

# CARING FOR THE BUSH CAPITAL

## BEYOND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: RESTORING CANBERRA'S ENVIRONMENT

Canberra is different to the rest of the country. We're progressive, we look after each other, and we take action on the issues that matter. As the bush capital of Australia, we have a responsibility to lead the nation in fighting climate change and protecting our environment.

Our environment is under threat like never before. The dual crises of climate and biodiversity destruction have seen quintessentially Australian animals fall like dominos in the face of habitat degradation, a sign that greater ecological collapse is heading our way.

At the moment, Canberra is home to 72 threatened species - a list which will only get longer without drastic action. For years, governments have only injected enough money to stave off environmental collapse, but not enough to regenerate and restore habitat.

We desperately need to fund long-term, ambitious and science-led projects which don't just protect our environment, but which restore and reconstruct long lost native habitat.

Construction on the edges of our suburbs has pushed many native ecosystems into increasingly precarious situations. New development must not come at the expense of the environment. Working hand in hand with First Nations people, the Greens will protect where we live, the water we drink, and our native ecosystems.

### THE ACT GREENS WILL:

- ▲ Establish a Bush Capital Restoration Fund and contribute \$50 million into this fund to support catchment health and environmental restoration programs
- ▲ Fund landscape-level habitat restoration, invasive species management, and connectivity to protect vulnerable species and stop any new species becoming endangered
- ▲ Expand reserves by protecting places of high ecological value such as Bluetts Block, Ainslie Volcanics and more
- ▲ Create an ecological framework to protect nature within our reserves and across other lease types, including farmland and public unleased land
- ▲ Build First Nations capacity and leadership to support joint environmental management of our reserves and waterways.
- ▲ Strengthen environmental laws to deliver the best nature protection

# DEDICATED FUNDING FOR CATCHMENT HEALTH, HABITAT PROTECTION AND RESTORATION

The ACT Greens recognise that protecting and restoring the environment is essential for the wellbeing and survival of all life on Earth. In Government, the Greens have secured substantial changes to the way our environment is managed, including a 60% increase in funding to environmental groups, including stable funding for our catchment groups, and significant increases in government-led restoration projects.

But even with the increases we have secured, funding for environmental protection, catchment health and restoration is still far short of what we need to stop environmental degradation.

The ACT Greens have a plan to change this by establishing the 'Bush Capital Restoration Fund'. The fund will provide a permanent and long-term source of increased funding for landscape level conservation, improving catchment health, restoration, and environmental management in the ACT.

Our Bush Capital Restoration Fund will apply and integrate First Nations knowledge and leadership into environmental decision making and

undertake holistic actions to restore Canberra's environment.

The Fund will invest in programs to build and rebuild thriving ecosystems to protect habitat for vulnerable species and prevent any new species from becoming endangered.

Programs will focus on what we call 'landscape-level restoration', meaning we will look at fixing habitat across Canberra holistically, not just through piecemeal projects.

Currently, while many restoration projects are a step in the right direction, they often do not get enough funding to be placed in the context of all restoration work needed across Canberra. This means that many projects are small and fragmented - a drop in the ocean compared to the work needed.

The landscape level restoration work will protect Canberra's environment in a way that restores different degraded land patches to reconnect our habitat as a network of biodiversity across the city.

Some of this work will include building wildlife land bridges, reintroducing long-lost species, establishing wildlife refuges, and expanding on our invasive species and weeds management practices to restore catchments and ecosystems, working at a landscape level.

The Greens will also assist private leaseholders like farmers to undertake restoration work at their properties with the support of the Government.

The Greens will establish the fund, with the allocation of an initial \$50 million over the next term to address past chronic under-funding of as a downpayment for chronic under-funding of landscape-scale environmental protection in the ACT.

This will be funded through the existing Water Abstraction Charge, recognising the need for landscape scale responses to protect and restore catchment health.

The Fund will operate as the mechanism to receive environmental offsets, environmental fines and compensation payments for damage, as well as Commonwealth and philanthropic grants for threatened species and habitat recovery. It will not be a substitute for lifting core baseline funding for environmental policy development and operational reserve management in the ACT.

### **INVESTMENT: \$50 MILLION ALLOCATED OVER THE FIRST YEAR OF TERM TO ALLOW FOR STRATEGIC PROJECT PLANNING AND TO ESTABLISH THE FUND.**

### **SUPPORTING FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP**

The ACT Greens recognise the profound wisdom of the traditional owners of our lands. First Nations people have been caring for Country for millennia. This deep knowledge and connection to Country must be respected, and the Greens believe programs empowering First Nations people to care for the land should be prioritised and well-funded.

