A report on the world’s forests shows Australia will have to lift its efforts if we want to preserve our heritage, writes Lizzie Stafford.

AUSTRALIA is renowned for its natural heritage, from north Queensland’s rainforests and coastline, to ancient pine forests in Tasmania and the haunting wilderness of Western Australia’s gorges. It has more than 147 million hectares of native forest and also one of the world’s largest national park systems. But a recent UN report into the state of the world’s forests revealed some grim news.

The 2011 State of the World’s Forests report says that in the sub-region of Oceania—which includes Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific island states—forests are in decline. Even more worrying is the fact Australia recorded the largest annual loss of forest in the Asia Pacific region between 2000 and 2010.

While the report suggests this was “primarily because of severe drought and forest fires”, environment academic Rod Fensham, from the University of Queensland, suggests there are other factors. “It’s also mechanical clearing—bulldozers,” he says. “Clearing was still very substantial until the last few years.”

Fensham says Queensland forests in recent decades have been subjected to more clearing than anywhere else in Australia. Until 2006, when tighter legislation was introduced, forests were being bulldozed at a rate of 200,000 to 500,000ha a year.

He says now, with stricter legislation, the clearing has slowed but conservation across Australia remains inconsistent, because of a lack of uniform national laws and policies.

State and territory governments have primary responsibility for forest management, while the Federal Government co-ordinates a national approach to environmental issues.

“So each state has its own individual response to addressing land clearing,” Fensham says.

Dr Margie Mayfield, a plant ecology expert, says Australia is “not great” at conserving forests. “Australia hits its forests really quite hard and until fairly recently, so most conservation efforts here are quite new,” she says.

Surprisingly, Mayfield says Australia has a “conservative” view of conservation when compared with nations such as China and India.

“We set a bit of forest aside as a national park and that’s how conservation is done,” she says. “China and India also have huge deforestation problems but they have a more modern view of conservation – they have a more active response and are planting a lot more forests. That’s pretty limited in Australia, partly because of the cost and because environmental laws make it difficult to afforest large patches of land.”

There is also the problem that a lot of land is privately owned.

“A lot of conservation-minded people would like to see a lot more planting of trees here,” she says. “And there’s still cutting going on, so there could be tighter regulation on what people are allowed to cut.”

“It’s tough, but I don’t think it’s as grim as the (UN) report suggests.”

Both Mayfield and Fensham warn it’s difficult to accurately gauge rates of deforestation around the world and that, while deforestation and the natural degradation of forests is a problem in Australia, there is a strong movement to protect the country’s remaining natural beauty.

“There’s good news and there’s bad news,” says David Lamb, from the Rainforest Co-operative Research Centre in Brisbane. “The bad news is we have lost a number of species or they are under threat.

“The good news is we’re well aware of that and there are efforts under way to preserve them.”

As well as legislation, Australia has a strong armory of initiatives aimed at preserving our spectacular natural heritage, including national parks, World Heritage listing and the National Indigenous Forestry Strategy.

National parks

National parks were originally created more as spaces for city dwellers to escape to for recreation than for conservation.

Australia’s first national park, now known as the Royal National Park, was established on the outskirts of Sydney in 1879. It was the second such park to be declared in the world after Yellowstone National Park in the US.

In the early 20th century, a growing number of recreation organisations, such as bushwalking clubs, pushed for the expansion of Australia’s national park network.

Today, the National Reserve System—some 590 national parks—protects about 81 million hectares of wilderness, totalling 11 per cent of Australia’s land area.

“National parks are a fundamental part of the operation and the business of (Queensland),” says National Parks Association of Queensland’s Paul Donatiu. “They are a tenure that is free from mining and more intense recreational uses, but essentially they’re a biodiversity conservation tool to preserve the landscape, animals and plants that are unique to this country.”

National parks protect special habitats, plants and wildlife, such as the ancient wollemi pines in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales; our unique ecosystems such as the wetlands in the Yalgorup National Park in Western Australia; natural wonders such as the Twelve Apostles; areas sacred to Indigenous Australians, such as Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory; places that...
preserve the history since European settlement, like the Flinders Chase National Park on Kangaroo Island; and a wide range of flora and fauna. "The national parks are doing a really, really important job," Donatiu says. "It’s very important that we protect that resource, that we manage it well and that we actually expand it, so that every aspect of a very biodiverse country is protected in these national parks."

World Heritage listing

Australia’s significant presence on the World Heritage registry says a lot about its incredible natural beauty, says Dr Greg Terrill from the Federal Government Heritage Division. "We have probably the most diverse spread of any country," he says. "We're very well represented."

World Heritage listing, which "recognises places of such outstanding significance that their value transcends national identity", ensures the permanent protection of 18 of Australia’s most sacred sites – 10 of which are made up predominantly of forested areas. The first World Heritage-listed rainforest in Australia was the Tasmanian Wilderness in 1982. Taking in a third of Tasmania, the wilderness is recognised for its rare and ancient flora.

The listing is a badge of honour, Terrill says. "It puts a lot of attention on managing these places to make sure that the values are safeguarded."

Indigenous conservation

An important movement in Australia’s conservation efforts is the National Indigenous Forestry Strategy, which was launched by the federal government in July 2005 to encourage indigenous participation in forest industries and conservation.

But since the 1990s state forestry sectors have been employing Aboriginal cultural heritage officers who play a vital role in conserving the qualities and attributes of places that have spiritual, historical, scientific and/or social value. Jeremy Saunders, a Biripi descendant from Tarco on the mid-north NSW coast, is a senior Aboriginal cultural heritage officer for Forestry NSW. He consults logging maps and surveys the sites for any evidence of Aboriginal or early European occupation or sites of significance and even important natural resources such as rare trees.

