

CONCLUSIONS AND CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

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THE STUDY REGION AND BIOGEOGRAPHIC VALUES

The Mt Lofty Ranges, of which the SMLR study area is a major component, is an island of forest and woodland surrounded by drier habitats to the north and east, and the ocean to the west and south. The SMLR, in particular, is in effect an outlier of the Bassian Zoogeographic region of temperate southern and eastern Australia. Within the SMLR many plant and vertebrate species exist as isolated populations from the greater areas of their natural distribution in the south-east of the continent.

The SMLR study region, covering an area of 6,282 square kilometres, represents just 0.6% of South Australia. Despite the relatively small size of the SMLR and extensive vegetation clearance, the region is highly biologically diverse, currently conserving:

- An estimated minimum of 1,100 native plant taxa². The Biological Surveys within the region recorded nine plant species with a National conservation rating.
- Twenty-two resident native mammal taxa.
- 293 bird species (63% of the total bird species recorded for the State) including one of the largest concentrations of threatened bird taxa on mainland Australia (MLRINRMG 2002).
- 42 native reptiles, including one species with a National conservation rating and five species with a State conservation rating.
- Six of the State's 27 amphibian species.

VEGETATION COMMUNITIES

Vegetation mapping for the South Mt Lofty Ranges described 152 vegetation communities, which have been summarised into 51 groups for the purpose of map display according to common dominant overstorey species. The mapping region included a greater area than that defined for the Biological Survey study area.

The 152 described groups were defined using a combination of Biological Survey data, interpretation of aerial photography, ground truthing and literature survey.

In contrast, the floristic analysis presented in this report was based only on survey data, and did not include major ecosystems such as grasslands, mangroves and samphire communities. Forty-one vegetation groups were defined, based on similarity of their floristic composition (all perennial species at a quadrat were included in the analysis).

The majority of remnant vegetation within the study region occurs on soils least suitable for agriculture and/or urban development, and is dominated by Stringybarks (*Eucalypts obliqua* and *E. baxteri*), Long-leaved Box (*E. goniocalyx*) and Pink Gum (*E. fasciculosa*) forest and woodland formations. These communities also tend to be both the most floristically diverse and least modified vegetation remnants.

Poorly represented communities in the region tend to occur on the most fertile soils and/or were naturally restricted in area due to specific habitat requirements. They include River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) and Manna Gum (*E. viminalis* ssp.) savannah Woodlands, once extensive in the region. Rare communities with naturally restricted distributions in the SMLR include swamps (often dominated by *Leptospermum* spp., sedges and rushes), Grey Box (*E. microcarpa*) Forest and Woodlands, Peppermint Box (*E. odorata*) Woodlands, and mallee communities (including those dominated by *E. socialis*, *E. incrassata*, *E. phenax* and *E. oleosa*). The poorly represented communities, including those associated with creeklines are generally highly weed-infested resulting in a loss of native plant diversity. The sampling effort across the major vegetation communities is shown in Table 61.

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² Note, the study region is more restricted than the Mount Lofty Ranges region defined in the Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (MLRINRMG in prep.) and the Biodiversity Plan (Blason and Carruthers in prep.). The SMLR study region is also more restricted than the Southern Lofty herbarium region. Hence biodiversity statistics are not directly comparable between the aforementioned documents/data sources.

Table 61.

Approximate proportion of structural vegetation communities surveyed during SMLR Biological Survey.

Structural Vegetation Community	Approximate % of survey quadrats
<i>Eucalyptus obliqua</i> dominated Open Forests and Woodlands	32
<i>Eucalyptus fasciculosa</i> dominated Forests and Woodlands	19
<i>Eucalyptus goniocalyx</i> dominated Forests and Woodlands	8
<i>Eucalyptus baxteri</i> , <i>E. cosmophylla</i> , <i>E. fasciculosa</i> Low Woodland or Low Open Forest	13
<i>E. viminalis</i> ssp. <i>viminalis</i> , <i>E. leucoxylon</i> , <i>E. camaldulensis</i> Savannah Woodland	4
<i>E. viminalis</i> ssp. <i>viminalis</i> , <i>E. leucoxylon</i> , <i>E. ovata</i> Woodland or Open Forest	6
<i>E. odorata</i> , <i>E. fasciculosa</i> , <i>E. leucoxylon</i> , <i>E. microcarpa</i> , <i>E. porosa</i> or <i>Allocasuarina verticillata</i> dry savannah Woodlands	6
Mallee species forming Mallee or Very Low Woodland	4
Coastal shrublands	<1
Swamps	9

