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Conservation covenants: Innovating for the future

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November 2, 2023

The Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA) recently concluded its annual [Private Land Conservation Conference](#) – the first in-person gathering of PLC practitioners across Australia since 2019. The conference was better attended than ever and explored a wide range of topics around the theme “Unite for Nature”.



Bush Heritage Australia's Pullen Pullen Special Wildlife Reserve. The first Special Wildlife Reserve to be declared under the legislation. Credit: Felicity Shapland, Pullen Pullen.

One widely attended workshop, facilitated by Dr. Lilian Pearce from La Trobe University and the University of Tasmania, took an in-depth look at ways in which conservation covenants—also called easements—are innovating for the future.

Titled “Improving and adapting covenants and covenanting programs to attract new partners and drive better outcomes for conservation”, the workshop tackled three key topics: (1) how covenants can support conservation outcomes in farming landscapes; (2) how covenants can be updated to recognize and embed cultural land management by Traditional Owners across all landscapes; and (3) how covenants can be used to achieve more robust protection, particularly in the context of mining and other extractive industries.

The session garnered cross-sector interest, attracting participants from not-for-profit organizations, businesses, and government agencies.

Speakers from the New South Wales Government’s [Biodiversity Conservation Trust](#) (BCT) highlighted the importance of stewardship payments in creating a value proposition for landholders considering permanently protecting biodiversity. Mick O’Flynn, BCT director of programs, spoke about a [pilot](#) that the organization is running to provide stewardship payments to Traditional Owners caring for Country that they own and manage. Principal Project Officer for the BCT, Donna Hazell, spoke about opportunities to engage sustainable land managers in covenants and the importance of including payments for farmers to provide stable cashflow in a volatile market.

[Trust for Nature](#) (TfN) has recently updated its standard covenant to better recognize and embed cultural land-management approaches and provide clearer pathways for Traditional Owners to access and practice culture on covenanted land. TfN Senior Policy Advisor Cecilia Riebl—also the ILCN’s regional representative for Australasia—shared learnings from this process, identifying key challenges and future opportunities.



Speakers at the ALCA PLC Conference. Courtesy: Cecilia Riebl.

“While our covenants did not restrict these practices previously, it was important to us to explicitly embrace them, and normalise the idea among non-Indigenous landholders of the possibility of access to their land by Traditional Owners,” explained Riebl.

Felicity Shapland, a special wildlife reserve project officer for [Bush Heritage Australia](#), shared her organization’s experience entering into Queensland’s first [Special Wildlife Reserve](#) (SWR) at [Pullen Pullen](#). SWRs offer the highest class of protected area in Australia, akin to national parks, excluding all incompatible land uses, including mining and forestry. She shared some of the benefits of more robust protections on private land, including investor certainty, and challenges, including navigating stringent standards for eligibility and avoiding perverse outcomes.

PhD candidates Sarah Brugler from the University of Tasmania and Clare Bracey from Monash University made the case for covenants, identified key research needs, and looked at the key challenges and solutions for bringing new actors into the PLC fold.

A wrap-up session addressed opportunities for covenant innovation in the next 10 years, what the sector needs to take up these opportunities, and who it needs as partners and champions.

The following summary draws on points raised throughout the morning:

- **Conservation covenants need to be properly resourced.** This means long term funding support, opportunities for top-up management activity funding, and outreach/knowledge support;
- **Research, monitoring, and knowledge-sharing will support a strong conservation program.** We need to know more about what works, where, why, and how. We must also share this information through our networks;
- **Private protection can be more inclusive and appealing through positive language and communication.** Individuals and community can be brought together through language about covenants that celebrate “care” and see protection as an opportunity rather than a barrier;
- **We need to balance traditional conservation with access to alternative income streams.** With multiple emerging markets we need to find ways to allow landholders to engage with these markets as well as participate in private protection measures;
- **Conservation covenant programs can better support Traditional Owners.** Policy reform, genuine engagement, tailored agreements, and cultural competency training and guidelines are important tools to ensure private land protection fosters Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ access, opportunities, and practices; and
- **Opportunities still exist for innovative policy that strengthens permanent protection on private land.** Conservation covenants are supported through multiple pathways and by many models. We need not be limited by how things have been done in the past in addressing our ambitions for the future.

As momentum increases around the implementation of 30x30, there is a clear need for on-title protection mechanisms to reflect contemporary values and allow for dynamic application. The approaches explored at this national forum provide a pathway for these changes to be implemented and mainstreamed.

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