

# Warkworth Sands Woodland of the Sydney Basin Bioregion ecological community: listing assessment consultation guide

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Warkworth Sands Woodland ecological community © Stephen Bell, Eastcoast Flora Survey

This information guide is intended to help the public understand why the Warkworth Sands Woodland ecological community is being assessed as potentially threatened under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and what a listing would achieve and mean for people in the region.

<h2>Summary</h2>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Warkworth Sands Woodland ecological community is being assessed as potentially threatened under Australia’s national environment law, the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> (EPBC Act).</li> <li>• A scientific assessment is being undertaken to define and gather evidence on its current threat status.</li> <li>• Public consultation and input from land owners and managers, councils and other interested parties is an important and valuable part of the assessment process.</li> <li>• Consultation is open until <b>12pm, Wednesday 17 February 2016</b>.</li> <li>• The Minister for the Environment will decide whether to list the ecological community in 2016.</li> <li>• If listed under the EPBC Act there would be benefits to the environment and to associated ecosystem services; listing would also have benefits and opportunities for land managers and groups with an interest in the ecological community.</li> <li>• Listing would help promote a co-ordinated, ecosystem-scale approach to threat abatement in the region and for many threatened species that are found within the ecological community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listing the Warkworth Sands Woodland ecological community under the EPBC Act would mean that an activity that is likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community would need to be referred for assessment and approval.</li> <li>• The EPBC Act is not designed to stop people using their land. Existing and routine landholder and agricultural activities and actions previously approved under other legislation are generally exempt from the EPBC Act.</li> <li>• Some activities or developments do require referral.</li> <li>• The national environment law considers new activities such as large new developments, works or infrastructure (for example permanently clearing significant areas of intact or high-quality native vegetation for new residential, or industrial areas, or energy infrastructure).</li> </ul>

## Public consultation on the Warkworth sands woodland ecological community

The ecological community was placed on the 2014 Finalised Priority Assessment List and the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) is assessing its eligibility for listing. The Committee is an independent group of scientists appointed to provide advice on threatened species and ecological communities to the Australian Government Environment Minister.

Considering the views of stakeholders is a vital part of the assessment process. A formal public consultation period for the ecological community is now open and will **close on Wednesday 17 February 2016**. The Committee is seeking comments on the draft description for the ecological community, and the nomination to list the ecological community as 'Critically Endangered'. All relevant comments received will be forwarded to the Committee and to the Minister for consideration.

Once the Committee has completed its assessment, its advice on the conservation status will be forwarded to the Minister who will decide whether the ecological community should be listed and in which conservation category. Under the EPBC Act, the Minister's decision is made on whether the ecological community meets the listing criteria and whether the listing will benefit its survival. The Minister's decision is due in 2016.

## What is an ecological community under national environmental law?

Australia's national environmental law, the EPBC Act, protects what are known as Matters of National Environmental Significance. The Act is only triggered if there is likely to be a significant impact to any of these matters.

Threatened species and ecological communities are Matters of National Environmental Significance. The EPBC Act defines an ecological community as an assemblage of native species that inhabits a particular area in nature. They often relate to types of native vegetation, such as a certain kind of grassland, woodland or forest.

The native plants and animals within an ecological community have different roles and relationships that together contribute to the healthy functioning of the environment. Protecting native communities also protects ecosystem services such as: good quality air and water; healthy soils; natural prevention or control of erosion and salinity; shelter and feed for stock; and the storage of carbon. These all contribute to better productivity of our land and water, which benefits people and society.

Human settlements and infrastructure where an ecological community formerly occurred do not form part of the natural environment and are therefore not part of the ecological community — for example, sites where an ecological community has been cleared or replaced by crops, exotic pastures or developments. This also applies to sites where the ecological community exists in a highly-degraded or unnatural state. For instance, cropping lands and exotic pastures, or areas where much of the native vegetation has been replaced by exotic species, are no longer part of a natural ecological community.

## What is the listing assessment process?

The assessment by the independent Committee involves clarifying the definition of the ecological community, determining where it occurs, and rigorously assessing its eligibility for listing as nationally threatened. An ecological community must be demonstrated to be significantly impacted by identified threats. It should also be shown that if these threats are not managed, there is a risk that the ecological community may be changed irreversibly and its natural composition and/or function could be lost forever. Three categories exist for listing ecological communities, depending on the level of extinction risk: vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered.

## What is the Warkworth Sands Woodland ecological community?

- The ecological community is low woodland, dominated by *Angophora floribunda* (rough-barked apple) and *Banksia integrifolia* subsp. *integrifolia* (coast banksia) with other trees, shrubs and groundcover species typical of sandy soils.
- The ecological community has a highly restricted distribution in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales. The core distribution is in the Warkworth district, south of Singleton. The ecological community is known only from the Singleton Local Government Area (LGA).
- The composition of the ecological community at a particular site is influenced by many factors including the size of the site, rainfall and drought conditions and by its disturbance history (including clearing, grazing and fire).
- The canopy of the ecological community is typically dominated by *Angophora floribunda* (rough-barked apple). Other co-occurring tree species include *Eucalyptus blakelyi*-*E. tereticornis* (Blakely's red gum x forest red gum hybrid), *Eucalyptus crebra* (narrow leaved ironbark), *Eucalyptus glaucina* (slaty red gum), *Eucalyptus moluccana* (grey box), *Callitris endlicheri* (cypress pine), *Brachychiton populneus* subsp. *populneus* (kurrajong) and *Allocasuarina luehmannii* (buloke, bulloak).
- The ecological community typically has a tall shrubby midstorey of variable density. The shrub layer is likely to include *Acacia filicifolia* (fern-leaved wattle), *Banksia integrifolia* subsp. *integrifolia* (coast banksia), *Brachyloma daphnoides* subsp. *daphnoides*, *Breyneia oblongifolia* (breynia, coffee bush), *Hibbertia linearis* and *Persoonia linearis* (narrow-leaved geebung).
- The groundcover is dominated by *Pteridium esculentum* (bracken) and *Imperata cylindrical* var. *major* (blady grass). Other species likely to occur are *Aristida calycina* var. *calycina* (dark wire-grass), *Aristida vagans* (three-awned speargrass), *Dianella revoluta* var. *revoluta*, *Hardenbergia violacea* (coral pea), *Lomadra confertifolia*, *Lomadra glauca* (pale mat-rush), *Lomadra leucocephala* subsp. *leucocephala* (woolly mat-rush), *Lomadra multiflora* subsp. *multiflora* (many-flowered mat-rush), *Microlaena stipoides* var. *stipoides* (weeping grass), *Persoonia linearis* (narrow-leaved geebung), *Pimelea linifolia* subsp. *linifolia* (slender rice flower) and *Pomax umbellata*.

