

Australian report reveals shocking decline in environment

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**A koala is fed through a pipette after being rescued from the bushfires of 2019/2020
Animals have suffered enormously as Australia's environment has deteriorated [File: Saeed Khan/AFP]**

Canberra, July 19 (RHC)-- The state of Australia's environment is "poor and deteriorating," a new government report has found. The 2021 State of the Environment Report, a mandatory assessment conducted every five years, was released on Tuesday by the recently-elected federal Labor government. It had been received by the previous Liberal-National coalition government in December 2021 but not published.

The report is undeniably grim, with the new Minister for the Environment, Tanya Plibersek, describing the findings as “shocking” and “a story of crisis and decline.”

The report found that Australia has lost more mammal species than any other continent in the world. More than 100 Australian species have been declared extinct or extinct in the wild, including eight species of wallaby alone.

One primary cause is habitat destruction. Almost half the country is now used for grazing sheep and cattle, and about 6.1 million hectares (15 million acres) of primary forest have been cleared since 1990. These changes mean Australia has experienced the third-largest cumulative loss of organic carbon in soil, behind only China and the United States.

Many of the worst changes have occurred in the past five years, with 202 animal and plant species having been declared ‘threatened’ over this period, bringing the total to 377 species becoming threatened in the last decade alone. There are now also more introduced foreign plant species in Australia than native species.

Even species supported through focused assistance showed little improvement, and the situation is expected to worsen once the effect of the 2019-20 ‘Black Summer’ bushfires becomes better understood. The bushfires are believed to have killed or displaced as many as three billion animals.

In the water, the news is also dire. Ocean acidification is reaching a tipping point, threatening the existence of juvenile coral, with the Great Barrier Reef experiencing mass bleaching events in 2016, 2017, 2020 and this year. Sea level rise is affecting many low-lying coastal areas, including the important Kakadu wetlands in the Northern Territory. In the Murray-Darling Basin, one of Australia’s most important river basins, record low water levels were recorded in 2019.

The report, which for the first time includes an Indigenous lead writer – Terri Janke – also pays specific attention to Indigenous heritage and knowledge. It found that Indigenous heritage continues to be destroyed, such as Juukan Gorge, parts of which were blown up in 2020 by mining giant Rio Tinto to extract iron ore. This ongoing destruction is despite the clear wishes of traditional owners.

Survey after survey has shown that the Australian public wants more action on climate change. For many voters, climate change was the number one issue in May’s federal election.

A record number of Greens candidates were elected to the House of Representatives and the Senate, while the Liberal party was all but wiped out in urban strongholds by the ‘teal’ independents who campaigned strongly on climate change. Labor was therefore the only major party able to form a government.

The increase in public support for climate action, and for politicians willing to take that action, is believed to be a direct response to the extreme bushfires, floods, and storms that wide swathes of the country have experienced in recent years.

“Australia has always been a land of extreme weather and climate variability,” notes Andrew King, a senior lecturer in climate science at the University of Melbourne. “[But] human-caused climate change is causing extremes to occur more often and with more devastating impacts.

“This report should act as a wake-up call to the damage we are doing to the world around us. We must decarbonise our economy and society as rapidly as possible to try and limit the environmental losses that we will experience as we keep warming the world.”

The State of the Environment report was delivered to the previous Coalition government in December 2021, but they declined to release it ahead of the election. The new federal Labor government is

therefore keen to lay the blame at the feet of the Coalition, which had been in government since 2013.

Two of that period's three prime ministers were outright climate deniers – Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison – while the other, Malcolm Turnbull, was removed by the party because he wanted to do more on climate change.

“Sussan Ley [environment minister under the Coalition] chose to keep it hidden, locked away until after the election ... When you read it, you'll know why. But Australians deserve the truth,” Plibersek told the National Press Club following the launch.

The reality is not quite so black and white. It is true that the federal Coalition did little to improve the environment, and in several circumstances actively made the situation worse. The Coalition was committed to increased investment in coal and gas, and its plan to cut carbon emissions was largely reliant on potential future technological development.

What federal Labor wants to avoid admitting is that state and territory governments are also culpable for the declining state of the country's environment. In fact, sub-national governments in Australia have primary responsibility for environmental regulation, and the role of the federal government is limited.

Of the country's eight states and territories, Labor is in power in six, including in the mining powerhouse states of Queensland and Western Australia. In Queensland alone, Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has approved at least 18 new coal mines since being elected in 2015. This includes a 1 billion Australian dollar (\$680m) coal mine at Olive Downs, where construction began in April.

Euan Ritchie, professor of wildlife ecology and conservation at Deakin University, describes government efforts to protect the environment as an “utter failure”.

“Bushfires devastating wildlife populations, extensive, repeated coral bleaching events, ecosystems collapsing across the continent,” Ritchie lists. “These events are all symptomatic of governments and society not acting on the science and evidence.”

Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Labor aims to achieve net zero by 2050. It has a 43 percent emissions reduction target by 2030, but this is significantly below the expert-recommended target of 50 to 75 percent. Although promising to invest heavily in renewables, Labor has repeatedly stated it will continue to support the extraction and use of fossil fuels.

Scientists are keen to point out that despite the report's grim findings, there is still much the country – government and people – can do. “Every Australian has an opportunity to be on the conservation frontline: saving species in the places they live and work,” said Kylie Soanes, an urban ecologist from the University of Melbourne. She says that research has revealed a huge appetite for nature conservation in cities, but that “actions occur in isolated pockets and need more support”.

Protesters hold placards pointing to the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef and how climate change could destroy it. Climate change has contributed to a series of bleaching events at the Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest coral reef system [File: Jono Searle/EPA]

Soanes says we need “a culture shift to support cities as spaces for nature as well as people. If we want people to better support biodiversity, to really get involved in environmental issues, we need to make nature part of every Australian's everyday experience – something they can see, enjoy, and help save.”

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