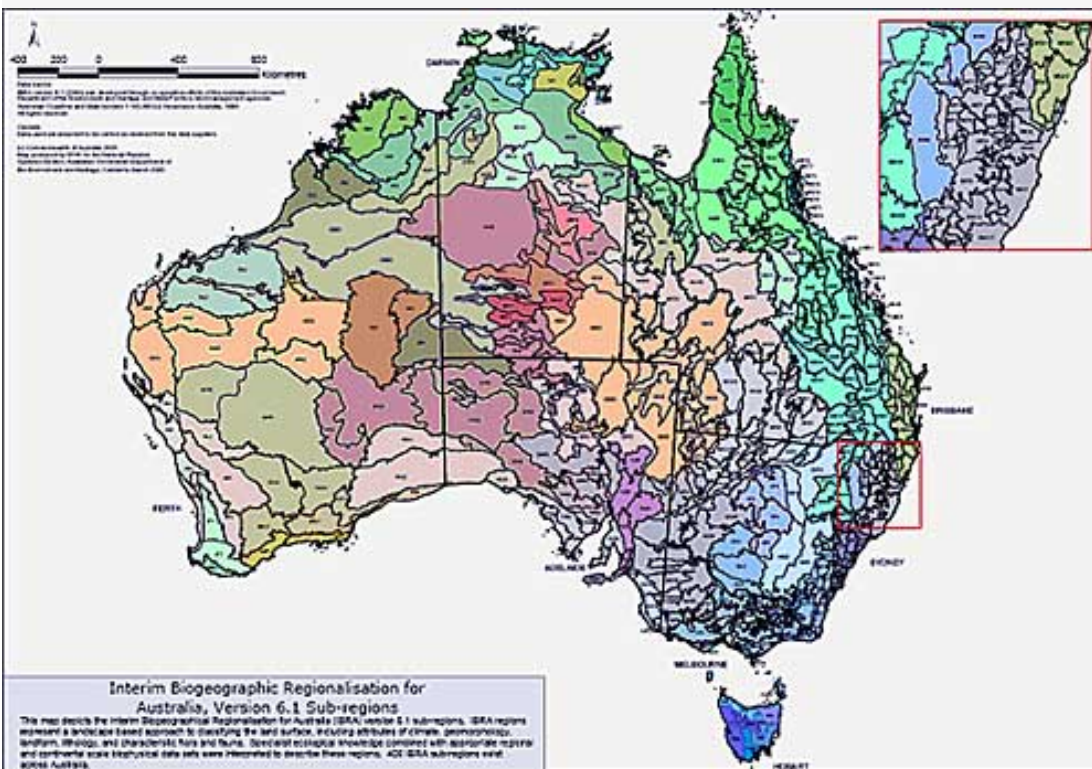
Condition Classes

Previously, definitions of threatened ecological communities were based on descriptions of the typical vegetation structure, soils, landforms and lists of characteristic plant and animal species. Consequently, listed ecological communities often included degraded remnants. The new approach will refine the definition of ecological communities through the use of condition classes.

A condition class describes areas of an ecological community that have a similar conservation value. Condition can be determined by factors such as: numbers and types of native plants and animals present; the level of weed invasion; the size of the area; and distance to the next area of native vegetation.

The new approach will only include areas of vegetation in good condition. Significantly degraded (low condition) areas will no longer be part of a listed ecological community. This means the protection provisions of the EPBC Act will focus on the areas of highest conservation value, while degraded areas, which would not trigger the 'significance test' of the EPBC Act, will be largely excluded.

While significantly degraded areas of vegetation are no longer part of a listed ecological community, this does not mean they are unimportant. Under the new approach, a second condition class has been identified that represents areas that would respond to rehabilitation efforts. As this class is not part of the listed ecological community, it does not trigger the protection provisions of the EPBC Act. However, these areas remain a focus for recovery planning and consequently land managers undertaking conservation measures to assist in the recovery of these degraded areas remain eligible for funding through programmes such as the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT).