If he finds something, he can create a buffer zone around the site. "It’s a fine balance between conservation and logging," he says. "There are so many animals that think we sometimes take up too much bush with our protection. But I think most people can see that us protecting the bush is so important to our culture."

He says a lot of indigenous people need access to the forest to keep teaching traditional practices, otherwise the culture will be lost. "A lot of our families still use the bush to collect their food and medicine, whether that be hunting or collecting traditional food or herbs," he says. "It’s important to our history, to our songs and to our stories."

What’s next

Professor David Lindenmayer, from the Australian National University, is one of the leading researchers in conservation in Australia.

He says protecting our forests is about much more than just saving trees. "When you log forests you cut back the carbon storage immensely and that’s a really key part of trying to tackle issues with climate change," he says. "Some forests are still there but they’re being degraded in what seems to be very subtle ways, but it has a massive impact."

"For example, the loss of hollow trees in forests is a massive, massive problem. "There are so many animals that are dependent on lots of these trees that you really worry about the depletion of that resource over the coming years."

Lindenmayer says there are three critical future strategies. "For a start, we need to take proper carbon measurements of how our native forests work to tackle climate change. "We have to really seriously get going with monitoring our forests and there has to be a bigger effort to better protect the existing large trees and protect more trees that will grow through to be old trees over time. "Otherwise our forests will be depleted in terms of the key things that they need to support habitat for biodiversity."

He sums it up: "We ought to be rethinking whether we should be logging native forests at all."
Living legend for the environment

Dr Aila Keeto is one of the pioneers of Australia’s conservation movement. The founder of the Rainforest Conservation Society of Queensland, now known as the Australia Rainforest Conservation Society, has devoted her life to protecting Australia’s wilderness. Her campaigns helped stop logging in north Queensland, Fraser Island and the central Queensland coast and saved more than 1.5 million hectares of forest.

In 1999, she was instrumental in implementing the South East Queensland Forests Agreement, a landmark document that set a national precedent for cooperation between the timber industry and the conservation movement. Her efforts were also instrumental in three successful World Heritage nominations, including the Wet Tropics, Fraser Island and the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia. Her work has not gone unrecognised, with numerous national and international awards to her name, including an Officer of the Order of Australia, a mention on the United Nations Roll of Honour and the Volvo Environment Prize, the world’s top environmental award.

She is considered a “living legend” in Australia’s environmental movement.

Australia’s forests - the facts

- 550 national parks protect some 81 million hectares of wilderness, totalling 11 per cent of Australia’s land area.
- Australia boasts 18 World Heritage sites, including four which are purely forests and another six which feature large forested areas.
- The dominant type of vegetation in Australia - 23 per cent - is hummock grassland in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.
- There are more than 700 species of eucalypts, most of which are native only to Australia.
- In 1803, Captain Philip Gidley King, the third governor of New South Wales, concerned about the widespread and indiscriminate clearing of forest in the new colony, introduced the first tree preservation order prohibiting the cutting down of trees and shrubs within “two rods” (10m) of river banks.
- In 1994, the Wollemi pine was found in a remote valley in the Blue Mountains of NSW. It is believed to be representative of a now extinct group of trees that existed at the time of the dinosaurs, making it a species that has been around for 65 million years.
- There are now an estimated 20,000 vascular (like ferns, flowering plants and conifers) and 7700 non-vascular plants (mosses, algae), and 250,000 species of fungi in Australia.
- Australia has over 1000 species of acacia.

Kakadu a World Heritage jewel in the far north

WORLD Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory is one of the most famous wilderness parks in the world. Internationally recognised for its spectacular natural beauty and diversity, from savannah woodlands and monsoon forests to coastal beaches, the area extends over a massive 20,000 sq km of untouched, pristine landscape.

After being declared a national park in 1979, Kakadu was granted World Heritage status in 1981. Since then, about 250,000 visitors each year have come to marvel at its natural wonders, which encapsulate more than two billion years of the Earth’s history.

The park’s forests, wetlands and waterways are home to a range of rare and endangered plants and animals.

The rainforests are dominated by allosyncarpia trees, found nowhere else in the world. Rare birds, including the hooded parrot and white-throated grass wren, hide in the spinifex and woodland, and rare bats shelter in caves.

Kakadu is also recognised for its unique indigenous history documented in rock art around the park. The Bininj/Mungguy people, who have lived in and cared for the country for thousands of years, believe that during creation time ancestral beings, known as the first people, walked across the Kakadu landscape.

Picture: Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Nicola Bryden
Vegetation key to our biodiversity

WHILE Australia prides itself on its rich biodiversity, Australian soils are highly dependent on vegetation cover to generate nutrients and provide stability. Land clearing, water extraction and poor soil conservation have had an adverse impact on the country's one million species of flora and fauna.

The most common vegetation types are those that have adapted to Australia's arid conditions, such as the hummock grasslands in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

In the east, eucalypt woodlands are the most common form of vegetation while in the west, acacia forests, woodlands and shrublands dominate the landscape.

Tough-leaved open forests of eucalypts and acacias replaced much of the dense rainforest that once covered large areas of the continent.

But in Tasmania and eastern Australia, remnants of ancient rainforest remain. These are home to hundreds of species of animals, many of them, like the ulysses butterfly (pictured) in the Daintree rainforest of north Queensland, unique to Australia.

More than 378 species of mammals, 828 species of birds, 300 species of lizards, 140 species of snakes and two species of crocodiles dwell in our national parks.