



Consultation Document on Listing Eligibility and Conservation Actions

Cophixalus mcdonaldi (Mount Elliot Nursery Frog)

You are invited to provide your views and supporting reasons related to:

- 1) the eligibility of *Cophixalus mcdonaldi* (Mount Elliot Nursery Frog) for inclusion on the EPBC Act threatened species list in the Critically Endangered category; and
- 2) the necessary conservation actions for the above species.

Evidence provided by experts, stakeholders and the general public are welcome. Responses can be provided by any interested person.

Anyone may nominate a native species, ecological community or threatening process for listing under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) or for a transfer of an item already on the list to a new listing category. The Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) undertakes the assessment of species to determine eligibility for inclusion in the list of threatened species and provides its recommendation to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment.

Responses are to be provided in writing either by email to:
species.consultation@environment.gov.au

or by mail to:

The Director
Marine and Freshwater Species Conservation Section
Wildlife, Heritage and Marine Division
Department of the Environment and Energy
PO Box 787
Canberra ACT 2601

Responses are required to be submitted by 22 October 2018.

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General background information about listing threatened species

The Australian Government helps protect species at risk of extinction by listing them as threatened under Part 13 of the EPBC Act. Once listed under the EPBC Act, the species becomes a Matter of National Environmental Significance (MNES) and must be protected from significant impacts through the assessment and approval provisions of the EPBC Act. More information about threatened species is available on the department's website at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html>.

Public nominations to list threatened species under the EPBC Act are received annually by the department. In order to determine if a species is eligible for listing as threatened under the EPBC Act, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) undertakes a rigorous scientific assessment of its status to determine if the species is eligible for listing against a set of criteria. These criteria are available on the Department's website at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/pubs/guidelines-species.pdf>.

As part of the assessment process, the Committee consults with the public and stakeholders to obtain specific details about the species, as well as advice on what conservation actions might be appropriate. Information provided through the consultation process is considered by the Committee in its assessment. The Committee provides its advice on the assessment (together with comments received) to the Minister regarding the eligibility of the species for listing under a particular category and what conservation actions might be appropriate. The Minister decides to add, or not to add, the species to the list of threatened species under the EPBC Act. More detailed information about the listing process is at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/nominations.html>.

To promote the recovery of listed threatened species and ecological communities, conservation advices and where required, recovery plans are made or adopted in accordance with Part 13 of the EPBC Act. Conservation advices provide guidance at the time of listing on known threats and priority recovery actions that can be undertaken at a local and regional level. Recovery plans describe key threats and identify specific recovery actions that can be undertaken to enable recovery activities to occur within a planned and logical national framework. Information about recovery plans is available on the department's website at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery.html>.

Information about this consultation process

Responses to this consultation can be provided electronically or in hard copy to the contact addresses provided on Page 1. All responses received will be provided in full to the Committee and then to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment.

In providing comments, please provide references to published data where possible. Should the Committee use the information you provide in formulating its advice, the information will be attributed to you and referenced as a 'personal communication' unless you provide references or otherwise attribute this information (please specify if your organisation requires that this information is attributed to your organisation instead of yourself). The final advice by the Committee will be published on the department's website following the listing decision by the Minister.

Information provided through consultation may be subject to freedom of information legislation and court processes. It is also important to note that under the EPBC Act, the deliberations and recommendations of the Committee are confidential until the Minister has made a final decision on the nomination, unless otherwise determined by the Minister.

Privacy notice

The Department will collect, use, store and disclose the personal information you provide in a manner consistent with the Department's obligations under the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the Department's Privacy Policy.

Any personal information that you provide within, or in addition to, your comments in the threatened species assessment process may be used by the Department for the purposes of its functions relating to threatened species assessments, including contacting you if we have any questions about your comments in the future.

Further, the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have agreed to share threatened species assessment documentation (including comments) to ensure that all States and Territories have access to the same documentation when making a decision on the status of a potentially threatened species. This is also known as the '[common assessment method](#)'. As a result, any personal information that you have provided in connection with your comments may be shared between Commonwealth, State or Territory government entities to assist with their assessment processes.