The ACT Greens will invest in First Nations conservation management, employment career pathways and leadership to embed First Nations care for country into all environmental decision making.

The Greens will support First Nations conservation management with a goal of establishing joint management agreements for the ACT's iconic nature reserves and waterways.. Supporting community led processes, we will work to embed traditional knowledge and practices into all conservation management.

We commit to reviewing the advisory mechanisms we have with traditional owners, with the intent to elevate their status and assist in the pathway to joint management of country. The Greens recognise that this will take time and must occur in conjunction with community-led work around native title claims, and recognition of who speaks for country.

The Greens will embed First Nations knowledge and practice within environmental operations by centring First Nations cultural knowledge in all reserve signage and interpretation and increasing cultural education for people engaging with our natural environment.

We will also complete appropriate Cultural Resource Management Plans for First Nations harvesting, management and use of culturally important natural resources.

The Greens will empower First Nations cultural leadership in conservation and

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environmental management by doubling the number of First Nations Rangers and establishing career pathways to support Indigenous conservation leadership. We will create a new First Nations-led cultural burning unit in the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, which the ecological burning team will collaborate with and learn from.

Additionally, we will establish a pilot project to support First Nations-led businesses to share traditional knowledge, explore joint management opportunities and establish eco-tourism and cultural-environmental education opportunities. This will focus on facilitating economic empowerment for First Nations' enterprises and ensuring that cultural knowledge is appropriately valued.

## **AN ECOLOGICAL NETWORK FOR BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION**

Environmental offsets don't work. In a climate and extinction crisis, we cannot trade off one habitat for another. We must protect and preserve what is left of our natural environment in Canberra.

The ACT Greens have long raised concerns about known patches of land with high ecological value being excluded from the ACT Government's reserve system. As identified by leading bodies such as the ACT Conservation Council, many of these patches are at serious risk of environmental degradation or destruction from poorly planned development.

In some cases, these land patches have been excluded because they are earmarked for future environmental offsets to compensate for the damage done by developments in other parts of Canberra. In the meantime, many of them are degrading without the appropriate management practices to ensure adequate conservation.

The ACT Greens will ensure that known, high-priority areas of ecological value on unleased land and public land are placed in our reserve system and protected through the strengthened Nature Conservation Act.

Some of these iconic areas include Bluetts Block and other areas of critical importance in the Western Edge Investigation Area; areas adjoining Callum Brae Nature Reserve; Ainslie Volcanics; Coombs Peninsula and Lawson Grasslands.

There are many other important areas include Flea Bog flat, Emu Creek and Dryandra Woodland. The ACT Greens will strengthen our Nature Conservation legislation and create distinct criteria for when a reserve should be created, to ensure that reserve protection is granted where it is needed.

The ACT Greens will create a framework for protecting environmental values on public, private and unleased land, so that placing areas into nature reserves is not the only mechanism we have for protecting them.

**INVESTMENT: EXPANDING THE RESERVE SYSTEM WILL REQUIRE ADDITIONAL BASELINE FUNDING TO EPSDD FOR THE STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT AND TO ACT PARKS AND CONSERVATION FOR ONGOING OPERATIONAL MANAGEMENT THAT WILL REQUIRE CALCULATION BASED ON THE LEVEL AND RATE OF EXPANSION.**

**DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK TO PROTECT ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES WILL BE DELIVERED THROUGH EXISTING RESOURCES.**

### **REWARDING CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LEASEHOLD**

Many farmers on private leasehold across the ACT are passionate and dedicated environmental stewards of some of our most critical habitat, including 40% of the remaining Yellow-Box Red Gum Grassy Woodlands.

Environmental stewardship on private leasehold is vital for habitat protection, connectivity and landscape resilience, yet there are no forms of financial assistance or incentives available from the ACT Government.

The ACT Greens recognise that we need to support private landholders in their stewardship and protection of important habitat on their land. This could include stewardship payments or grants programs, complemented by certainty of tenure, and must be accompanied by

clear enforcement and compliance of best-practice management.

This is fairer and more cost-effective than trying to put all natural areas into reserves. We will also investigate the feasibility of legislating a private land conservation covenanting system so that ACT leaseholders can access the same federal financial incentives and other sources of income that private landholders can in other Australian jurisdictions.

