



To: Local Government

From: Environment Policy Unit

Organisation: WALGA

Date: 4 July 2019

Subject: Tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) woodlands and forests of the Swan Coastal Plain listed as Critically Endangered by the Australian Government.

IN BRIEF:

Operational Area:	Land Use Planning
Key Issues:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 'Tuart (<i>Eucalyptus gomphocephala</i>) woodlands and forests of the Swan Coastal Plain' have been listed as Critically Endangered under the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i>, effective as of 4 July 2019. • The Approved Conservation Advice provides information on how to identify areas of Tuart woodlands and forests that are protected under national environmental law, and the priority research and conservation actions. The conservation advice is available on the Department of the Environment and Energy's website.

Background

The Tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) woodlands and forests are only found on the Swan Coastal Plain in Western Australia. The ecological community is mapped along the coast from Jurien Bay to Sabina River near Busselton, and is currently known to occur within 20 Local Government Authorities (Bunbury, Busselton, Cambridge, Capel, Cockburn, Dandaragan, Dardanup, Fremantle, Gingin, Harvey, Joondalup, Kwinana, Mandurah, Murray, Nedlands, Rockingham, South Perth, Stirling, Wanneroo and Waroona). More than 80% of the Tuart woodlands and forests have been lost, with only 5,700 ha (5%) of the remaining extent protected in reserves. Protection of these woodlands and forests, containing the largest trees on the Swan Coastal Plain, also protects habitat for a range of threatened species, including the western ringtail possum and black cockatoos.

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) conducted a listing assessment and considered advice received during the public comment period from October to December 2017. WALGA provided a submission on behalf of the Local Government sector that supported the proposed listing. In 2018, the TSSC recommended to the Minister for the Environment that the ecological community merits listing as critically endangered under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). In 2019, the Minister accepted the Committee's advice and adopted the approved conservation advice. This listing is effective as of 4 July 2019.

The objective of the conservation advice is to mitigate the risk of extinction of the Tuart woodlands and forests, and help recover its biodiversity and function through protecting it from significant impacts and by guiding management and recovery. A recovery plan is not recommended for the ecological community.

The ecological community is not currently protected at the State level under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*.

Key diagnostic characteristics and condition thresholds

To be considered part of the ecological community, patches of vegetation should be discrete and mostly continuous areas with at least two living Tuart trees in the canopy layer. The patch boundary is 30 m beyond the outer canopy of the established Tuart trees (including dead trees).

If a patch meets the above key diagnostic characteristics, in addition to several characteristics related to location, structural form, and commonly occurring native species and fauna, the following applies:

- 5 ha patches or greater, in any condition, are part of the nationally protected ecological community
- 0.5 – 5 ha patches need on ground surveys of native plant species richness, cover, habitat values, evidence of regeneration and landscape characteristics to determine whether they are nationally protected
- patches smaller than 0.5 ha, in any condition, are not nationally protected

Patches may include small areas of bare ground or roads and buildings, so long as they do not significantly alter the overall function of the ecological community.

Very small (<0.5 ha) and/or degraded patches that do not meet the minimum thresholds for size, native vegetation cover or species diversity, such as isolated trees or remnants where native species have been largely replaced by weeds, are not protected under national environmental law. However they should still be considered as possible sites for recovery, which may improve them to the point that they may be regarded as part of the protected ecological community.

The recommended minimum buffer zone for the ecological community is 30 m, however the buffer zone is not nationally protected.

Site surveys should sample species richness in monitoring plots of at least 100 m² (10 m x 10 m or equivalent size) along transects. Surveys should ideally be undertaken in more than one season, over more than one year during periods of adverse conditions (e.g. drought), and delayed until there has been regeneration after a disturbance event (e.g. fire). It is important to note that reference to the existing mapping of the vegetation community should be taken as indicative rather than definitive. The conservation advice notes that it is a very high priority to verify floristics, status and condition of mapped Tuart patches to facilitate identification of the highest priorities for retention.

The Tuart woodlands and forests ecological community encompasses considerable natural variation across its range, and has also been subject to varying degrees of disturbance and degradation. The history of degradation (e.g. clearing and regrowth), and disturbance (e.g. fire, flooding, grazing) has been taken into account in developing the key diagnostic characteristics and condition thresholds, as sometimes these factors may temporarily mask good condition sites.

Considerations for Local Government

Listing means that any activity likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community needs to be referred to the Australian Government Department of Environment and Energy for assessment and approval.

The conservation advice states that the highest priorities are to prevent vegetation clearance, fragmentation and habitat degradation of the ecological community and of surrounding native vegetation. The use of offsets to compensate for damage to the ecological community should be a last consideration after avoidance and mitigation of adverse actions. Identifying and protecting high quality remnants in the landscape in secure conservation reserves is required, as is retaining appropriate connectivity between patches and allocating resources for management. Preventing impacts in areas adjacent to or near patches is also important, for instance avoiding activities that could cause significant hydrological change.

Managing threats such as weed invasion, diseases and grazing is also a high priority. Identification of suitable fire regimes and fire suppression strategies are also important as the ecological community is vulnerable to post-fire weed incursion and also has conservation significant fauna associated with the mature trees. Active restoration or natural regeneration is encouraged, and it is recommended that management actions involve local residents and Aboriginal communities.

For further information, please contact **Melanie Davies, Biodiversity and Sustainability Project Officer**, on 9213 2065 or email mdavies@walga.asn.au.