An open letter to the Prime Minister

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to you as 114 members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, the world’s leading organisation of protected area professionals covering senior figures from academia, public land/sea management agencies and the NGO community. We believe protected areas deliver on many priorities of your government: a sustainable national economy, regional economies, Indigenous employment and national health and well-being goals among them.

As Australians, we are all custodians of one of the most remarkable places on earth. The majority of Australia’s plants and animals are not found anywhere else. Our land, seascapes and unique animals are valued by Australians, attract visitors from all over the world and are a defining part of who we are as people. The most effective protectors of these national assets are our World Heritage Areas, national parks and other protected areas.

The Australian Government and its leader, the Prime Minister, have a special responsibility on behalf of the people of Australia, and the people of the world, to safeguard this richness and pass it on to future generations by taking a lead in conservation and sustainable development.

However, the Australian members of the World Commission have expressed rising concern about policy reversals and regressive legislative and management changes affecting conservation and protected areas at both state and federal level in the past two years in Australia. This retreat from many years of leadership and achievement by governments of all political persuasions is both unfortunate and unprecedented.

We believe science and the national interest require instead a strong commitment to Australia’s leadership in conservation and continued building of our systems. The IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney in November, the world’s largest and most influential meeting on nature conservation through protected areas, will be an excellent opportunity to showcase this commitment. The main aim of the Congress will be to articulate the vital role of protected areas in conserving nature while delivering essential ecosystem services and position protected areas within goals of economic and community well-being.

An important fact is that Australia has not completed its protected area system. As signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Australia and 168 other countries, have agreed, through the Aichi Targets, to continue to build fully representative, effectively and equitably managed terrestrial and marine protected area systems. This is a result of global recognition of the rapid decline of the natural fabric of the earth and species caused by human impacts.

Despite significant progress over past decades, Australia is a long way from achieving a fully representative protected area system with nearly 40% of bioregions (35 of 89) having less than 10% representation and over 10% of subregions having no representation at all in the National Reserves System. Only 20% of threatened species are adequately represented in our protected areas. The task of building a truly comprehensive network of Marine Protected Areas is also unfinished. Almost 20% of Australia’s marine bioregions (16) have no representation at all in marine sanctuaries. Achieving representativeness of inshore and continental shelf systems should be a priority.
We therefore do not agree with any idea that our protected area system is sufficient or that we have too many protected areas. This suggestion goes against the great efforts of many Australians over the last decades to protect and restore land for conservation. These include farmers and other landholders who have chosen covenants on their lands as wildlife refuges, Indigenous communities who have embraced the concept of Indigenous Protected Areas which now make up 36% of the National Reserve System, and tens of thousands of individuals and families who have donated to conservancies to purchase critical land. It also challenges the major efforts of state and territory governments who have been systematically building their national parks systems for over a century.

We do not accept the description of protected areas as being ‘locked up’, which implies that the only beneficial use of land or ocean is for the extraction of commodities. It ignores the reality that protected intact ecosystems are highly productive of multiple benefits. It also leads to the erroneous view that protected areas exclude people. With well over 100 million visits a year, protected areas in fact ‘open up’ access to land for healthy recreation. Importantly Indigenous Protected Areas also get Traditional Owners back on their country as well as generating significant employment and measurable improvements to community health and well-being – vital national goals.

A key benefit of healthy, thriving nature is the multi-billion dollar tourism industry with international nature tourism responsible for $19.5 billion in foreign exchange and strong employment, particularly in regional Australia...The Australian Alps skiing and mountain based tourism industry contributes at least $280 million per year while tourism in the Great Barrier Reef creates over $5 billion in economic activity.

Protected areas produce many other social values and services, from cultural connection, health, wellbeing and adventure, to freshwater catchments and filtration, erosion prevention, pollination, carbon capture and resilience to climate change, fishery nurseries and many more. For example the clean, clear water from catchments of the Australian Alps national parks contributes an estimated $9.6 billion worth of water annually.

Australia’s actions with regard to protected areas should therefore be in step with an increasing global and strategic understanding of the immense values and benefits derived from intact healthy ecosystems over the long term. They should be recognised and highly valued as the core of the ‘natural capital’ of our country, rather than damaged through uses, which while appropriate elsewhere, do not belong in nature reserves such as logging, mining, grazing, hunting or inappropriate tourist development.

Australia should continue the positive trajectory of innovation, good governance and management that our nation has established and for which it has been internationally acknowledged. These include outstanding initiatives such as Indigenous Protected Areas, management effectiveness methodologies, support for the National Reserve System and private reserves and the inclusive ‘whole of landscape’ approach to connectivity conservation corridors which involve thousands of individual community and landholder initiatives working with park agencies.