**INVESTMENT: FURTHER WORK IS NEEDED TO DETERMINE THE BEST PAYMENT MECHANISMS FOR PRIVATE LEASEHOLDERS, IN COLLABORATION WITH FARMERS AND CONSERVATION SCIENTISTS. COSTS WILL BE SOURCED FROM WITHIN THE BUSH CAPITAL RESTORATION FUND.**

### **RESTORING HABITAT AND CONNECTIVITY IN OUR CITY**

Habitat corridors are critical for wildlife to move through landscapes across our city. The ACT Greens believe we must build a city where the natural environment and built environment can live in harmony. With Greens in Government, we have taken the first ever steps to recognise unnatural fragmentation of habitat as a key threatening process by law. That's why we've already begun work to develop an action plan to manage this threat.

In the last 3 years, Greens in Government have already:

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- ▲ Established the Ecological Network to identify and connect patches of habitat across the city landscape and facilitated connection with the planning system, so that ecological mapping can inform planning decisions.
- ▲ Introduced the first Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide.
- ▲ Restored 20 sites in critical locations for wildlife and habitat connectivity.
- ▲ Begun working with the community and key Ngunnawal stakeholders to establish a community vision for the restoration of Sullivans Creek.
- ▲ Begun work to protecting urban habitat, such as native grasslands and saplings, from getting mown in urban mowing programs.
- ▲ Established native seed production areas.

Building on this critical foundational work, the Greens will continue efforts to keep our bush capital a biodiversity haven for plants, animals, and people.

We will increase funding for habitat restoration and connection in our suburbs for a cooler, greener and wilder city and concentrate restoration on key areas of habitat connectivity, guided by the Ecological Network mapping.

We will also establish a planting program of trees for vulnerable fauna that need mature hollow-bearing trees for successful breeding, like the Superb Parrot, and prioritise restoration where it will benefit threatened species.

We will implement a trial of virtual fencing in key high-collision areas, such as reserve-suburb boundaries or where two reserves are separated by a road.

Additionally, where re-establishing habitat connectivity is necessary for wildlife movement or to prevent habitat fragmentation, we will fund major projects like wildlife underpasses and overpasses.

This could include places like Goorooyaroo, Mt Majura and Mt Ainslie reserves and wildlife overpasses for Horse Park Drive, William Hovell Drive and Hindmarsh Drive.

### **INVESTMENT: RESOURCED FROM THE BUSH CAPITAL RESTORATION FUND**

### **FIGHTING FOR OUR WILDLIFE: STOPPING THE EXTINCTION OF OUR THREATENED SPECIES AND KEEPING COMMON SPECIES COMMON**

Our work to restore habitat is vital to support the species that we share the bush capital with. There are threats like never before for native wildlife that need urgent action.

The Greens will continue to resource our evidence-led threatened species programs, for iconic species including the Koala (Gula), the Canberra Earless Dragon, the Eastern Corroboree Frog and the Brushtail Rock Wallaby.

The Greens will support the strong partnership of ACT Government with the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust and the work to reintroduce previously endemic species in predator proof sanctuaries

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and reserves. We will support conservation education activities, including the establishment of a new education and cultural centre attached to Jerrabomberra Wetlands.

The Greens will support work to ensure our common species stay common and are able to share the landscape with us as the city evolves. This will include projects to respond to threats such as mange in wombats and chytrid fungus in amphibians.

The Greens recognise that the Dingo plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance by regulating kangaroo populations and helping control pest species, as well as holding cultural significance for First Nations traditional owners. Genetic research has confirmed the wild-living populations in the ACT as pure dingoes. We will work with local traditional owners to use First Nations language to refer to dingo. After reclassifying dingos as a native animal instead of a pest species, the Greens will develop a comprehensive plan to ensure dingos' role in rebalancing ecosystems is recognised, and we will work with landowners who lose stock to dingo attacks to develop and support them to implement best-practice management techniques.

**INVESTMENT: RESOURCED THROUGH EXISTING PROGRAM FUNDING, WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEEK FUNDING FOR PRIORITY PROJECTS THROUGH THE BUSH CAPITAL RESTORATION FUND. SUPPORT FOR THE JERRABOMBERRA WETLANDS**

**EDUCATION CENTRE WILL BE FUNDED THROUGH DEVELOPER CONTRIBUTIONS AS PART OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EASTLAKE PRECINCT.**

## **STRONGER LAWS TO PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT**

Greens in government have led the nation by driving the legislation for the right to a healthy environment, improving protections for Canberra's important ecosystems and waterways during land development and construction, and increasing funding for nature protection enforcement.

But we need to do more to strengthen our environmental laws and nature protection.

### **IMPLEMENT STRENGTHENED CONSERVATION LAWS**

The Nature Conservation Act is undergoing its legislated 10-yearly review and it is time to increase its effectiveness.

