



Biodiversity and local government



Local governments are at the front line when it comes to managing our natural resources. Their day to day planning decisions have a direct impact on the environment

This role is especially important in rapidly growing urban areas like the Perth Metropolitan Region. Perth's population is expected to increase by about 40 percent, or more than half a million people, in the next 25 years.

And that inevitably puts major pressures on remaining undeveloped areas in what is one of the world's most biodiverse cities.

The region is part of an international biodiversity hotspot, located in southern Western Australia. It contains declared rare flora including the King Spider Orchid, Curved-leaf Grevillea and Praying Virgin Orchid and threatened ecological communities such as the Marri-Grass Tree Woodlands on the Swan Coastal Plain. Among more than 1,500 native plant species found in the region are more familiar plants like West Australia's floral emblem, Mangles Kangaroo Paw as well as Bull's Banksia, Tuart, Marri and Jarrah. The many different plant communities in the hotspot are home to a wide range of animals like the Quokka,





Carnaby's Black Cockatoo – one 311 bird species found in the area – and 71 reptile species, including Australia's rarest tortoise the Western Swamp Tortoise. So many invertebrate species inhabit the area that some are still unnamed. The region also supports a rich marine environment, with diverse marine algae and seagrass communities.

The threats faced by these diminishing natural areas are typical of other regions within and around major cities. As well as clearing for development and the resulting fragmentation of bushlands and wetlands, there are many other pressures. These come from over-use and trampling, invasion by weeds and feral animals, erosion, firewood collection, pollution including excessive nutrients coming from fertilisers, and lack of information about what species the natural areas support and what they need.

The Perth Biodiversity Project

Local governments in the Perth Metropolitan Region manage 7,800 hectares of native vegetation and make planning decisions which affect around 75,000 hectares of natural areas in total. They have seen the pressures being put on this land and have taken steps to put biodiversity conservation on the agenda.

The Perth Biodiversity Project is a local government initiative launched in 2001. It provides technical support and information to help this sphere of government protect and manage natural areas and improve biodiversity conservation in the Perth Metropolitan Region.

The project is a partnership involving a number of different bodies led by the Western Australian Local Government Association. Key partners include the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust, the Swan Catchment Council, all 31 Perth metropolitan councils, Western Australia's Department for Planning and Infrastructure, Department of Conservation and Land Management and Department of Environment, Greening Australia WA and Birds Australia WA.

The Natural Heritage Trust supported the project's establishment in 2000-01, with funding of \$1.96 million over six years. The project is a continuing regional priority for the Swan Catchment Council.





Local biodiversity plans

Coordinated planning at a local level is critical for conserving biodiversity, especially in an area like the Perth Metropolitan Region. In 2004, the Perth Biodiversity Project made a significant contribution to achieving this with the release of the *Local Government Biodiversity Planning Guidelines*. These Guidelines have been prepared to help local governments conserve and manage bushland, wetland and other natural areas. The Guidelines contain four key elements to encourage the development of local biodiversity strategies.

1. Identifying ways of protecting local natural areas.

These include using existing mechanisms, as well as developing other innovative and proactive measures.

2. Supporting conservation on private land

Much of the local bushland, wetland and natural areas in the Perth region are privately owned and conservation is consequently heavily reliant on the actions of private landholders. In developing strategies for local biodiversity conservation, local governments therefore need to consider how incentives can be provided to private owners to conserve natural areas on their own land.



3. Conserving the bush during development

Developing local biodiversity strategies can help local government identify key natural areas and ensure that their protection is highlighted at an early stage in planning for new developments and new suburbs. Planning can then allow for the long-term ecological viability of these areas.

4. Managing natural areas

The strategies also need to help local governments find ways to better manage biodiversity on local reserves for which they are responsible and to increase their level of knowledge and skills. This will assist with regeneration projects, weed and pest control, ecological assessment and habitat protection.