The Department's Privacy Policy contains details about how respondents may access and make corrections to personal information that the Department holds about the respondent, how respondents may make a complaint about a breach of an Australian Privacy Principle, and how the Department will deal with that complaint. A copy of the Department's Privacy Policy is available at: <http://environment.gov.au/privacy-policy>

Cophixalus mcdonaldi

(Mount Elliot Nursery Frog)

Taxonomy

Conventionally accepted as *Cophixalus mcdonaldi* (Zweifel 1985).

Species Information

Description

The Mount Elliot Nursery Frog is smooth and pale to dark brown above with scattered darker markings, which typically include a dark streak above each arm, an obscure interorbital bar, dark canthal and temporal streaks and dark facial markings. It is smooth and pale underneath with dark stippling and mottling and the discs of the fingers and toes are well developed (Cogger 2014). Males are up to 23 mm snout-to-vent length (SVL) in size and females up to 26 mm SVL (Zweifel 1985). The male call is a short trill that differs from all other Australian *Cophixalus* species (Hoskin 2004).

The eggs of microhylids are relatively large and are laid in very moist soil. The tadpole develops inside the egg and when it has completed metamorphosis it hatches from the egg as a fully formed froglet (Zweifel 1985). One gravid female Mount Elliot Nursery Frog was found to contain 17 eggs (Anstis 2017).

Distribution

The Mount Elliot Nursery Frog is found only on Mount Elliot, south-east of Townsville (Zweifel 1985; Hoskin 2004; Williams 2007). Mount Elliot is the highest mountain in the region, located in the Bowling Green National Park and is relatively undisturbed. The Mount Elliot Nursery Frog has only been recorded in areas from 900 m and above (Hoskin 2004). The population occurs just outside the Wet Tropics biogeographic region of northern Queensland.

Relevant Biology/Ecology

Very little is known of the specific biology of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog. The species is most closely related to *C. neglectus* (Williams 2007) but like *C. concinnus*, it is a high altitude rainforest-restricted species (Shoo & Williams 2004). Frogs have been found during the day sheltered in fallen palm fronds and beneath rocks, with the males emerging to call in the late afternoon (Hoskin 2004). Males concentrate around rocky creek margins and call from the ground level, or close to it (Hoskin 2004). Individuals have also been found in rotted tree stumps, under flat rocks and in rock cracks, with a clutch of up to eight eggs located inside a small hole (2 cm in diameter) in a solid rock face (Williams et al. 1993).

The microhylids of the Australian Wet Tropics differ from most other frog species in that they are terrestrial breeders and do not need surface water to breed. They require high levels of soil and litter moisture to prevent desiccation of the eggs during development (Williams 2007). One parent (usually the male) will generally attend to the eggs until hatching occurs (Felton et al. 2006; Hoskin 2004; Williams 2007). The embryo develops directly in the egg and then hatches out as a tiny froglet. The eggs are large relative to other frog species and clutch sizes are small (Hoskin 2004).

The generation length of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog is unknown. Male microhylids (*C. ornatus*) have been found aged between 4 and 14 years (average age of males was 5.5) (Williams 2007).

Threats

Threats to the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog include climate change, habitat degradation and introduced species. The table below lists the threats impacting the species in approximate order of severity of risk, based on available evidence.

Number	Threat factor	Threat status	Evidence base
1.0	Climate change		
1.1	Temperature increase, extreme weather events e.g. cyclones, droughts	Known potential	<p>The Mount Elliot Nursery Frog is found only at high altitude on a single mountain top in northern Queensland. Distribution modelling for congeneric species suggests it could lose a substantial proportion of its available habitat due to climate change (Williams et al. 2003; Meynecke 2004; Shoo 2005; Williams & Hilbert 2006).</p> <p>Climate change modelling carried out by Williams and Hilbert (2006) suggests that five <i>Cophixalus</i> species would lose more than 50 percent of their core habitat with a 1 °C increase in temperature. However an increase by 3 - 5 °C is predicted to be more likely in the next 50 years.</p> <p>Changes in hydrology and other effects of climate change (e.g. reduction in food supply) may also alter the susceptibility of frogs to disease, but these impacts are likely to be variable among species and sites (DoEE 2016).</p>
2.0	Habitat loss and degradation		
2.1	Clearing, trampling, fragmentation, altered hydrology	Known potential	Feral pigs are responsible for habitat damage and potentially cause adult frog mortality (Richards et al. 1993).
3.0	Invasive species		
3.1	Yellow Crazy Ants (<i>Anoplolepis gracilipes</i>)	Known potential	<p>Yellow crazy ants spray formic acid to subdue prey, which causes burns and irritates the skin and eyes of animals. They can have severe impacts on a range of ecological processes and lead to significant loss of biodiversity. Yellow crazy ants were detected within the World Heritage Area and Little Mulgrave National Park in 2012 and now cover up to 61 ha (WTMA 2016) within these protected areas. In December 2013 yellow crazy ants were also detected in the Kuranda area (WTMA 2016).</p>
4.0	Disease		
4.1	Amphibian chytrid fungus	Known current	Chytridiomycosis is an infectious disease caused by the amphibian chytrid fungus (<i>Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis</i>) that affects

