

NatureLinks: Protected Areas, Wilderness, and Landscape Connectivity in South Australia, Australia

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Abstract—The South Australian Government has recognized that, despite an extensive protected area system (26 percent of the State), Statewide ecological goals will not be achieved on protected areas alone. The NatureLinks model promotes protected areas acting as “ecological cores” in landscapes managed with conservation objectives. To implement this model, partnerships with other landholders to develop goals and implement actions are essential. This paper discusses the setting of protected area goals and actions that are nested in broader landscape goals, using areas of high wilderness quality as examples. In fragmented landscapes where protected areas are surrounded by agricultural land and numerous neighbors, challenges arise when balancing wilderness management with acting as a “good neighbor”; the example of fire management is discussed. In a large reserve of very high wilderness quality in which mining is permitted, mining has now been excluded from 503,000 ha/1,242,940 acres; this area can now be managed as a core, and partnerships with mining companies enable broader landscape goals to be pursued. The compatibility of wilderness quality and Aboriginal traditional use is discussed; cooperative management with Aboriginal people enables the continued use of the Unnamed Conservation Park by traditional owners in a manner consistent with their traditions and the protection of biodiversity and wilderness quality.

Introduction

Large areas of South Australia have very high wilderness quality according to the assessment undertaken by Lesslie and Maslen (1995). This assessment emphasizes the extent to which locations are remote from, and undisturbed by, the influence of modern technological society. Areas of high wilderness quality are particularly extensive in the western regions of the State where there is little history of pastoralism or vegetation clearance for agriculture, and large areas are held under Aboriginal freehold.

In the southern, temperate regions of South Australia, less than 30 percent of the native vegetation that was present 200 years ago remains (State of the Environment Report 2003). The remnant vegetation occurs as fragments in an agricultural matrix. Regional landscapes vary greatly in the extent of cover and connectivity and the integrity of ecologi-

cal function, and some large remnants in these regions score highly in Lesslie and Maslen’s (1995) wilderness quality rating.

South Australia has an extensive protected area system—26 percent of the State’s land area (approximately 26 million ha/64,247,400 acres) is in protected areas. Areas of high wilderness quality are protected in nine Wilderness Protection Areas (WPAs) totaling 683,000 ha/1,687,730 acres declared under the *Wilderness Protection Act 1992*. WPAs provide the highest level of protection of reserves under South Australian legislation. Many other areas of high wilderness quality are protected in National Parks, Conservation Parks and Regional Reserves declared under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. Regional Reserves, which are established to protect biodiversity while permitting utilization of the natural resources of an area, cover 10 percent of the State and comprise 39 percent of the terrestrial protected area system. In addition, 311,200 ha/768,992 acres (5.2 percent) of the State’s coastal waters are contained in marine protected areas, mostly established under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* and *Fisheries Act 1982*. The South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) is responsible for the establishment and management of the majority of protected areas in the State.

The South Australian Government recognizes that even a protected area system of this extent will not achieve the objectives of conserving and restoring South Australia’s ecological systems. Protected areas play a critical role in providing core conservation management areas, but partnerships with other landholders are essential if Statewide conservation objectives are to be achieved.

This paper outlines the South Australian Government’s approach to achieving Statewide conservation objectives through a landscape approach to biodiversity conservation, and explains the role of protected areas, and specifically areas of high wilderness quality, in this approach.

NatureLinks

To provide a framework for planning and achieving ecological restoration at landscape scales, the South Australian Government has developed *NatureLinks: Implementing the WildCountry philosophy in South Australia* (DEH 2003). This builds on the landscape scale *WildCountry* model promoted by The Wilderness Society in South Australia (Mackey and others, in press). *WildCountry* is itself modeled on the North American Wildlands Project (Noss 1992).

By acknowledging that landscape scale ecological outcomes require landscape scale conservation management,

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NatureLinks provides a model for integrating activities across tenures and taking account of society's social, cultural and economic aspirations in working towards ecological outcomes.

The goal of *NatureLinks* is:

To enable South Australian species and ecosystems to survive, evolve and adapt to environmental change (DEH 2003).