To encourage local government to prepare local biodiversity strategies that meet the *Local Government Biodiversity Planning Guidelines*, the Western Australian Local Government Association has developed a series of milestones. The Perth Biodiversity Project provides local governments with support and guidance to complete these. Under the milestones, in preparing their biodiversity strategies, local governments are to:

1. Define the scope of the biodiversity conservation issue, training people to deal with it and identifying the resources required to accomplish the task.
2. Adopt objectives and targets for biodiversity conservation and its management.
3. Prepare a Local Planning Policy for biodiversity conservation.
4. Develop an incentive strategy to encourage private land conservation.
5. Prepare an action plan for managing local government reserves.
6. Formalise the protection measures in the local government planning scheme.
7. Provide the resources and make the commitment to monitoring and evaluation.

The project in action

The Perth Biodiversity Project has funded a number of activities to help local governments in the region.

The City of Wanneroo is one example of the Project in action. Located 22 kilometres north of Perth, it is one of the fastest growing local government areas in Australia with an annual growth rate of almost six percent. The population is expected to increase from 112,000 in 2005 to 147,000 by 2011. The area includes natural coastal, bushland and wetland ecosystems and land use ranges from residential areas, intensive agriculture such as market gardens, industrial areas and national parks.

The City has a Local Environmental Strategy that commits it to preparing a city-wide plan to increase biodiversity protection.

In 2003, the City of Wanneroo received \$14,700 from the Perth Biodiversity Project for biodiversity assessments of all natural areas owned or managed by the City. These assessments were undertaken using the Project's draft Natural Area Initial Assessment Templates. City-managed natural areas have now been prioritised for management as nature conservation reserves.

In June 2004, the City of Wanneroo accepted an offer from the Perth Biodiversity Project to participate in a pilot project to prepare a local biodiversity strategy using the *Local Government Biodiversity Planning Guidelines*. Support from the Project to date has included:

- awareness raising activities for elected councillors and staff;
- negotiating with State Government agencies to obtain representatives for the City of Wanneroo Local Biodiversity Planning Steering Committee;
- briefing members of the Steering Committee on biodiversity issues and the milestone framework;
- further funding towards the employment of an officer to develop a discussion paper for its local biodiversity strategy; and
- preparation of information, maps, training and assistance for Council officers to use this information to develop biodiversity targets.

By participating in the Project, the City of Wanneroo, has been able to coordinate its planning and progress in biodiversity conservation to develop a policy framework that is linked to both State and Australian Government initiatives. This includes the City's "Smart Growth Strategy" that promotes development that minimises environmental impact and conserves and enhances natural areas.



In June 2004 the Wanneroo Council passed a motion that endorsed, "... the Perth Biodiversity Project's Local Biodiversity Milestone Program and agrees to participate in the pilot program in developing its Local Biodiversity Strategy."

While the City of Wanneroo provides just one example of the Project in action, there have been similar experiences in other areas, including the Shire of Kalamunda and Town of Kwinana.

Lessons learnt

Key lessons and benefits learnt during the Perth Biodiversity Project and while developing and implementing the *Local Biodiversity Planning Guidelines* are listed below.

- Transparent biodiversity conservation priorities must be developed upfront.
- Developing a useful local biodiversity strategy takes strong local government commitment and time.
- A local biodiversity strategy provides local government with an informed basis for allocating resources to managing land with the highest biodiversity conservation priorities.
- A local biodiversity strategy provides a strong basis for applying for external funding.
- The process of preparing a local biodiversity strategy raises community and landowner awareness as well as community capacity.
- Developing and implementing a local biodiversity strategy helps local government align with a wide range of State and Australian Government legislation and policies, as well as providing links to natural resource management organisations and regional initiatives.

Biodiversity encompasses the variety of all living things. Conserving biological diversity gives us the best chance of adapting to our rapidly changing world.

This leaflet is one of a series showing how farmers, Indigenous communities, local government and community groups have either initiated special biodiversity projects, or have successfully incorporated biodiversity protection into their work and daily lives.

We hope these success stories provide useful information and inspiration to others in similar situations.

For more information: www.nrm.gov.au; or freecall 1800 552 008

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P2: Perth banksias; Andrew Tatnell.
Quokka; B & B Wells, CALM, WA.
City of Wanneroo staff review regional maps; J. Cullity.
Purple Swamp Hen; Andrew Tatnell.

P3: Kangaroo Paw, Perth in background; Andrew Tatnell.
Western Swamp Tortoise; B & B Wells CALM, WA.

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