

National biodiversity plan is a big tax benefit

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Wildlife corridors can help turn the tide of extinctions.

THE great challenge of carbon-tax politics is to persuade voters to look past short-term costs to long-term benefits. The federal government has conspicuously failed in this. Public debate has largely ignored the positives: cutting greenhouse gas emissions, increasing energy security and investing in sustainability. Yesterday, *The Age* reported on one great potential benefit: an ambitious scheme of wildlife corridors to preserve Australia's biodiversity.

The government is considering the plan, which was devised by an expert panel. The idea is to create links between national and state parks, indigenous land and private properties to stem an alarming loss of biodiversity as habitats become fragmented and isolated. "This has reduced the environment's capacity to function naturally and disrupted the connectivity of the ecosystems that support our economy and well-being," the plan says.

The plan reflects a policy shift from saving single species to protecting habitats. This is based on solid ecological principles. Study after study finds that isolated small reserves lose species over time. Ecologists have a formula to calculate the sustainable number of species, which is directly related to habitat area and isolation. It is not only that small reserves are vulnerable to a disaster. To sustain a population, many species require protected areas much larger than the territory they occupy. Migratory species - and Australia has many - cannot survive in a single reserve, and need to move along corridors of suitable habitat.

A further complication is climate change and its effects on habitat in reserves, which may become unsuitable for the species they were set up to protect. The temperature-driven moves of hundreds of species - permanent altitudinal and longitudinal shifts - are well documented. If such species face barriers to their movement to suitable nearby habitat, they become even more vulnerable.

Rates of biodiversity loss are the worst in history. The United Nations' *Global Biodiversity Report* warns that the ecological foundations on which society depends are threatened. Soil fertility, crop production and clean water are at a high risk of "rapid degradation and collapse". We do not know the tipping points for biodiversity loss, but we are in a position of responsibility for sustaining healthy life on this planet.

Australia is one of 17 countries categorised as "mega-diverse". About 80 per cent of our mammals, reptiles and plants exist nowhere else. Yet this country has one of the world's worst mammal extinction rates - 18 species since European settlement - and one in five surviving species is threatened. Australia has the greatest number of threatened reptiles. About one in six bird species is at risk of extinction. Vegetation clearing - 500 species are endangered or vulnerable - is a major driver of habitat and biodiversity loss.

Successful habitat conservation requires funding and public support. These are key elements of the plan. The money is there, in the carbon tax's \$1 billion Biodiversity Fund as well as the \$2 billion Caring for Our Country program, to fund conservation, revegetation, carbon storage and land acquisition. A new law would enable the minister to declare a national wildlife corridor. The panel identifies six and suggests four more.

The corridors will build on the work of Landcare and conservation volunteers and property owners. Panel member Deborah Kerr, of the National Farmers Federation, said the plan was not about imposing projects on communities and landholders. Community groups could nominate corridors for listing. "It's about building on something that is already there," said Ellie Clark of Trust for Nature, which is involved in one of the corridors, known as Habitat 141°.

The difference is that the biodiversity benefits of isolated conservation efforts will be multiplied by a national system of habitat corridors. This is a visionary scheme. The government should adopt and promote the plan as one of the great benefits of the carbon tax.

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/national-biodiversity-plan-is-a-big-tax-benefit-20120308-1un4t.html>