Senior representatives of WCPA would welcome meeting with you to discuss these issues and explore ways of ensuring continued progress. We have made this an open letter as the issue has recently become a live debate in the community and members have expressed their desire to have their views contributed.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Marc Hockings, Vice Chair for Science and Management

Dr. Graeme Worboys, Vice Chair for Connectivity Conservation and Mountains

Penelope Figgis AO, Vice Chair, Oceania

IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, PO Box 528, Sydney 2001
WCPA signatories
Penelope Figgis AO, WCPA Vice-Chair (Oceania)
Professor Marc Hockings, School of Geography, Planning and the Environment, University of Queensland
Dr Graeme Worboys, WCPA Vice Chair for Connectivity Conservation and Mountains
Professor Hugh Possingham FAA, Australian Laureate Fellow, Director ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions, University of Queensland
Professor Richard Kingsford, Director of Centre for Ecosystem Science, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of NSW
Professor Robert Pressey, ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University
Professor Andrew Campbell, Head, School of Environment, Charles Darwin University
Professor Stephen Garnett, Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University
Emeritus Professor Ben Boer, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney
Associate Professor Peter Valentine, Adjunct Associate Professor, James Cook University
Dr Andrea Leverington, Director, Protected Area Solutions
Graeme Kelleher AO, Ocean Elder, IUCN-WCPA
Doug Humann AM, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Peter Hitchcock AM, Consultant, Environment and Heritage
Don Henry, CEO of Australian Conservation Foundation
Shane Orchard, Environmental scientist
Dr Alan Hemmings, Environmental Consultant
Associate Professor Stephen Wearing, University of Technology, Sydney
Emeritus Professor Sir Alan Mark FRSNZ KNZM, Department of Botany, University of Otago
Bruce Gall, former Director, Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service
Bob Debus AM, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Corazon Catibog-Sinha, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Alastair Birtles, Senior Lecturer, School of Business, James Cook University
Dr Geoff Mosley AM, Australian Director, Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy
Dr Hanna Jaireth, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Nicole Baker, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Associate Professor James Watson, School of Geography, Planning and the Environment, University of Queensland
Dr Naomi Doak, Coordinator, TRAFFIC Greater Mekong Programme
Penny Spoelder, Senior Consultant with TRC Tourism
Associate Professor Robyn Bushell, Institute for Culture & Society, University of Western Sydney
Katherine Zischka, Marine and Environmental Consultant
Chrissy Grant, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Stuart Gold, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Tim Stevens, Griffith School of Environment, Griffith University
Alistair Henchman, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Keith Twyford, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Stephanie Price, Environmental Lawyer
Dr Michelle Lim, Centre for Water Law, Policy and Science, University of Dundee
Anne Reeves OAM, Senior VP NPA NSW
Andrew Cox, CEO, Invasive Species Council
Michael Kennedy, Director, Humane Society International (Australia) & the Wildlife Land Trust (Australia)
Dr Dermot Smyth, Adjunct Research Fellow, Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University
Bob Speirs, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Lisa Marie King, Senior Research Fellow, Curtin University, Malaysia
Mariasole Bianco, President Worldrise
Dr Carina Wyborn, Visiting Fellow, Australian National University
John McEachern, Marine Park Planner
John Tanzer, Director of WWF International-Marine
Janet Mackay, Director, TRC Tourism
Dr Haydn Washington, Visiting Fellow, Institute of Environmental Studies, UNSW
Dr John Watson, WCPA Caves and Karst Specialist Group, IUCN-WCPA Connectivity & Mountains Biome
Geoff Vincent, Principal, Vincent Project Management and Consulting
Dr Susan Gould, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Landscape and Policy Research Hub, Griffith University
Gary Howling, Conservation Manager, Great Eastern Ranges Initiative
Philip Stewart, Certified Wildland Fire Ecologist
Dr Daniel Robinson, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Environmental Studies, UNSW
Dr Fiona Leverington, Adjunct Senior Fellow, University of Queensland
Robyn James, Member IUCN WCPA
Dr Raymond Nias, Director, Southwest Pacific Region, Island Conservation
Bruce Jefferies, WCPA Deputy Vice Chair (Oceania)
Professor David Gillieson, School of Earth & Environmental Sciences, James Cook University
Dr Hedley Grantham, Senior Director, Moore Centre for Science and Oceans, Conservation International
Dr Leanne Fernandes, Director, Earth to Ocean Consulting
Dr Amy Diedrich, Lecturer, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, James Cook University
Dr Quentin Hanich, Senior Research Fellow, University of Wollongong