The ACT Greens will shift responsibility for establishing nature reserves from the Planning Minister to the Environment Minister, because environmental decisions must be based on conservation need, not dictated by city planning.

To ensure community confidence that conservation outcomes will not be

traded off due to resourcing challenges or competing demands for land, we will establish clear criteria and guidelines for when a nature reserve should be created.

We will also determine clear resourcing requirements for effective management of reserves and protected areas, to ensure this is not a barrier to including new areas in the reserve.

The Greens will increase the capacity of the Conservator of Flora and Fauna to undertake nature compliance and enforcement activities, so that all Canberrans have confidence that our laws deliver real outcomes. We will also allow the Environment Minister to appoint the Conservator of Flora and Fauna to guarantee the independent functions of the role.

Invasive species are one of the largest threats to conservation outcomes. We will list feral cats as a threatening process under the Nature Conservation Act, to help protect wildlife in our national parks and reserves.

We will strengthen the ACT's protection against invasive weeds by banning known pest plants from being sold in nurseries or used in landscape gardening.

We will ban second generation rat poisons that kill our birds of prey, and scavenging wildlife like goannas and quolls.

**INVESTMENT: DELIVERED WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES**

## **ESTABLISH A ROBUST, INDEPENDENT ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AUTHORITY**

The Greens will legislate a new independent statutory Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) equipped with the authority and resources needed to safeguard the well-being of our environment.

The EPA will be overseen by a qualified, independent board appointed by the Minister for the Environment. This board, consisting of independent environmental experts, will enhance the integrity and independence of the EPA, ensure an appropriate 'compliance posture' and incorporate scientific and First Nations expertise.

Functions of the new EPA will align with newly developed First Nations cultural protocols and environmental justice frameworks. We will ensure the EPA has sufficient resourcing to undertake compliance and enforcement activities in line with its responsibilities under the Environment Protection Act. The independent EPA will work closely with the Conservator of Flora and Fauna to enforce wildlife and habitat protections.

**INVESTMENT: AN ADDITIONAL \$10M OVER THE FORWARD ESTIMATES TO ENABLE THE ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATIONALISATION OF THE EPA, WITH AN ENHANCED COMPLIANCE FUNCTIONS ACROSS THE EPA AND THE OFFICE OF NATURE CONSERVATION.**

## **IMPLEMENT OUR COMMITMENT TO PHASE OUT WOOD HEATERS BY 2045**

Greens in Government have delivered a commitment to phase out wood heaters in line with our pathway to electrification, and our plan to transition away from fossil fuel gas by 2045. This recognises that clean air is fundamental for a healthy environment, and while we generally have favourable air quality in Canberra, experts agree that there is no safe level of exposure to particulate matter in air pollution.

Using the findings of the regulatory impact assessment, the Greens will develop the pathway for an orderly transition away from wood heaters, focused on supporting and incentivising consumers to switch to more energy efficient and less polluting heating sources and ensuring new builds do not include wood or gas heating.

## **INVESTMENT: MET FROM WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES**

### **FIX NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION LAWS**

Australia's national environmental protection laws are broken and have failed to protect our unique wildlife and ecosystems. Greens Environment Minister Rebecca Vassarotti has been pushing the Federal Labor Government to make good on their promise to fix them but reforms have stalled before any substantial outcomes have been delivered.

The ACT Greens promise to keep pushing for the strongest possible national environmental standards and protections for nature.

Instead of waiting for Federal Labor to get its act together, the ACT will lead the way by preparing a regional plan that protects nature and clearly identifies areas for potential development that will have minimal environmental impact. The ACT will take a conservation-first approach to identifying areas where development must be prohibited.

## **INVESTMENT: MET FROM WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES**

### **ENDING DODGY OFFSETS**

We will reform our offsets policy to implement effective governance structures and ensure any possible impacts on ACT protected matters, as well as Commonwealth EPBC-listed Matters of National Environmental Significance, are accounted for in planning decisions. By setting up the ecological framework for managing high conservation values on public and private land, the Greens will also end the practice of compulsory acquisition of private farming leaseholds where there is the option to achieve conservation outcomes through enhanced private stewardship arrangements with impacted farmers.

We will ensure that all potential environmental impacts are addressed based on environmental harm mitigation hierarchy, which means they must be avoided, minimised or mitigated.

Compensation over the long-term will occur only as a last resort. Any offset or compensation activities must have nature positive, net-gain outcomes. Payments for compensation activities will be paid into and managed as part of the Bush Capital Restoration Fund.

**INVESTMENT: MET FROM WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES**