



# Australian Alps to Atherton

## A continental-scale connectivity conservation proposal



As a first step, the Ministers can establish a group consisting of conservation agency heads and community representatives. This group would undertake the initial planning and recommend final implementation strategies to the Ministers. The project could be implemented in sections or pilot areas where necessary.

### Valuable land that must be conserved

The forests and woodlands from the Australian Alps to Atherton:

- contain three World Heritage Areas – Wet Tropics, Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves (CERRA) and the Greater Blue Mountains; and three Ramsar-listed wetlands – Blue Lake, Ginini Flats and Little Llangothlin Nature Reserve.
- provide habitat for more than 8257 species of indigenous vascular plants, of which 2144 (26%) are endemic, including the world's tallest eucalypt species (*E. regnans*). The world's oldest and rarest tree species, the endangered Wollemi pine, also lives here.
- provide habitat for 1235 or more species of animals of which 152 (23%) are endemic, including endangered tree-climbing kangaroos, the primitive musky rat-kangaroo, mountain pygmy possum, cassowary and ground parrot.

- have Aboriginal dreaming tracks, pathways, relics, places and Country that have been highly significant to Aboriginal people for over 40,000 years.
- are the longest unfragmented north-south mountainous and natural landscape in Australia, enabling unique plants and animals to evolve and move across latitudes and altitudes.
- contain headwaters that capture the most reliable rainfall in eastern Australia and provide clean water for most cities, industries and agricultural production. This water also flows to the Great Barrier Reef and to aquatic systems that provide breeding grounds for local fisheries.
- are a source of clean air, and vegetation that can absorb carbon dioxide emissions.
- have outstanding landscapes for recreation, nature-based tourism and improving health and wellbeing. The area contains the largest, most accessible mountainous recreation areas in Australia, and one of the longest walking tracks in the world – the 5330-km Bicentennial National Trail, which extends from Cooktown in Queensland to Healesville in Victoria. Many national parks in the area are accessible to 11 million Australians, being within a four-hour drive of major cities.

**The onset of climate change is a significant threat to ecosystems, and is likely to proceed at a rate that will exceed their natural adaptive capacities. The result will be the decline and ongoing extinction of many plant and animal species.**

Australian Alps to Atherton is a proposal for landowners of different tenures and managers to work together to conserve, protect and restore landscapes and ecosystems along the Great Dividing Range and Great Escarpment of eastern Australia. It is a vision that can only be achieved by governments, landholders and the community, the best available science and cultural knowledge, and environmental stewardship. The idea of better protecting corridors at a continental scale across existing tenures is already being pursued in other parts of the world.

The proposal aims to connect landscapes and ecosystems for 2800 km from the Australian Alps to the Atherton Tablelands.

By managers and landowners of different tenures working together, we can:

- improve the resilience of ecosystems and species to adapt to the threats from climate change, changed fire regimes, pests and weeds
- increase awareness through better coordination and management of knowledge, science and planning; and use of new and existing tools.

This proposal:

- is an opportunity for Australians to connect mountainous environments from north-south on a continental scale over the maximum possible elevation and climate range
- saves a connected sample of unique landscapes and ecosystems that are arguably the terrestrial equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef
- conserves the highest concentrations of Australia's plants and animals, ecosystems and cultural heritage including most of the tall eucalypt forests and rich rainforests of eastern Australia
- protects the greatest concentration of primitive flowering plants in the world
- preserves natural ecosystems that provide microclimates and refuge for many native plants and animals
- maintains headwaters which are the most important source of clean water for eastern Australia's growing population
- improves opportunities for Aboriginal people to maintain their spiritual connections with Country



- enhances Australia's reputation as a global leader in conservation
- supports billions of dollars worth of economic activity
- complements other government initiatives that are responding to droughts, soil loss, rising salt levels, water shortages, habitat degradation and declining agricultural productivity.



### Why urgent action is needed

During the 200 or more years of European settlement, the abundance and distribution of native plant and animal species has declined. Reasons include **habitat destruction** caused by clearing of native vegetation, and **habitat changes** caused by changed fire regimes, invasion by introduced plant and animal species, and pathogenic diseases. The rapid onset of climate change forces us to think differently about how we link all our efforts to protect our plants and animals.

### About the proposal

The Australian Alps to Atherton proposal aims to combine and extend the Australian Alps and the Great Escarpment of Eastern Australia conservation corridors, which have been established in south-eastern Australia on public lands during the last 60 years. Land in these corridors includes protected areas, state forests, Crown lands, private leasehold lands and private forested and cleared lands.

Some protected areas are already connected, particularly in the Australian Alps and from east Gippsland in Victoria to the Hunter Valley in NSW. In northern NSW and Queensland, protected areas provide anchor points for connecting other public and private lands.

### Achieving the proposal

To extend the area of connected land and help landholders to restore and manage native vegetation in key linking areas, governments working with community and agency stakeholders such as catchment management authorities and local councils would develop strategies and incentives programs for landholders. They would also use cultural knowledge and best practice scientific procedures to ensure effective vegetation management across all land tenures.



Australian Alps to Atherton proposal (yellow highlight) on the uplands of the Great Divide and Great Escarpment of Eastern Australia. The Great Divide (black line) separates runoff that flows to the east coast of Australia from runoff that flows inland. It extends 2800 km from southern Victoria to north of Cairns in far north Queensland. The Great Escarpment (red line) is a highly variable and fragmented dissected plateau edge located east of the Great Divide.