



Queensland nature refuge program 'at breaking point', report warns

Program that protects and restores environmentally sensitive land on private property badly under resourced, report warns

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Queensland's 4.4m hectare network of nature refuges is "stretched to breaking point" and badly under-resourced, a new report commissioned by an alliance of conservation groups warns.

The refuges are designed to protect and restore environmentally sensitive land on private property across Queensland. Landholders agree to dedicate part of their property as a private protected area, and in turn receive government support.

The report, released today by Our Living Outback, says that support on average is equivalent to 25c a year to manage a hectare. It calls on the government to address the "long-term underinvestment".

"The system is now stretched to breaking point, letting down landholders and nature," Fiona Maxwell, the Queensland manager for the Pew Charitable Trusts, said.

Barry Hughes, a grazier who runs North Head station in the Gulf Country, has about 19,000 hectares set aside for conservation. He said the program provided money about 10 years ago, including for fencing to protect against feral species.

Hughes said there was very little funding for ongoing maintenance, but that the biggest issues was “personnel on the ground at the local level”. He said staff at the government’s natural resource management office at Georgetown had recently been moved 350km away to Mareeba.

“There’s a lot of good stuff that goes on in our industry ... and I think [the nature refuges program] gives the grazing industry a platform to speak loud and long about some of the good stuff that goes on.

“The most pertinent point in this whole conversation is leading back to support mechanisms from grassroots level up, and being able to maintain service provision in the regional and rural areas where these large-scale projects have been managed for the last 10 years.”

Landholders say the lack of financial support means they have to put more of their own resources towards managing weeds, fires and feral animals.

Ian McMaster, from Mount Mellum on the Sunshine Coast, says the government program has serious flaws.

“We own two properties we’ve converted into nature refuges, but we’ve only felt comfortable doing that because of the support of our local council and their programs. We’ve had limited support from the state government,” McMaster said.

“I know of people in other council areas who have much less support and bigger properties and management issues [and] for them the task is much harder.”

The report says Queensland is “failing” to protect its species and landscapes. There are 955 threatened species in the state. Only 8% of the total landmass is dedicated for conservation, compared to 30% in South Australia and 23% in Western Australia.

Maxwell said the nature refuges program had been successful in part by expanding and encouraging about 500 landowners to take part.

“But with the growth of the program, funding hasn’t kept up the pace,” she said. “Queensland landholders are being short-changed and left to do much of the heavy-lifting.

“With the highest number of plant and animal species of any state or territory and an ever-increasing number of species on the brink of extinction, Queensland carries an immense responsibility when it comes to protecting nature.”

The Our Living Outback alliance - the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Queensland Trust for Nature, is calling on the government to increase funding for the program.

The state’s environment minister, Leeanne Enoch, said the report “highlights the growth of the nature refuges program” and that the government would continue to expand it.

“Queensland also has the largest private protected area network in Australia, by hectares,” she said.

“Since 2017, 69 nature refuge landholders have ... shared in \$470,000 in grants to support their projects. We are continuing this financial support with a new round of nature refuge

landholder grants opening this week.”

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