SURVEY EXPECTATIONS AND NOTABLE FINDINGS

Flora

The flora of the region has been comprehensively surveyed. In addition to the 1,177 survey sites included in this analysis, numerous other smaller-scale surveys have been conducted. The Biological Surveys have contributed towards comprehensive vegetation mapping of the study region. This has enabled a more accurate assessment of conservation priorities e.g. many poorly represented vegetation associations are under threat due to weed invasion or other forms of indirect long-term clearance. Although no new flora records for the region were recorded during Biological Surveys, an opportune record of *Eucalyptus conglobata* confirmed the existence of this species, previously thought to be extinct from the Southern Lofty herbarium region.

The Biological Surveys have provided baseline data on species composition within the larger vegetation remnants. In general, however, the survey sites are within larger areas of more intact remnants. In particular, Crown Land is disproportionately surveyed³. Seventy seven percent of remnant vegetation is privately owned, of which only 3% is formally protected by Heritage Agreements. There is limited information concerning the condition of privately owned remnant vegetation.

The Biological Surveys aim to provide an inventory of the main vegetation communities (Table 61). Rare species and smaller areas of rare habitat are not specifically targeted.

Although the SMLR are an island of higher rainfall communities surrounded by drier habitat, only 13 endemic plant taxa are recognised. However, there are a number of species with small disjunct

populations within the SMLR which appear morphologically distinct from populations outside the region (Peter Lang, pers. comm. 2002). These include:

- *Pultenaea laxiflora* On white sands in the Sandy Creek, Para Wirra area,
- *Glycine tabacina* (Variable Glycine). Within the SMLR, it occurs in the Sturt Gorge,
- *Eucalyptus diversifolia* (White Mallee). A very small disjunct population occurs in Blackhill Conservation Park,
- *Eucalyptus brachcalyx* x *rugosa*. A small and isolated relict population occurs in Torrens Gorge,
- *Eriostemon pungens*, *Eriostemon brevifolius* and *Olearia teriifolia*. Small, disjunct populations of these three species occur in Stoneyfell Quarry and/or the Horsnell Gully area, associated with quartzite, and
- *Pultenaea hispidula* occurs in the central Mt Lofty Ranges.

Further research is required to determine if the above species (and other species with similar relict populations) are actually new species. Regardless of their taxonomic status, however, conservation programs should recognise the genetic diversity of these disjunct populations.

Fauna

Although this survey was the single-most extensive fauna survey of the region to date, the bird fauna has been extensively studied, and to a lesser extent, mammals and reptiles are well known. The survey, therefore, was not expected to discover any new species or even new records for the region. However, it soon became clear that what is largely regarded as common knowledge, particularly of the fauna, of the “backyard” of Adelaide, was not supported by SA Museum specimens or database records. A major aim of the survey, therefore, was to update and add to these records.

³ Approximately 23% of remaining native vegetation in the Mount Lofty Ranges occurs on Crown Land (MLRINRMG 2002).

Due to the genuine rarity of some species, and the criteria for site selection causing a bias against some habitat specialists, the overall results of the survey confirmed the status and distribution of the more common species, while highlighting a shorter list of species that warrant further investigation. These are as follows:

Mammals

- **Common Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*)**

The Common Brushtail Possum is more commonly seen than the Common Ringtail Possum because it still occupies habitats that have been largely cleared for agriculture and/or urban development, namely areas occupied by humans. However, brushtail possums are actually less common than ringtail possums and are at least uncommon in the majority of remnant woodlands of the SMLR. The survey results support its Rare rating in draft *National Parks and Wildlife Act* schedules.

- **Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*)**

Conversely, the Koala (introduced to the SMLR) appears to be expanding its distribution and increasing in abundance in the study region. Because the Koala prefers to feed on a limited number of eucalypt species (all of which have been extensively cleared since European settlement), there is a danger of tree loss due to Koala feeding pressures.

- **Southern Brown Bandicoots (*Isodon obesulus*)**

Bandicoots were recorded at 25 of the 102 SMLR survey sites. All recordings were south of the River Torrens, mostly centred on the area between Greenhill Road and Scott Creek CP. It seems that the distribution of this species has remained stable since Paull's (1985) survey. However, largely due to fox baiting, their populations seem to have increased within their area of distribution.