This is to be achieved via an objective of:

Connected habitat across South Australia, comprising a comprehensive system of core protected areas buffered and linked by lands managed for conservation objectives (DEH 2003).

This model enshrines the role of protected areas as ecological cores in landscapes managed with conservation objectives.

NatureLinks provides a scientific framework: it synthesizes key principles and findings from landscape ecology and restoration ecology to establish six "*NatureLinks* Principles." These principles are being integrated into State and regional biodiversity planning processes and are intended to underpin biodiversity conservation projects undertaken in South Australia. The six principles are (DEH 2003):

1. Biodiversity conservation activities should be planned at a landscape scale. Landscape connectivity is critical to maintaining viable populations and enabling ongoing adaptation of species and ecosystems. Individual projects may be small in scale but should form part of a bigger picture.

2. Habitat restoration should be undertaken at large spatial scales. Habitat restoration, including re-establishment of native vegetation where it has been lost, is a key component of ecological restoration and needs to be undertaken at appropriate scales that consider population viability and landscape connectivity.

3. Species in fragmented landscapes should be managed as metapopulations. Populations must be sufficiently large and contain enough genetic variability to resist local inbreeding or extinction due to chance events such as flood or fire, and to enable ongoing adaptation. Many habitat remnants in fragmented landscapes may not be able to support viable populations. It is therefore necessary to consider viability at scales broader than individual remnants and to manage species as metapopulations—that is, systems of subpopulations linked by the exchange of individuals and/or genes. Landscape connectivity is a key attribute to consider in metapopulation management.

4. An "ecological community" approach to biodiversity conservation should be encouraged. An ecological community is a characteristic suite of interacting species that are adapted to particular physical, chemical and biotic conditions. Projects that focus on management and restoration of ecological communities, including threatened ecological communities, deliver positive conservation outcomes for many of the constituent species and thereby represent good cost efficiency. An ecological community approach should also ensure that managers consider the ecological processes and interactions that are necessary for ongoing function and adaptation.

5. Ecological restoration should be planned over long time scales. Recovery of the most degraded ecological systems will take a very long time and expectations of short-term

outcomes must be realistic. Although short-term projects should be encouraged, they should be planned in the context of larger scale, longer-term ecological objectives.

6. Biodiversity conservation activities should be underpinned by sound ecological knowledge. Activities should be based on an understanding of the ecological systems being managed or restored. Our understanding is far from perfect, therefore, projects should be planned and implemented in an adaptive management framework according to best available knowledge and current "best practice" standards.

Climate Change

The *NatureLinks* model promotes large-scale connectivity and ecological management to maximize the evolutionary capacity of species and ecosystems to adapt to environmental change. This approach will also underpin South Australia's strategy for managing the impacts of climate change on biodiversity and protected areas will play a key role as "ecological cores" in this strategy.

Ecosystem resilience is another key concept driving South Australia's measures to mitigate climate change impacts on biodiversity. By managing or excluding threatening processes, we may improve the capacity of ecosystems to respond autonomously to stresses such as climate change. Maintaining the ecological integrity of large areas of high wilderness quality through the exclusion of threatening processes is considered an important component of the State's approach to biodiversity conservation. Such "single use" areas provide valuable cores for larger scale objectives of managing for resilience and evolutionary capacity.

Development of a Protected Area Strategy

The South Australian Government is committed to achieving a comprehensive, adequate, and representative terrestrial protected area system. Targets include a minimum 15 percent protection of each of the State's 17 terrestrial bioregions and 80 percent of all environmental associations represented in the protected area system (DEH 2004a).

Recent planning for achieving a CAR Reserve System is increasing the focus on the role of protected areas as "ecological cores" in achieving Statewide and landscape scale ecological goals. This informs the process of identifying priority locations and opportunities for new protected areas, and also drives the development of protected area management goals that are nested within broader landscape goals and management initiatives.

The Government is also committed to the establishment of a South Australian Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (SARMPA) (DEH 2004b). Nineteen new marine parks, to complement existing marine protected areas, are to be established by 2010. The new marine parks will be zoned for multiple-use. Zones will range from "restricted access" and "sanctuary" areas to protect and conserve biologically significant habitats in a pristine condition, through to "general managed use" areas to provide for ecologically sustainable use of marine resources. Collectively, they will form a network to protect and conserve representative examples of the State's eight marine bioregions (DEH 2004b).

This focus on a landscape approach to protected area management dictates that we must work with other land managers in both development of goals and implementation of actions. These goals and actions vary greatly according to the landscape in which a reserve is set; terrestrial reserves that are located in an extensively cleared agricultural landscape will have different goals and confront different challenges to those located in continuous, intact vegetation. The following case study provides examples of these differing circumstances.

The East Meets West Project

A number of large-scale projects are being developed under the *NatureLinks* model. A critical challenge being addressed in these projects is setting conservation management regimes on reserves and wilderness areas and working with adjacent landholders to develop complementary management without compromising economic, social or cultural aspirations.

The East meets West project aims to ensure the survival and ongoing adaptation of species and ecosystems in the fragmented landscape in the agricultural zone of Eyre Peninsula and the continuous vegetation that runs to the north of Eyre Peninsula through the Great Victoria Desert into Western Australia (fig. 1). The project area covers many millions of hectares.

This paper uses East meets West as a case study, and focuses on management, planning and key partnerships associated with several areas of high wilderness quality within the project area.

Hincks and Hambidge WPAs. On the central Eyre Peninsula approximately 30 percent native vegetation remains, including two large remnants protected as Hincks and Hambidge Wilderness Protection Areas (66,934 ha/165,398 acres and 38,087 ha/94,115 acres respectively; fig. 1). Several other protected areas exist in the region including Bascombe Well Conservation Park (32,141 ha/79,422 acres), Kulliparu Conservation Reserve (13,567 ha/33,525 acres) and several Heritage Agreements (private land protected by a covenant under the *Native Vegetation Act 1991*). A large amount of native vegetation on private land provides some degree of linkage and buffering to these protected areas. The matrix in which this vegetation is set is predominantly agricultural land used for cropping/grazing enterprises. Protected areas in the region provide core areas that are managed with biodiversity conservation as the primary objective; surrounding areas are managed primarily for primary production with management activities contributing to landscape ecological objectives.

Within the remnant vegetation, threats to biodiversity include introduced plants and animals (including the European Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*). Effective management of these requires partnerships with landholders. The State Government is involved in two major community-based initiatives that encourage and support land managers to participate in integrated landscape-scale management of pests in central Eyre Peninsula. These West Coast and Eastern Integrated Pest Management programs involve more than 400 landholders, with activities occurring on and off reserves.

In addition to managing threats to existing vegetation, opportunities are sought to improve cover and connectivity through strategic reestablishment of native vegetation for buffers and linkages.

Under the *Wilderness Protection Act 1992* and the statutory Wilderness Code of Management (DEH 2004c), WPAs should be managed “to maximize the naturalness and remoteness, in other words, the wilderness quality, of wilderness areas.” For WPAs such as Hincks and Hambidge that are surrounded by agricultural land and numerous neighbors, this provides a number of challenges, perhaps most exemplified by the issue of fire management.

Wildfires on Eyre Peninsula can be large in scale and extremely destructive. An extensive and intense wildfire in 2004 caused loss of life and widespread destruction of property on lower Eyre Peninsula. In 2001, a single fire burnt 75 percent of Hambidge WPA over a 9-day period. DEH has responsibility under the *Country Fires Act 1989* to minimize the risk to life and property arising from fires on protected areas. To achieve this, fire suppression and prevention activities will at times be necessary. On WPAs, the methods used will be, wherever possible, those which have the least long-term impact on wilderness quality (DEH 2004c).

From an ecological perspective, fire is an inherent process in the ecosystems of Eyre Peninsula (and most of Australia) and species have evolved differently in terms of their response to fire. For many plant species fire is required for recruitment, whereas in many other species fire can kill adults and seeds and result in local extirpation. Fauna species have also evolved differently; for example, many species prefer habitat structure and composition associated with recently burnt areas whereas many others require “long unburnt” habitat. As a general rule of thumb, a mosaic of ages since fire is desirable to promote habitat and species diversity. Achieving this and other specific ecological objectives (such as protection of known sites containing threatened species) on protected areas, including WPAs, may require deliberately lit (“prescribed”) fire. Although such active management may appear to compromise pure perceptions of wilderness quality, it may be necessary to ensure that these reserves are managed with realistic ecological objectives.