Regionalising the Description

The definition of an ecological community can also be regionalised with the definition of the listed ecological community differing slightly for each region. This recognises that ecological communities that occur over large areas can cover a range of climatic zones and soil types, and as a result can display variation in the types of plants and animals found in them. Definitions under the new approach can capture local variations, making it easier for land managers to match the vegetation occurring on their property with the written description.

How can I tell if I have a listed ecological community on my property?

When an ecological community is listed under the EPBC Act the following information products become available on the Department's web site:

- listing advice including a definition of the ecological community
- an information sheet including an indicative map *and*
- conservation advice.

Land managers can use this information to identify the ecological community on their property.

A list of all the ecological communities currently listed under the EPBC Act can be found at www.deh.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publiclookupcommunities.pl.

Protection provisions of the EPBC Act

A land manager is obliged to seek approval for any changes that may have a significant impact on an area of a listed ecological community. This includes activities such as clearing of listed woodlands or ploughing of listed native grasslands. The process for seeking approval is through a referral. Information about the referral process is available online at www.deh.gov.au/epbc/publications/referral.html.

Summary

- An ecological community is a group of plants and animals whose presence is determined by one or more factors such as soil type and climate.
- The definition of an ecological community listed under the EPBC Act will now include information on the condition classes that make up the ecological community.
- Areas in a degraded condition will not be included as part of a listed ecological community.
- Areas of land that contain degraded examples of a listed ecological community may still be rehabilitated and land managers remain eligible to apply for NHT funding to improve the condition of this land.
- Land managers wishing to undertake activities that are likely to have a significant impact on an area of land containing a listed ecological community must seek approval from the Australian Government by making a referral under the EPBC Act.
- Land managers will not be required to seek approval under the EPBC Act for actions occurring on land containing degraded examples of a listed ecological community.

Conservation Advice

When a native species or ecological community is listed as threatened under the Australian Government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, conservation advice is developed by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee to assist in its recovery.

Conservation advice provides guidance on immediate recovery and threat abatement activities that can be undertaken. It ensures that information on newly listed species and ecological communities is readily available and can quickly be incorporated into regional plans still under development. Where recovery plans are available or under development conservation advice refers to this work.

Conservation advice includes practical on-ground activities that can be implemented by local communities, natural resource management groups or individuals such as landholders. Examples may include:

- Fencing of known sites on private property to protect the species from trampling by domestic livestock.

- Regular inspection of known sites to identify any changes in species numbers.

Conservation advice may also contain broader management actions which can be undertaken at a regional level by organisations such as local councils, government agencies or non government organisations.

Examples may include:

- Develop and implement a suitable fire management strategy for the species.
- Develop a management plan for the control and eradication of feral species in the local region.

Conservation advice for newly listed species and ecological communities can be found on the department's web site, or through the Species Profile and Threats Database.

See: _

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html>

<http://www.deh.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/sprat.pl>

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Update on ecological community listings during 2005

- *Upland Wetlands of the New England Tablelands and the Monaro Plateau*

This ecological community consists of wetlands on the New England Tablelands and Monaro Plateau that occur in depressions in the landscape, rather than being connected to rivers and streams. The Upland Wetlands can occur as near permanent, intermittent or ephemeral wetlands. This depends on a number of factors, including rainfall patterns and the depth of the depression they occur in.



Llangothlin Lagoon - Peter Flood;

Latham's Snipe - Geoffrey Dabb

The Upland Wetlands occur between 700 and 1400 m above sea level, mostly on basalt soils. They support a range of species of animals and plants, such as turtles, frogs, sedges and water plants.

The Upland Wetlands of the New England Tablelands and the Monaro Plateau were listed as endangered on 17 November 2005, as they are restricted in their distribution and are vulnerable to ongoing threats, such as draining, damming and trampling.

The New England components of this ecological community are also listed as threatened under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995*.

The priority recovery and threat abatement actions to assist in the recovery of this ecological community include:

- preventing further draining or damming
- providing alternative water sources for stock
- fencing off all or part of the wetlands to control stock access
- avoiding grazing at times of year when the ecological community, and the species it supports, are particularly vulnerable to disturbance
- create and revegetate buffer zones around the wetlands
- remove and manage weeds.