			amphibians worldwide, causing mass die-offs and some species extinctions (DoEE 2016). However, the prevalence of chytrid is extremely low in Australian microhylids (Hauselberger & Alford 2012).
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Assessment of available information in relation to the EPBC Act Criteria and Regulations

Criterion 1. Population size reduction (reduction in total numbers)			
Population reduction (measured over the longer of 10 years or 3 generations) based on any of A1 to A4			
	Critically Endangered Very severe reduction	Endangered Severe reduction	Vulnerable Substantial reduction
A1	≥ 90%	≥ 70%	≥ 50%
A2, A3, A4	≥ 80%	≥ 50%	≥ 30%
A1 Population reduction observed, estimated, inferred or suspected in the past and the causes of the reduction are clearly reversible AND understood AND ceased.	<i>based on any of the following</i>	(a) direct observation [except A3]	
A2 Population reduction observed, estimated, inferred or suspected in the past where the causes of the reduction may not have ceased OR may not be understood OR may not be reversible.		(b) an index of abundance appropriate to the taxon	
A3 Population reduction, projected or suspected to be met in the future (up to a maximum of 100 years) [(a) cannot be used for A3]		(c) a decline in area of occupancy, extent of occurrence and/or quality of habitat	
A4 An observed, estimated, inferred, projected or suspected population reduction where the time period must include both the past and the future (up to a max. of 100 years in future), and where the causes of reduction may not have ceased OR may not be understood OR may not be reversible.		(d) actual or potential levels of exploitation	
		(e) the effects of introduced taxa, hybridization, pathogens, pollutants, competitors or parasites	

Evidence:

The generation length has not been determined for any species of Australian microhylids (Williams 2007). There are no data available to evaluate the population trend over any three generation period.

The data presented above appear to be insufficient to demonstrate if the species is eligible for listing under this criterion. However, the purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to better understand the species' status. This conclusion should therefore be considered to be tentative at this stage, as it may be changed as a result of responses to this consultation process.

Criterion 2. Geographic distribution as indicators for either extent of occurrence AND/OR area of occupancy			
	Critically Endangered Very restricted	Endangered Restricted	Vulnerable Limited
B1. Extent of occurrence (EOO)	< 100 km²	< 5,000 km²	< 20,000 km²
B2. Area of occupancy (AOO)	< 10 km²	< 500 km²	< 2,000 km²
AND at least 2 of the following 3 conditions indicating distribution is precarious for survival:			
(a) Severely fragmented OR Number of locations	= 1	≤ 5	≤ 10

(b)	Continuing decline observed, estimated, inferred or projected in any of: (i) extent of occurrence; (ii) area of occupancy; (iii) area, extent and/or quality of habitat; (iv) number of locations or subpopulations; (v) number of mature individuals
(c)	Extreme fluctuations in any of: (i) extent of occurrence; (ii) area of occupancy; (iii) number of locations or subpopulations; (iv) number of mature individuals

Evidence:

The calculated extent of occurrence (EOO) is 14 km², and the area of occupancy (AOO) is 12 km² (unpublished data DoEE 2017). These figures are based on the mapping of point records from post-1997 (20 year timeframe), compiled from state and Commonwealth agencies along with museums, research institutions and non-government organisations. The EOO was calculated using a minimum convex hull, and the AOO calculated using a 2x2 km grid cell method, based on the IUCN Red List Guidelines 2014.

There is a single population on Mt Elliot in northern Queensland (Zweifel 1985; Hoskin 2004). A continuing decline in area of occupancy and area, extent and/or quality of habitat may be inferred based on climate change (Shoo 2005).