Fire management in Hincks and Hambidge WPAs requires balancing these issues: protecting life and property, actively promoting habitat and species diversity, and protecting wilderness quality. The relationship of protected area managers with the local community and the Country Fire Service is critical to achieving this balance; a shared understanding of the objectives of all stakeholders and a clear awareness of operational procedures and responsibilities is essential.

Yellabinna WPA. North of Eyre Peninsula lie the Yellabinna dunefield and the Great Victoria Desert, comprising several million hectares of uncleared vegetation extending into Western Australia (fig. 1). Much of this vegetation is of very high wilderness quality (Lesslie and Maslen 1995).

Until recently, the Yellabinna Regional Reserve (RR) covered some 2 million ha/5 million acres of the Yellabinna dunefield. This “multiple use” reserve located in high quality wilderness is available for exploration, prospecting and mining under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* and State mining legislation.

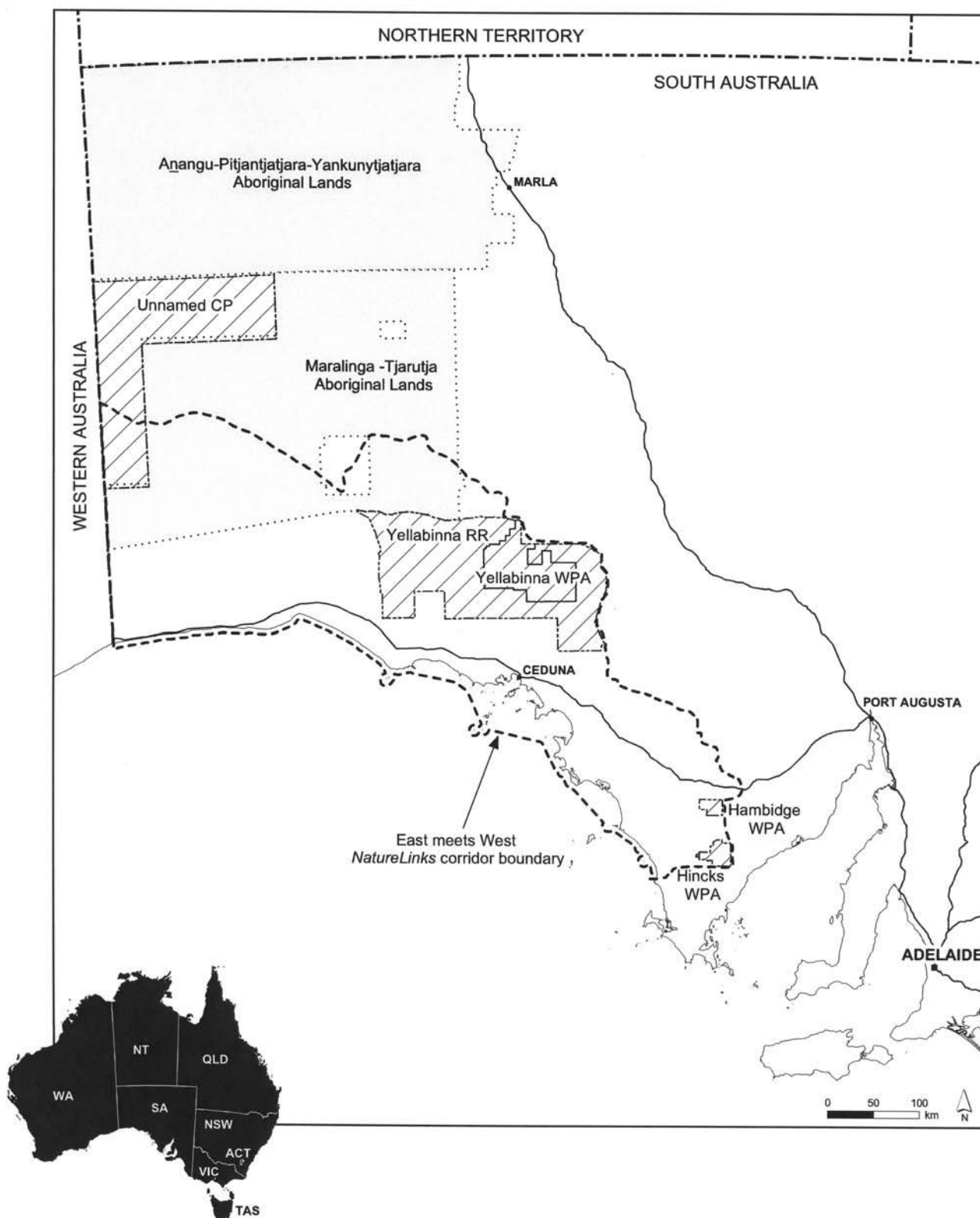


Figure 1—The East Meets West project boundary and key locations in the region. Key: CP—Conservation Park; WPA—Wilderness Protection Area; RR—Regional Reserve. Inset map of Australia showing States (South Australia—SA; Western Australia—WA; Queensland—Qld; New South Wales—NSW; Victoria—Vic; Tasmania—Tas) and Territories (Northern Territory—NT and Australian Capital Territory—ACT).

Assessment of the Yellabinna region determined that there was an “extremely large area” of wilderness within the Yellabinna RR that met the criteria of the *Wilderness Protection Act 1992* (Wilderness Advisory Committee 2004). This assessment was balanced against the high geological prospectivity of the region, and an area of 503,000 ha/1,242,940 acres was delineated and gazetted in 2005 as the Yellabinna Wilderness Protection Area in which exploration and mining will not be permitted.

The new Yellabinna WPA is almost fully bounded by the remaining portion of the Yellabinna RR and an additional 3 million hectares/7,413,161 acres of contiguous reserves in which mining is permitted (fig. 1). This provides opportunities to establish large-scale ecological objectives with the WPA forming the core and the multiple use reserves a buffer. Partnerships with mining companies will develop exploration and mining practices that minimize impacts on ecological values outside of the core areas.