- **Rodents and Yellow-footed Antechinus**

The Swamp Rat, *Rattus lutreolus*, Bush Rat, *Rattus fuscipes*, and the introduced Black Rat, *Rattus rattus*, require relatively dense vegetation. However, it appears that as conditions become drier moving north within the SMLR, first the Swamp Rat, then the Bush Rat disappears and the Black Rat becomes dominant. As there are no SA Museum records of any native rat species north of the River Torrens, it is not possible to determine if the introduced Black Rat has displaced any native species in the drier Barossa/South Para region. The Yellow-footed Antechinus, *Antechinus flavipes*, which is often found in the same locations as the above rat species and prefers forest and woodland with a relatively dense understorey. This species also becomes progressively more rare travelling north, and they have only been recorded from four locations north of the River Torrens.

- **Platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*)**

Although the Platypus has not been recorded for over 50 years in the study region, its continued existence cannot be discounted. A survey specifically targeting this species (namely, suitable watercourses) is recommended.

Birds

The survey findings support the now widely accepted view that many once common woodland birds within the SMLR are declining. For example, very few records of the Diamond Firetail, Brown Treecreeper and Hooded Robin were made during the survey.

In addition to habitat loss and fragmentation, changes in vegetation and the spread of urbanisation on the Adelaide Plains has also affected the adjacent hills' fauna. Since the 1960's, a substantial increase in plantings of flowering Australian native trees in urban Adelaide has created an extensive open woodland. This has advantaged several of the more aggressive nectar feeding species and others that prefer this parkland style habitat. Unfortunately these relatively young trees do not as yet provide opportunities for hollow-nesting birds. So whilst providing an enormous food resource for species of lorikeets, these aggressive nesters also compete for hollows in the mature woodland areas in the adjacent ranges. Aggressive group-living birds such as New Holland Honeyeaters, Noisy Minors, Magpies and Red-wattle Birds also impact on the more timid woodland species in the ranges.

Reptiles

- **Rosenberg's Goanna (*Varanus rosenbergi*)**

No records were made during the six weeks of site-based field-work. However, the survey coordinator (D. Armstrong) saw one individual near Myponga CP and one individual at Mt Gawler North Native Forest Reserve, during reconnaissance trips. A further five verifiable sightings were made between 1999 and 2001. The paucity of records for this large easily recognisable species indicates that prospects for its long-term survival within the region are bleak.

- **Cunningham's Skink (*Egernia cunninghami*) and Yellow-bellied Water Skink (*Eulamphrus heatwoli*)**

Both these species occur as isolated populations within the study area. Cunningham's Skink appears to have disappeared from the Adelaide Hills face around Belair and Blackwood. In South Australia, the Yellow-bellied Water Skink is known only from the Fleurieu district where it is restricted to creek lines and swamps. Both species may be susceptible to habitat fragmentation, through increased fire frequency and past timber cutting practices.

- **Flinders Worm Lizard (*Aprasia pseudopulchella*)**

There were no records of the Flinders Worm Lizard obtained during the recent survey. However, a number

of SA Museum records, obtained in recent years, show it occurring along the eastern foothills and slopes. It is possible that within the SMLR it could still be found between Elizabeth and Gawler. Further surveys are required to determine the status of this Nationally Vulnerable species.

- **Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota*)**

It is probably doubtful, or at least unclear, that Carpet Pythons still naturally occur within the region. However, further searches in suitable habitat (eastern parts of the SMLR) may reveal its presence in the region.

- **Olive Snake-lizard (*Delma inornata*)**

During the survey period, specimens were collected opportunistically. These were from beneath siltstone slabs in grassland along a watercourse from which stock had been excluded, and as road kills adjacent to roadside grassland, at Highland Valley (south-east of Mount Barker). This appears to be an isolated population in the region, and its long-term persistence in the region is uncertain.

Invertebrates

An estimated 10,000 invertebrate species occur in the Mt Lofty Ranges. The majority are unable to be identified to species level and little is known of their ecology. The AusRivas program provided a relatively comprehensive survey of freshwater macro-invertebrates, enhancing knowledge of species distributions and habitat relationships. The Biological Survey was the first attempt to systematically survey all invertebrate families within the region. Although, still on a limited scale (74 survey sites, with a focus on ground-swelling species), the survey has provided new distribution and abundance data for many invertebrate taxa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH/SURVEY WORK

Plants

1. A formal, wide-scale program to assess the condition of vegetation remnants, in particular targeting vegetation communities across all land tenures.
2. Identify locations of vegetation communities with a conservation rating. Where necessary, identify their tenure, ecological condition, size and biodiversity. Prioritise remnants desirable for inclusion in the Reserve System or to be placed under Heritage Agreement, or similar conservation covenant.
3. Implement mechanisms to increase the conservation tenure of privately owned remnants (not already under Heritage Agreement).
4. Determine the taxonomic status of several species with disjunct populations within the SMLR, and which appear morphologically distinct, from populations outside the region (see above for examples of species).

Mammals

1. Conduct further spotlighting surveys and monitoring programs to more accurately assess the population abundance, distribution and ecological requirements of the Common Brush-tail Possum.
2. Monitor representative areas of eucalypt species favoured by koalas (especially *E. viminalis* and *E. camaldulensis*) that are vulnerable to over-browsing.
3. Conduct further searches for the Swamp Rat, Bush Rat and Yellow-footed Antechinus in the study area, primarily north of the River Torrens.
4. Identify watercourses that may still provide suitable habitat for the Platypus and intensively search of this species, widely regarded as extinct in the region.

Birds

1. To address the decline in many species of native birds the Mt Lofty Ranges “Bush for Birds” project is being implemented. This large-scale project aims to restore habitats for a range of species, rather than focussing on an individual species approach. Initially, the project aims to:
 - Create large areas of habitat with suitable vegetation structure by various means, including active revegetation, fencing and/or stock control to allow natural regeneration, weed and pest control.
 - Re-establish native vegetation on areas of more fertile soils, now largely cleared (MLRINRMG 2002).
2. Some individual species are the subject of current academic research e.g. Black-chinned Honeyeater.

The Spotted Quail-thrush and Bush Stone Curlew could possibly be extinct in the SMLR. Further intensive searches of suitable habitat are required to determine their status.

Reptiles

1. Conduct further surveys to more accurately identify the distribution and population numbers of Rosenberg’s Goanna, Cunningham’s Skink, Yellow-bellied Water Skink, Flinders Worm Lizard, Carpet Python and Olive Snake-lizard (see above for discussion).

Invertebrates

The potential for further research is enormous with relatively few families being comprehensively surveyed and described taxonomically.

Even the existing survey records need considerable additional work to identify them to genus or species level.

CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Due to the SMLR's proximity to Adelaide, and a high proportion of fertile soils, 87% of the pre-European vegetation has been cleared and the majority of the remainder is highly fragmented and/or modified to some degree. Very few first growth forest and woodland trees remain.

Historical factors contributing to the critical state of the SMLR remnant vegetation include clearance, fragmentation, grazing, logging, firewood collection and mining. Despite the implementation of the Native Vegetation Act (1991), intended to prevent broad acre clearance, degradation of remnant vegetation continues. The majority of this damage is not due to direct clearing or felling of individual old trees; rather it is a gradual process contributing to an ongoing reduction in habitat quality. Factors contributing to this degradation include clearance for house site construction and fire hazard reduction, weed and feral animal invasion, native herbivores, fire, rubbish dumping, *Phytophthora* (a root-rot fungus) and damming of waterways. The latter has increased significantly in recent years to provide water to irrigate extensive new areas planted with grape vines. Impacts from run-off containing pesticides, herbicides and sediment from peri-urban, roadside and horticultural/agricultural activities is also impacting upon remnant vegetation.

Simply retaining all existing stands of vegetation will not ensure a status quo in the natural biodiversity. An effect of past clearance is that much of the vegetation is now small fragmented blocks. Sixty-nine percent of remnant blocks in the Mt Lofty Ranges are ten hectares or less and 96% of remnants are less than 100 hectares (Blason and Carruthers in prep.). Many remnants are too small and isolated to maintain viable populations of native flora and fauna (MLRINRMG 2002). Sustained and active (often intensive) management is required to maintain the natural biodiversity of most remnants.