The data presented above appear to demonstrate that the species is **eligible for listing as Critically Endangered** under this criterion. However, the purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to better understand the species' status. This conclusion should therefore be considered to be tentative at this stage, as it may be changed as a result of responses to this consultation process.

Criterion 3. Population size and decline			
	Critically Endangered Very low	Endangered Low	Vulnerable Limited
Estimated number of mature individuals	< 250	< 2,500	< 10,000
AND either (C1) or (C2) is true			
C1 An observed, estimated or projected continuing decline of at least (up to a max. of 100 years in future)	Very high rate 25% in 3 years or 1 generation (whichever is longer)	High rate 20% in 5 years or 2 generation (whichever is longer)	Substantial rate 10% in 10 years or 3 generations (whichever is longer)
C2 An observed, estimated, projected or inferred continuing decline AND its geographic distribution is precarious for its survival based on at least 1 of the following 3 conditions:			
(a) (i) Number of mature individuals in each subpopulation	≤ 50	≤ 250	≤ 1,000
(a) (ii) % of mature individuals in one subpopulation =	90 – 100%	95 – 100%	100%
(b) Extreme fluctuations in the number of mature individuals			

Evidence:

There are no data available to assess population size.

The data presented above appear to be insufficient to assess whether the species is eligible for listing under this criterion. However, the purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to better understand the species' status. This conclusion should therefore

be considered to be tentative at this stage, as it may be changed as a result of responses to this consultation process.

Criterion 4. Number of mature individuals			
	Critically Endangered Extremely low	Endangered Very Low	Vulnerable Low
Number of mature individuals	< 50	< 250	< 1,000

Evidence:

There are no data available to assess population size.

The data presented above appear to be insufficient to assess whether the species is eligible for listing under this criterion. However, the purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to better understand the species' status. This conclusion should therefore be considered to be tentative at this stage, as it may be changed as a result of responses to this consultation process.

Criterion 5. Quantitative Analysis			
	Critically Endangered Immediate future	Endangered Near future	Vulnerable Medium-term future
Indicating the probability of extinction in the wild to be:	≥ 50% in 10 years or 3 generations, whichever is longer (100 years max.)	≥ 20% in 20 years or 5 generations, whichever is longer (100 years max.)	≥ 10% in 100 years

Evidence:

Population viability analysis appears not to have been undertaken. Therefore, there are insufficient data to demonstrate if the species is eligible for listing under this criterion. However, the purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to better understand the species' status. This conclusion should therefore be considered to be tentative at this stage, as it may be changed as a result of responses to this consultation process.

Conservation Actions

Recovery Plan

A decision about whether there should be a recovery plan for this species has not yet been determined. The purpose of this consultation document is to elicit additional information to help inform this decision.

Primary Conservation Actions

- The primary conservation action for the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog is to manage known threats to the species, resolve knowledge gaps relating to potential threats to the species and prioritise conservation actions to address them.

Conservation and Management Priorities

Habitat loss and disturbance

- Implement a program ensuring suitable habitat is maintained in areas currently supporting populations of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog and investigate options for enhancing the resilience of the species' current habitat to climate change.
- Investigate the development of an assisted colonisation (translocation) strategy in response to the threat of climate change. The strategy should include consideration of the benefits and risks of undertaking a coordinated series of translocations of *Cophixalus* species to mountain tops further south as increased temperatures impact on their survival and reproductive success.

Invasive species (including threats from grazing, trampling, predation)

- Reduce the impacts of habitat destruction by feral pigs on existing populations by using fencing (where feasible) and reducing pig numbers.
- Control yellow crazy ants by baiting at critical stages of the ants' life cycle.

Disease

- Minimise the spread of the amphibian chytrid fungus by implementing suitable hygiene protocols (Murray 2011) to protect priority populations as described in the *Threat abatement plan for infection of amphibians with chytrid fungus resulting in chytridiomycosis* (Department of the Environment and Energy 2016).
- Provide disease identification and prevention protocols (methods of handling, diagnostic keys, etc.) to researchers and land managers for use in the field.

