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COVID recovery in Australasia – Searching for silver linings for the private land sector

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What a year 2020 has been. In Australia, we entered it in a fog of smoke, with the most extreme wildfires the nation has ever seen decimating an area the size of Syria (18.6m hectares or 46 million acres) and killing billions of animals. By January, the smoke had travelled to New Zealand and then across the South Pacific Ocean to Chile and Argentina.

Hot on the tail of Black Summer came COVID-19. Both Australia and New Zealand responded relatively swiftly to this threat, imposing physical distancing measures and in parts strict lockdowns that have left the region almost COVID free (for now).

Both these disasters have brought into sharp focus the interconnectedness of humans with their natural environment. They have highlighted the urgent need to reverse the degradation and fragmentation of natural ecosystems: not only to ensure human health, but also to protect wildlife and biodiversity and support a more sustainable economy.

In recognition of this reality, the Australasia region has seen the introduction of a number of economic stimulus measures that have the added benefit of supporting biodiversity. The New Zealand government has taken a proactive approach with its \$1.2 billion '[Jobs for Nature](#)' package, which will create 11,000 nature jobs to combat unemployment and supplement pandemic-affected sectors. There will be a focus on conserving fragile ecosystems such as wetlands and rivers, through revegetation, weeding and feral animal control. This will provide employment through partnerships between the community, Māori land managers and government departments. The private land conservation sector is expected to be supported as part of this program: Chief Executive of the [NZ Queen Elizabeth II National Trust](#) Dan Coup has said that 'we are optimistic that this program will include funding for conservation covenants, as a means of permanently securing investments in nature'.

In Australia, the federal government has allocated just a [fraction](#) of this amount to environmental projects, with leadership coming more from the states. In Victoria for example, the \$500 million [Working for Victoria](#) initiative is helping people impacted by COVID to gain skills and find employment, including in the environment sector. [Trust for Nature](#) Southwest Victoria Manager Adam Blake has been closely involved in working with crews to deliver high priority activities on covenants and private conservation land. 'This initiative has had outstanding results' he said, 'and is not just accelerating positive outcomes for nature but enhancing relationships with community, Landcare groups and even the [corporate sector](#). I just wish we could maintain this level of funding and commitment out the other side of COVID.' Other COVID investment targeting jobs in conservation has included the Queensland Government's \$10 million [Reef Assist](#) program. In Western Australia the Government has invested \$60.3

million into the [WA Recovery Plan](#), which will support projects that protect our environment and create more than 1,000 conservation jobs across the State.

These initiatives are something the [Australian Land Conservation Alliance](#) (ALCA) would like to see more of. Earlier this year ALCA, together with a group of more than 70 farming and conservation organisations, wrote to [Governments](#) across Australia calling for large scale investment in conservation, land management and restoration. The proposed \$4 billion '[Recovery and Renewal](#)' proposal would employ up to 24,000 Australians over two years, providing work to those in areas and industries that have been hardest hit by the COVID economic crisis. 'This is such an important proposal' says Joanna Osborn, Executive and Partnerships Officer at ALCA, 'not only to get Australians back on their feet but also to pave a pathway to a more sustainable and resilient Australia'. The stakeholder group continues to negotiate with the federal government about resourcing and implementing this proposal. All crises force society to reflect and adapt. Previous upheavals have shone a light on social, economic and racial inequalities and kick-started a 'new normal'. Time and again our environment, and the ecosystem services it provides, has been overlooked and undervalued – this is a historical opportunity to change the status quo. If we have learned nothing else from 2020, it is that really substantial financial and social mobilisation is possible in response to a crisis: let's harness that momentum to shape the future we want to see.

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