Both the Mount Lofty Ranges Biodiversity Plan (Blason and Carruthers in prep.) and the Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (MLRINRMG 2002) contain comprehensive recommendations for conservation management. The Interim Natural Resource Management Strategy focuses upon developing a coordinated approach to management, where natural resource management is closely integrated with all forms of land use. Conservation programs will encourage and assist landowners and the local community to actively participate, and be an essential element of biodiversity conservation (Robinson and Armstrong 1999). The Strategy recommends that an ongoing regional Natural Resource Management Group be established to promote a coordinated and integrated management approach by community groups, Local Government, Soil Conservation Boards, Catchment Water Management Boards, Animal and Plant Control Boards and other government departments. The Department for

Environment and Heritage will play a key role in encouraging linkages and cooperation between conservation projects with the aim of achieving Landcare and biodiversity outcomes (Robinson and Armstrong 1999).

The Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (MLRINRMG 2002) also outlines resource condition targets and provides detailed recommended actions for managing fragmentation and ongoing loss of habitat. Other than broad protection under the *Native Vegetation Act (1991)*, 66,450 hectares of remnant vegetation in the region, remains outside of Reserves, Heritage Agreement areas, and other protective mechanisms and have no formal protection. A key recommendation of the Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (MLRINRMG 2002) is to place large areas of privately owned land under formal conservation agreements. Current programs and practices to manage remnant habitat are comprehensively outlined by MLRINRMG (in prep.).

Many of the threats to natural biodiversity in the SMLR, and hence management requirements, are applicable to remnant vegetation of the agricultural regions, in general. These include:

- Control of environmental weeds and/or weeds associated with threatened plant species
- Management of Total Grazing Pressure (both introduced and native species)
- Control of feral animals (particularly cats and foxes)
- Fire management
- Lack of habitat hollows and competition for existing hollows from introduced species
- Revegetation to provide corridors and buffer zones.

All of the above issues need to be addressed in the study region. However, there are also other management issues, which although not confined to the Mount Lofty Ranges, are particularly significant. These include:

- The wide distribution of many different weed species across the fragmented areas of natural vegetation is a major management problem. With a properly coordinated effort over a long period successful control of at least a range of woody weed species can however be achieved.
- The impact of *Phytophthora* spp. on native vegetation. Due to the generally high rainfall and widespread presence of susceptible native plants *Phytophthora* is now widespread throughout the study region. A *Phytophthora* project officer has been appointed for the region and an Action Plan has recently been produced.
- Inappropriate use of fire. Due to the very high human population in the region, minimising fire risk is a high priority in the Hills. However, this needs to be balanced against the adverse impacts of too-frequent burning for hazard reduction (e.g. increase in weeds, loss of native species).

- Disruption of water regimes and water contamination.
- Fox baiting is essential to prevent loss of native fauna and the spread of weeds. However, the indirect impacts of fox baiting also needs to be considered (e.g. increases in rabbit and, possibly, feral cat populations). Off-target impacts of poisoning baits also need to be managed. In a highly populated area such as the SMLR, baiting also needs to be managed very carefully to prevent off-target impacts such as loss of pets.
- Tree die-back, from a variety of causes, but particularly lerps, mistletoe infestation, Mundulla Yellows, increased insect attack, vegetation clearance and/or altered water regimes. Many of these factors are correlated. Trees particularly susceptible to die-back in the study region are Pink Gums (*E. fasciculosa*) and River Red Gums (*E. camaldulensis*).
- The collection of moss rocks from the eastern part of the study region has been an issue for many years (MLRINRMG 2002). “While a code of practice has been produced for moss rock collectors, there is still some concern regarding the habitat loss and landscape impact associated with the industry (MLRINRMG 2002).

- Loss of dead trees and associated tree hollows. This is also a significant issues in the South East of the State. Currently dead trees are not protected under clearance legislation. However, there are proposed amendments to the *Native Vegetation Act (1991)* to protect standing dead trees that are 600mm or more in diameter and 300mm above the ground and provide habitat for roosting and nesting for a range of species (MLRINRMG 2002).

Actions to conserve habitat will in the long-term also help ensure the long-term viability of fauna populations currently under threat. For example, increasing the area of remnant vegetation, enhancing its condition, and providing corridors and buffer zones linking remnant patches will assist in maintaining threatened fauna species.

The major challenge to arrest, and hopefully reverse, the ongoing decline in the biodiversity of the SMLR is still before us.

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