Fire management is less complex in Yellabinna WPA. Although individual fires may burn large areas, they are considered unlikely to burn a high percentage of the reserve and the region contains a mosaic of fire ages (Wilderness Advisory Committee 2004). Furthermore, there are few properties and assets near to the WPA, therefore threats to life and property are unlikely. Consequently, fire suppression activities and prescribed burning will rarely be contemplated.

The few access tracks in the Yellabinna region have long been favored recreational destinations for the small communities in the far west of South Australia. Yellabinna WPA management will involve working with the community to determine how to offer a quality visitor experience while maintaining the wilderness quality of the WPA.

Unnamed Conservation Park. North of Yellabinna, in the Great Victoria Desert in western South Australia, are the Maralinga-Tjarutja and Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal Lands (fig. 1). The local Anangu people have occupied these lands for at least 39,000 years and still maintain strong cultural and spiritual connections with this country.

According to the definition of wilderness quality as “the extent to which locations are remote from, and undisturbed by, the influence of modern technological society,” this area is of very high wilderness quality. The region includes the Unnamed Conservation Park (CP), a 2.1 million ha/5.2 million acre reserve of extreme remoteness and naturalness (fig. 1).

Traditional aboriginal land management practices are important factors influencing many species and ecosystems in the far northwest of South Australia. An example of this is the use and management of fire. Traditional patch burning by the Anangu people resulted in frequent small fires that created a tight mosaic of vegetation ages since fire, creating a heterogeneous landscape in which very large fires were rare (Morelli 1992). The sizes of the mosaic patches are believed to have been typically between a few tens of hectares and a few thousand hectares (Robinson and others 2003). A changed lifestyle for the Anangu since contact with non-Aboriginal Australians means that patch burning is no longer widespread, the fine mosaic is being lost, and there is widespread build up of fuel and the potential for consequent massive catastrophic fires that may burn up to several hundred thousand hectares in a single event

(Robinson and others 2003). Improved fire management in the far northwest will seek to protect significant cultural sites, protect significant species populations or habitats, and instigate measures such as patch burning and firebreaks to limit the spread of future fires.