## Why is the ecological community important?

Much of the vegetation of the Hunter Valley has been cleared, fragmented or heavily modified, and with this, many species have become locally, regionally or globally threatened. In particular, fewer mammal species are now found in this area. For many of the plant and animal species that remain, remnants of ecological communities such as Warkworth Sands Woodland are critical for their survival. For example, it provides habitat for woodland birds, many of which are threatened.

More than 85% of the ecological community has been cleared and what remains is subject to ongoing pressures including further clearing and fragmentation mostly associated with mining activities. Other impacts associated with human activities include displacement by invasive species and changes to fire regimes. Further threats to the ecological community include plant disease and climate change.

## What are the benefits of listing an ecological community as nationally threatened?

There are a number of benefits to listing ecological communities under Australia's national environment law:

- Listing an ecological community can help protect the landscape that provides connectivity, corridors and refuges essential to the ecological function, health and biodiversity of the region. It can protect critical habitat for threatened species and for other species under pressure in the region. In turn, this helps foster the ecosystem services associated with an ecological community.
- Listing threatened ecological communities helps protect them from future significant human impacts that may cause further decline. The aim of the national environment law is to ensure the matters of national environmental significance are given due consideration, along with broader economic, social and other issues in the planning of any large projects. Where possible, significant adverse impacts to the environment should be avoided; or the impacts mitigated, reduced or offset, when unavoidable.
- National listing encourages agencies and community/Landcare groups to apply for environmental funding opportunities for conservation and recovery works. The Australian Government has a variety of programmes to encourage land managers to continue to conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services on their properties.
- A conservation advice, published at the time of listing, provides guidance and options for environmental decision-making, including rehabilitation and conservation initiatives in the region.
- In the case of this ecological community, a listing would:
  - provide landscape-scale protection that complements the existing national protection of threatened plants and animals found within the ecological community;
  - protect environmental values, including ecosystem functions and services associated with the ecological community, which contribute to the long-term landscape productivity.

## **Will activities that happened before listing, or ongoing and routine activities, need to be referred?**

No. Activities which were routine, or began before the year 2000 may generally continue without referral/approval. Such exemptions apply to activities that were either already legally approved (termed 'prior authorisation'), or are ongoing (termed 'continuing use').

Land management and other practices undertaken in line with the State native vegetation laws and guidelines are also typically exempt from the EPBC Act.

Council, farming and other practices which are unlikely to require approval from the Australian Government include the following:

- ongoing grazing, horticultural or cropping activities
- maintaining existing fences, roads, internal access tracks and firebreaks
- maintaining existing gardens and orchards
- maintaining existing farm dams or water storages
- replacing and maintaining sheds, yards and other existing buildings
- controlling weeds and spraying for pests on individual properties; and
- management of feral pest species.

In all these cases impacts on important patches of the ecological community (e.g. high quality, important corridors for wildlife) should be avoided.

## **Will the listing impact EPBC approvals for the Warkworth Continuation Project?**

No. Actions determined to be a controlled action, or approved under the EPBC Act prior to a new ecological community listing, are not required to take subsequent listings into account.

## **What actions might need to be referred for approval under the EPBC Act?**

The environment assessment process under the EPBC Act involves:

- referral (only if the action is likely to have a significant impact)
- assessment (usually involves developing an Environmental Impact Statement with the proponent), and
- approval from the Minister (who considers the environmental, social and economic factors involved).

New, changed or intensified activities that are likely to have a significant impact on a listed ecological community (i.e. an irreversible or long-term detrimental impact) may need Australian Government approval and should therefore be referred.

The major activity that is likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community is permanently clearing large or otherwise important areas of intact or high-quality native vegetation. Such activities might include, for example: major mining, residential, commercial or other industrial development; building new roads or widening existing roads or tracks (e.g. for electricity transmission lines).

To help reduce the significance of actions, the EPBC Act promotes the avoidance and mitigation of impacts, wherever that is possible.

## Where can I get further information?

- Information on threatened ecological communities: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities>
- Information on the proposed listing of the ecological communities: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/nominations/comment>
- The listing process: [www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html)
- The EPBC referral and approval process: [www.environment.gov.au/epbc/](http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/)
- Australian Government natural resource management initiatives: [www.nrm.gov.au/](http://www.nrm.gov.au/)
- The department's Community Information Unit: by phone on **1800 803 772** (freecall), or email at [ciu@environment.gov.au](mailto:ciu@environment.gov.au)