

The Natural Heritage Trust

Helping Communities Helping Australia

**The Natural Heritage Trust- Helping Communities Helping Australia -
The Liberal and National Parties plan to provide an additional \$250
million to the \$1.25 billion Natural Heritage Trust to help local
communities better manage natural resources and conserve our
environment now and into the future.**

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The Natural Heritage Trust: Helping Communities Helping Australia

Australians treasure our continent's unique environment.

Our oceans, beaches, rivers, forests and arid interior have influenced who we are, where we live and the type of economy that Australia has developed.

We have an incredibly rich and varied environment - so much so that we are one of only 12 countries that have been described as 'mega-diverse'.

Past mistakes and practices have, however, damaged our environment:

- much of our land has been overcleared, resulting in erosion, vegetation loss and rising salinity;
- many of our rivers are affected by poor water quality;
- air pollution is increasing in our major cities;
- our coastline has been affected by sewage and stormwater pollution; and
- too many of our plants and animals are now threatened with extinction.

During 13 years of Labor government things got worse. Labor did not have a comprehensive and well-funded plan to fix the problems.

Labor's approach was based on ad-hoc announcements designed to buy off a few green votes rather than target the real problems faced by Australia's environment.

In 1996, the Liberal and National parties were elected to office with a commitment to redress Labor's neglect.

As promised during the last election, the Coalition has established the **\$1.25 billion** Natural Heritage Trust. This is the **largest investment in environmental protection** and care ever made by an Australian government.

Importantly, we have also developed a comprehensive plan that targets the full range of environmental and natural resource issues facing Australia. As a result, funds from the Natural Heritage Trust are going directly to where they are needed most.

The Natural Heritage Trust is focussed on real 'on-ground' works.

Labor's reliance on large bureaucracies as the panacea for our environmental problems failed Australia. Our priority has been to support those thousands of individuals and communities making practical efforts to protect and repair their local environment.

Maintaining the Momentum

The Liberal and National Parties are committed to maintaining the momentum established by the Natural Heritage Trust into the new millennium.

The next Howard/Fischer government will therefore provide \$250 million from the sale of the second, 16 per cent, tranche of Telstra, to the Natural Heritage Trust.

This will mean that the total contribution made by the Howard/Fischer government to environmental protection through the Natural Heritage Trust will be \$1.5 billion – an unprecedented level of financial support.

The Natural Heritage Trust's residual fund of \$300 million will continue to be preserved – providing an ongoing funding base for the Trust's activities in future years as promised at the last election.

These funds will allow the government to maintain support for the full range of Natural Heritage Trust programs such as Bushcare, Rivercare, Landcare and Coastcare, Murray-Darling 2001 and our support for endangered species, wetlands and World Heritage places.

These new funds will be in addition to core funding for the environment and primary industry portfolios.

Other funding announcements for the environment and sustainable agriculture will be announced during the course of the election.

The Natural Heritage Trust: Background Information

Natural Heritage Trust programs have targeted the full range of problems facing Australia's environment, including vegetation loss, land degradation, river quality, biodiversity loss and coastal pollution.

The Trust has also promoted a more rapid transition to ecological sustainability within Australia's agricultural sector to ensure the long-term economic prospects of Australia's rural industries.

Already the Natural Heritage Trust has made considerable progress in addressing these issues.

Restoring Vegetation

Bushcare

The Howard/Fischer government has established the **largest native vegetation restoration program** in Australia's history through the Natural Heritage Trust funded Bushcare program. **\$330 million** has been allocated over the initial five years of the Trust for **Bushcare**.

Unsustainable land clearing has led to the loss of significant areas of forests, woodlands and other types of native vegetation. This, in turn, has threatened the habitats of many of Australia's native animals and caused land degradation and water quality problems for Australia's rivers.

Vegetation loss has also threatened the viability of large areas of agricultural land because of the resulting loss of top soil and rising salinity. Clearing of native vegetation also contributes to Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

The Liberal and National Parties are committed to reversing the decline of native vegetation by mid-2001.

In the last financial year over 650 individual projects were supported by Bushcare to fence-off remnant vegetation, create wildlife corridors and revegetate thousands of hectares of degraded farm land. This year, higher levels of funding will increase that number.

Farm Forestry

Landcare and Bushcare are complemented by the Howard/Fischer government's **\$41 million** Farm Forestry program which is encouraging on-farm commercial tree growing.

Farm forestry represents an opportunity for primary producers to diversify income and fight the land and water degradation which is causing a long term decline in returns from conventional agricultural enterprises in a number of areas in Australia. At the same time there are potential regional economic and social benefits flowing from an expanded supply of wood and non-wood products.