Stakeholder Engagement

- Interested nature conservation, land management and land holder groups could be engaged in conservation management activities, such as survey and monitoring, but should be made aware of the need to follow correct field practices and hygiene protocols to mitigate the risks of trampling and disease transmission. If necessary, use workshops to aid stakeholders in developing the skills and knowledge required to manage threats to this species while undertaking these activities.
- Inform the public about the status and recovery efforts for the species, e.g. by providing information to visitors to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and publicising the species through the media.

Survey and Monitoring priorities

- More precisely assess the population size, distribution and ecological requirements of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog.
- Design and implement a monitoring program for the Mount Elliott Nursery Frog.

Information and Research priorities

- Improve knowledge of the reproductive biology, age structure and growth rates of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog.
- Improve knowledge of the thermal tolerance limits of the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog and assess its possible response to future climate scenarios.
- Improve understanding of how climate change will likely impact on the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog due to altered temperatures, rainfall, environmental stressors and disease virulence.
- Improve understanding of husbandry methods for the species.

- Improve understanding of the impacts of feral pigs and yellow crazy ants on the Mount Elliot Nursery Frog.

References cited in the advice

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- Shoo L & Williams Y (2004). Altitudinal distribution and abundance of microhylid frogs (*Cophixalus* and *Austrochaperina*) of north-eastern Australia: baseline data for detecting biological responses to future climate change. *Australian Journal of Zoology* 52,667-676.
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- Williams Y (2007). Ecological differences between rare and common species of microhylid frogs of the Wet tropics biogeographic region. Thesis. James Cook University.
- Zweifel R G (1985). Australian frogs of the family Microhylidae. *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History* 182,265-388.

Other sources cited in the advice

- Atlas of Living Australia (2016)
<http://spatial.ala.org.au/?q=lsid%3Aurn%3Aisid%3Abiodiversity.org.au%3Aafd.taxon%3A586367df-b602-44e4-b462-f0c3d0e75a48#>
- Department of the Environment and Energy (2016). Threat abatement plan for infection of amphibians with chytrid fungus resulting in chytridiomycosis, Commonwealth of Australia 2016. Available from:
<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/infection-amphibians-chytrid-fungus-resulting-chytridiomycosis-2016>
- Department of the Environment and Energy (2017). Area of Occupancy and Extent of Occurrence for *Cophixalus mcdonaldi*. Unpublished report, Australian Government Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) (2016). Stamp Out Yellow Crazy Ants. Viewed 2 December 2016. Available on the internet at: <http://www.wettropics.gov.au/stamp-out-yellow-crazy-ants.html>.

Consultation questions

1. Do you agree with the current taxonomic position of the Australian Faunal Directory for this taxon (as identified in the draft conservation advice)?
2. Can you provide any additional references, information or estimates on longevity, age of maturity, average life span and generation length?
3. Has the survey effort for this taxon been adequate to determine its national distribution and adult population size?
4. Do you accept the estimate provided in the nomination for the current population size of the taxon?
5. For any population with which you are familiar, do you agree with the population estimate provided? If not, are you able to provide a plausible estimate based on your own knowledge? If so, please provide in the form:
 - Lower bound (estimated minimum):
 - Upper bound (estimated maximum):
 - Best Estimate:
 - Estimated level of Confidence: %
6. Can you provide any additional data, not contained in the current nomination, on declines in population numbers over the past or next 10 years or 3 generations, whichever is the longer?
7. Is the distribution as described in the nomination valid? Can you provide an estimate of the current geographic distribution (extent of occurrence or area of occupancy in km²) of this taxon?
8. Has this geographic distribution declined and if so by how much and over what period of time?
9. Do you agree that the taxon is eligible for inclusion on the threatened species list, in the category listed in the nomination?
10. Do you agree that the threats listed are correct and that their effects on the taxon are significant?
11. To what degree are the identified threats likely to impact on the taxon in the future?
12. Can you provide additional or alternative information on threats, past, current or potential that may adversely affect this taxon at any stage of its life cycle?
13. In seeking to facilitate the recovery of this taxon, can you provide management advice for the following:
 - What individuals or organisations are currently, or need to be, involved in planning to abate threats and any other relevant planning issues?
 - What threats are impacting on different populations, how variable are the threats and what is the relative importance of the different populations?
 - What recovery actions are currently in place, and can you suggest other actions that would help recover the taxon? Please provide evidence and background information.
14. Can you provide additional data or information relevant to this assessment?

15. Can you advise as to whether this species is of cultural significance to Indigenous Australians?