William Kostka, Executive Director, Micronesia Conservation Trust
Christian Bell, Former Marine Reserve Management Officer, Tasmanian Parks & Wildlife Service
Dr Carol Booth, Policy Officer, Invasive Species Council
Russell Watkinson, Adjunct Research Fellow JCU, Director Terrain; past Executive Director Wet Tropics Management Authority
M. A. (Latif) Siddique, PhD Candidate, Sustainability Research Centre, University of the Sunshine Coast
Dr Ro Hill, Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Earth and Environmental Science, James Cook University
Dr Michael Lockwood, Senior Lecturer, University of Tasmania
Associate Professor Paul Marshall, Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Science, University of Queensland
Dr Dave Pollard, Marine Ecologist
Tegan Burton, Ranger, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service
Paul van Nimwegen, Post-graduate student, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University
Cassie Wright, Director, Nature Matters
Dr Sue Feary, Independent heritage consultant, Retired national park manager, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service
Associate Professor Geoff Wescott, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University
Jim Muldoon, Environmental Consultant
Lee Thomas, PA Management Consultant
Michael Chilcott FEIANZ, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Philip Ingamells, Victorian National Parks Association
Paul Donatiu, Executive Coordinator, National Parks Association of Queensland
Michelle Prior, National Parks Australia Council
Associate Professor John Bailey, School of Veterinary and Life Sciences, Murdoch University
Dr Ashley Brooks, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Chris Smyth, Chris Smyth Consulting
Dr. Martin Taylor, IUCN WCPA
William Carr, Consultant, Burrup Rock Art Technical Working Group
David Whitelaw, Executive Manager – West, Bush Heritage Australia
Dr Ian Craigie, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University
Dr Jamie Pittock, Fenner School of Environment and Society, The Australian National University
Zoe Wilkinson, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Phil Wise, Wildlife biologist
Desmond Boyland PSM, Secretary, Wildlife Queensland
Pam Eiser, President, Project Jonah Australia
Pepe Clarke, Chief Executive Officer, Nature Conservation Council of NSW
Paul Sattler OAM, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Ian Walker, Chair Parks Forum and Chair Healthy Parks Healthy People Task Force
Alexia Wellbelove, Senior Program Manager, Humane Society International
Dr Daniel Lunney, Member, IUCN-WCPA, Sydney
Joanne Issaverdis, National Manager – Ecotourism Division, Conservation Volunteers Australia
Professor Jonathan Gardner, School of Biological Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington
Dr James Fitzsimons, Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University
Professor William F Humphreys, Adjunct Professor, University of Western Australia
Gillian Anderson, NERP Landscapes & Policy Research Hub – Australian Alps Knowledge Broker, People in Nature
Dr Padma Narsey Lal, Visiting Scientist, Ecosystem Sciences Division, CSIRO
Dr Megan Barnes, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Greg Middleton, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Brian Martin, Director, Shearwater Associates Pty Ltd.
Rob Murphy, Executive Manager North, Bush Heritage Australia
Dr Lea M Scherl, Adjunct Associate Professor, James Cook University
Gregor Manson, Member, IUCN-WCPA
Dr Rebecca Koss, Co-Chair IUCN Task Force for the Intergenerational Partnerships for Sustainability
The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world’s oldest and largest global environmental organization. Within IUCN, the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) is the world’s premier network of protected area expertise with over 1,700 members, spanning 140 countries. The once in a decade premier global event on protected areas, the IUCN World Parks Congress, will be held in Sydney in November 2014. The Australian Government and NSW governments are co-hosts.

www.worldparkscongress.org

Evidence for information provided in the letter:

Policy reversals
Some of Australia’s leading scientists have written an editorial in Conservation Biology saying policy reversals “represent a serious about-face for government policy on nature conservation”.

National Reserve System
Despite considerable progress many gaps remain in the National Reserve System:

- 40% of bioregions (35 of 89) having less than 10% representation and over 10% of subregions having no representation at all in the National Reserves System.
- 20% of threatened species are not adequately represented in protected areas

Indigenous Protected Areas

The Australian Alps national parks
The Australian Alps national parks help contribute:

- 9,600 Gigalitres of water or 30% of the annual average water yield of the Murray Darling basin worth an estimated $9.6 billion annually;
- $280 million per annum Australian Alps ski based tourism industry (Worboys and Good, 2011).

Great Barrier Reef tourism economic benefit
The Australia-wide economic contribution (direct and indirect) generated by tourism is $5.2 billion

Nature tourism in Australia
Across Australia international nature is responsible for $19.5 billion in foreign exchange.