Rehabilitating Our Land

Landcare

The Howard/Fischer government is spending **\$515 million** over five years to **rehabilitate our land**.

The national Landcare program is supporting tens of thousands of Australians who are engaged in 'on-ground' projects designed to rehabilitate degraded land, stop erosion and top soil loss and prevent salinity.

There are now more than 4000 Landcare groups across Australia with an estimated one in three farmers now a member of a Landcare group.

The Natural Heritage Trust is providing more than **\$268 million** over its initial five years for Landcare. This is complemented by on-going support from consolidated revenue - a five year commitment by the Howard/Fischer government of more than **\$515 million**.

1200 individual projects were supported by the Howard/Fischer government in 1997/98.

The Coalition has also expanded the program to allow funding of works on private property - an approach that Labor failed to adopt during their 13 years in office. Landcare and water conservation have been further encouraged by the introduction of a Landcare tax rebate.

Feral Animals and Weeds

Introduced plants and animals pose an enormous threat to Australia's land and its biodiversity. They also seriously damage Australia's rural sector. It is estimated, for example, that weeds cost agricultural industries over \$3 billion a year in lost productivity and management costs.

Through the Natural Heritage Trust the Howard/Fischer government has allocated **\$16 million** to the National Feral Animal Control Strategy which is targeting animals such as rabbits, foxes, goats, pigs, carp, mice and wild dogs. The initiative will also provide major support for monitoring and surveillance of the rabbit calicivirus.

\$24 million has been allocated to the National Weeds Strategy which is designed to target national priority weeds. Almost \$1 million has already been spent to tackle rubber vine and prickly acacia.

Land and Water Audit

Governments require comprehensive and detailed information to support decision making in relation to the use of our environmental resources.

Despite the seriousness of land and water degradation in Australia, the former Labor government never developed a comprehensive

nationwide appraisal of its environmental, economic and social costs to the nation.

In contrast, the Natural Heritage Trust is providing **\$37 million** over its initial five years for a National Land and Water Audit which will, for the first time, provide reliable information on the status of our natural resource base.

It will provide an independent, objective assessment of the extent of degradation arising from approximately 20 types of land and water problems and will include an economic analysis of each.

The Audit will provide a clear understanding of the status of, and changes to, the nation's land and water resources and implications for their sustainable use and the operation of the Natural Heritage Trust.

Protecting Rivers and Wetlands

Many of Australia's rivers and wetlands are suffering from environmental stress resulting in a decline in water quality and a loss of native fish. Blue-green algal outbreaks and declines in water flow volumes are two of the more public manifestations of poor river health. Urban rivers face particular problems associated with litter, sewage and stormwater pollution.

Poor river quality affects both those ecosystems that are dependent on them and the productive capacity of surrounding lands.

Protecting and restoring Australia's rivers has therefore been a priority for the Howard/Fischer government.

Rivercare, Waterwatch and River Health programs

The government has allocated **\$97 million** from the Natural Heritage Trust for a national effort to improve the health of Australia's rivers outside the Murray-Darling Basin.

The **National Rivercare** program is supporting community groups to protect their local rivers through practical conservation projects such as bank stabilisation and replanting. It is a logical extension of the Landcare program.

The program also supports larger, integrated projects involving a range of stakeholders to improve river health by improving water course and stormwater management and developing environmental flow plans for whole catchments.

Last year, 120 projects worth around \$6 million were supported.

Waterwatch Australia is supporting thousands of volunteers, particularly school children, to monitor the health of rivers and, at the same time, increase their knowledge about ways to protect our rivers and streams

With financial support from the Natural Heritage Trust, Waterwatch has grown from 200 groups in 16 catchments to nearly 1800 groups in more than 150 catchments. It has been estimated that **50000 Waterwatch volunteers** are monitoring more than **4000 sites** across Australia.

The **National River Health Program** is being funded to improve our knowledge base. The program is designed to improve our capacity to determine the environmental flows required to maintain river ecosystems. It is also supporting a comprehensive assessment of the health of Australia's rivers.

Murray-Darling 2001

The Murray-Darling is Australia's largest river system and its basin comprises about one-seventh of Australia's land mass. It has enormous significance for agriculture - some 40 per cent of Australia's agricultural production is sourced from the basin. The Murray-Darling is also of great environmental significance, containing rich riparian ecosystems.

Inappropriate use of the river system and land within the basin has caused significant problems for the Murray-Darling, including salinisation, increased sediment and nutrients loads and algal blooms.