In 2004, the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* was amended to create an innovative framework for the cooperative management of parks with Aboriginal people in South Australia. The framework enables the establishment and cooperative management of national parks and conservation parks over both Crown (Government-owned) land and Aboriginal freehold land (see Leaman 2004). The Unnamed CP was subsequently handed back to the traditional Aboriginal owners by the South Australian Government in 2004, while maintaining its status as a conservation park and retaining its pre-existing no mining regime and public access rights. The park is now managed by a traditional owner majority board in accordance with a co-management agreement between the State Government and the traditional owners.

The Unnamed CP is of significant biological and conservation value and of great cultural significance to its traditional Aboriginal owners. The philosophy for cooperative management of Unnamed CP explicitly acknowledges the compatibility of continued use of the Park by Anangu people in a manner consistent with their traditions and the protection of biodiversity and wilderness quality. Cooperative management enables the Unnamed CP to be managed as a core with clear biodiversity goals, integrated with cultural aspirations and initiatives on the Park and on adjacent Aboriginal lands.

The inclusion of provisions for the establishment and cooperative management of both Crown and Aboriginal-owned parks creates opportunity for further partnerships on Aboriginal lands within the East meets West project. Other groups have expressed interest and the State Government is working closely with Aboriginal people to identify additional opportunities for cooperative management to progress landscape scale ecological objectives within the project area.

Marine Protected Areas. While the focus of East meets West is primarily terrestrial, marine protected areas established over adjacent coastal waters extend the landscape approach into the marine environment.

The Great Australian Bight Marine Park (168,320 ha/415,928 acres) extends approximately 300 km (186 miles) east from the South Australian-West Australian border and encompasses all State waters (out to the 3 nautical mile State limit). The region has considerable importance for conservation. The marine park protects the most significant Australian breeding and calving sites for the nationally endangered Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*), habitat for a number of other whale species, and breeding populations of the New Zealand Fur Seal and Australian Sea Lion (Edyvane 1998). Commercial fishing is permitted in sections of the park outside the whale breeding season. Mineral and petroleum exploration and extraction is not permitted. Due to its remoteness and limited access, visitor activity in the marine park is largely shore-based, with the main focus on whale viewing.

The Great Australian Bight Marine Park is contiguous with the Nullarbor National Park (582,673 ha/1,439,816 acres), Wahgunyah Conservation Park (39,906 ha/98,610 acres) and the Yalata Aboriginal Lands (456,300 ha/1,127,542 acres).

The coastline contains “uninterrupted coastal vistas and areas of very high scenic value in a remote and relatively pristine wilderness” (Edyvane 1998). Management objectives include protection of the natural and cultural values of the landscapes and seascapes (DEHAA 1998), and the marine park and adjacent coastal lands are managed as an integrated coastal-marine region.

Southeast of the Great Australian Bight Marine Park, but within the broader East meets West project area, a further four marine parks are proposed under the SARMPA (DEH 2004b). These proposed parks will be centered on offshore islands (most of which already have protected area status) and coastal embayments. These marine parks will further contribute to *NatureLinks* and broader landscape-seascape connectivity.

Conclusions

The concept of an integrated landscape scale approach, particularly the *WildCountry* model promoted by The Wilderness Society, has been adopted by a number of non-Government organizations in Australia. However, South Australia is the first Government in Australia to formally build such a framework into policy and planning instruments. The adoption of *NatureLinks* by the State Government enables landscape ecology principles to be built into key State planning and natural resource management processes. The value of this is demonstrated by the renewed focus of the State’s protected area strategy on the role of protected areas as cores in achieving goals of landscape scale restoration and adaptation to climate change.

State Government will not be able to deliver landscape scale goals in isolation. Government plays a key role in coordinating and facilitating planning and implementation, and partnerships such as those described in this paper will be required across South Australia if Statewide and landscape scale ecological goals are to be achieved.

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