Further information on this listing can be found at the Department's web site at www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications.

Current Nominations

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/index.html>

Open for public comment

These nominations were considered by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee at its meeting in September 2005.

- [Central Gippsland Plains Grassland](#) - invitation to comment closes **Friday, 3 February 2006**
- [Forest Red Gum Grassy Woodland](#) - invitation to comment closes **Friday, 3 February 2006**
- [Temperate Lowland Plains Grassy Wetland](#) - invitation to comment closes **Friday, 3 February 2006**
- [Murray Valley Grassland of the Riverina Bioregion](#) - invitation to comment closes **Friday, 3 February 2006**.

Closed for public comment

Whilst these nominations are now formally closed for public comment late comments may be accepted.

- [Calcarene Dune Woodland of South Eastern Australia](#) – closed on **29 November 2005**
- [Mission Road Viney Hardwood Forest of Norfolk Island](#) - invitation to comment closed on **11 October**

2005.

If you would like further information on the listing of threatened species, recovery plans that are in place, and threat abatement plans for key threatening processes please have a look at the Department's web site at

- <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/nominations/index.html>
- <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery/index.html> and
- <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tap/index.html>

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The Threatened Species Scientific Committee

The [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) (EPBC Act) provides for the establishment of an independent scientific advisory body, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee. The functions of the Committee include advising the [Minister for the Environment and Heritage](#) on the amendment and updating of lists of threatened species, threatened ecological communities, and key threatening processes together with the making or adoption of recovery plans and threat abatement plans.

The Committee was formally appointed on 16 July 2000, when the EPBC Act commenced, with individual members appointed for a term of 3 years. Members are selected by the Minister for their expertise across the field of environmental management, though it was also recognised that the Committee should call on additional expert opinion as required.

The Department of the Environment and Heritage provides secretariat services for the Committee. A web page describing the Committee's role and members is available at <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/committee>.

In addition to their ongoing work programme, Committee members consider a wide range of issues. Some of the more recent highlights include:

- progressing Species Information Partnerships with states and territories by considering the conservation status of a number of species listed inconsistently under the EPBC Act and state or territory legislation; and
- determining new strategic approaches to the listing of ecological communities and recovery planning, including the development of conservation advice at the time of listing.

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Contributions from around Australia

Bush for Life 2005 Workshop Training Program

Courtesy of Threatened Species Network (SA)

The Bush For Life, Trees For Life's bush management program, helps protect important sites of remnant vegetation that are suffering from fragmentation, pressures from introduced plant and animals species and development and/or recreational impacts.

Bush For Life volunteers work on over 1,000 hectares of bushland across the greater Mt Lofty Ranges. Their efforts also help protect listed and declining plants, which rely on good quality bushland to survive across their sites.

If you are interested in spending three to four hours per month working on a Bush For Life site then book into a free one-day training workshop. The workshop introduces you to past and present vegetation conditions of South Australia, bush management techniques such as minimal disturbance weeding methods and bush regeneration principles.

Bush For Life training includes:

- Native vegetation management
- Native plant and weed identification
- Technical advice
- Action plans listing monthly activities for the Bush For Life site
- Ongoing support from a site co-ordinator



Cullen parvum (small scurf-pea) –

Lois Padgham © Threatened

Species Network SA

- Safety equipment
- Weed management tools
- Chemicals
- Application materials

Techniques and Key principles include:

- Minimal disturbance technique - Minimising and reducing the risk of further weed infestation
- Work outwards from the good native bush towards weed-infested areas - Giving native plants a better chance of regenerating and spreading
- Avoid over clearing - Minimising soil erosion and reducing additional follow-up work
- Spot Regeneration - Gently and gradually removing competition around targeted native species, allowing them room to grow, reproduce and eventually expand from that initial area
- Minimum use of herbicide - Only used in small amounts due to the techniques applied.
- Workshops are held regularly over the year, phone Trees For Life on 8372 0150 or email info@treesforlife.org.au to find out more information or book your place.

Season's Greetings

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<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/communities-newsletter/index.html>