The Howard/Fischer government has worked with the Queensland, New South Wales, Victorian, South Australian and ACT governments to rehabilitate the Murray-Darling.

\$163 million over the first five years of the Natural Heritage Trust has been allocated to support the joint State, Territory and Commonwealth **Murray-Darling 2001** program.

The key objectives of Murray-Darling 2001 are to: restore riparian land systems, wetlands and floodplains by establishing environmental flows capable of sustaining natural processes; improve water quality; develop integrated catchment management strategies; and encourage sustainable land use.

430 projects were supported during the last financial year.

Wetlands

Wetlands are an important part of Australia's biodiversity and provide habitat for a range of plants and animals including migratory birds. Australia has 49 wetlands which are recognised as internationally important under the Ramsar wetland convention.

\$11 million has been allocated over five years from the Natural Heritage Trust for wetland protection.

Protecting Australia's Coasts and Marine Environment

Our beaches are some of the nation's most famous icons. Yet increased coastal urbanisation and economic activity has threatened Australia's coastline and our oceans.

Problems such as coastal pollution from sewage and stormwater, increased sedimentation from agricultural developments, habitat loss, poor coastal planning and threats to marine species are, however, common.

Natural Heritage Trust funding has allowed the Howard/Fischer government to provide **\$106 million** for the *Coasts and Clean Seas* program to **protect Australia's marine environment and coastline**.

This represents the largest contribution ever made by a federal government towards coastal protection and reducing pollution - in 1998/99 the Howard/Fischer government will spend five times the amount spent by the Labor Party during their last year in office.

Coasts and Clean Seas is supporting a comprehensive suite of sub-programs including:

- *Clean Seas*, which is providing \$50 million to reduce marine pollution;
- *Coastcare*, which is supporting community effort to protect and rehabilitate our beaches and coastline;
- the *Marine Species Protection Program*, which is supporting efforts to save threatened marine animals such as dugong and turtles;
- the *Fisheries Action Program*, which is supporting sustainable fishing and protecting fish habitats;
- the *Coastal and Marine Planning Program*, which is reducing ad-hoc coastal planning and ensuring that the needs of our environment are included in planning decisions; and
- the *Introduced Marine Pests Program*, which is helping to control feral marine animals and reduce their impacts on the marine environment.

Protecting Biodiversity

Biodiversity loss was identified in the first State of the Environment report, published in 1996, as Australia's biggest environmental challenge.

The Natural Heritage Trust has allowed the Howard/Fischer government to strengthen efforts to halt biodiversity loss.

Expanding the National Reserve System

The Liberal and National Parties support the development of a comprehensive and representative system of conservation reserves to protect biodiversity.

\$80 million has been allocated from the Natural Heritage Trust for the National Reserve System program which, in partnership with the States and Territories, is purchasing land for the reserve system.

So far, the government has approved the acquisition of an **additional 450,000 hectares** for the National Park system including an extension to the Mount Remarkable National Park in South Australia and the creation of a new Park at Cudmore Station in Queensland.

World Heritage

Australia has 13 places that are listed as World Heritage properties because of their international importance.

The Howard/Fischer government has recognised its obligation to protect these special areas.

Through the Natural Heritage Trust more than **\$44 million** has been allocated over five years to support the protection of State-run **World Heritage** issues.

Endangered Species

Unfortunately, Australia has one of the worst rates of animal and plant extinctions. More than 100 species have been lost since European settlement began.

Through the Natural Heritage Trust, the Howard/Fischer government has supported renewed efforts to protect Australia's threatened species. **\$16 million** over the first five years of the Trust has been allocated for this purpose.

Improving the Delivery of Environment Programs

The Natural Heritage Trust has allowed the Howard/Fischer government to significantly improve the way in which programs designed to protect and restore our environment are delivered.

The unique structure of the Trust has, for the first time, brought together the federal government's environment and sustainable agriculture programs. Under Labor, such programs operated in a piecemeal fashion despite their similar goals and the obvious advantage of greater co-ordination.

The government has also made Natural Heritage Trust projects more accessible to the community by establishing a 'one-stop shop' for most Trust applications.

The Coalition has ensured that it has access to the best possible advice in administering Trust programs. The government has established a Natural Heritage Trust Advisory Committee, chaired by Sir James Hardy, which is monitoring the effectiveness of program delivery.

A Council of Sustainable Vegetation has also been established in accordance with the Coalition's election commitments. The Council provides advice on the government's efforts to halt vegetation loss.