Biodiversity Council

Biodiversity Concerns Report: 97% of Australians want more action to protect nature

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Further information

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The Biodiversity Council, June, 2023.

The Biodiversity Council brings together leading experts including Indigenous Knowledge holders to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. It was founded by 11 universities including its host the University of Melbourne, with support from The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ross Trust, Trawalla Foundation, The Rendere Trust, Isaacson Davis Foundation, Coniston Charitable Trust and Angela Whitbread.

In brief

Most Australians are aware of the uniqueness and benefits of Australian biodiversity (our plants, animals and other living things).

Many Australians feel connected to nature and 8 out of 10 Australians (83%) say it is important to them to know that nature is being looked after.

Many Australians are not aware of the extent of biodiversity loss in Australia.

97% of Australians want more action to conserve biodiversity, and most consider that 'every person in Australia' has a responsibility to act, including all levels of government.

85% of Australians are moderately or highly concerned about threats to nature, particularly:

- Increasing levels of waste and pollution;
- The impact of climate change on biodiversity;
- The loss of pollinator species and natural places;
- The extinction of native plants and animals; and
- Land clearing.

Most Australians engage in some actions to protect nature including spending time in nature, being a sustainable consumer, and managing pets or gardens for nature.

Most Australians strongly support greater spending for biodiversity and new policies to protect nature including:

- Banning logging of native forests
- Introducing laws to prevent pet cats roaming
- Requiring businesses to report their impact on nature

7 in 10 Australians indicate that nature conservation issues may influence how they will vote in future federal, state, territory and local elections.

Swing voters are more connected to nature, more concerned about biodiversity issues and believe more action is needed, compared to non-swing voters.

Our recommendations:

Policymakers should accept the community mandate to take stronger action for nature, including:

- Strengthening environmental laws
- Ceasing native timber harvesting
- Increasing expenditure

People enjoying time in nature in Melbourne.
Image: Jaana Dielenberg

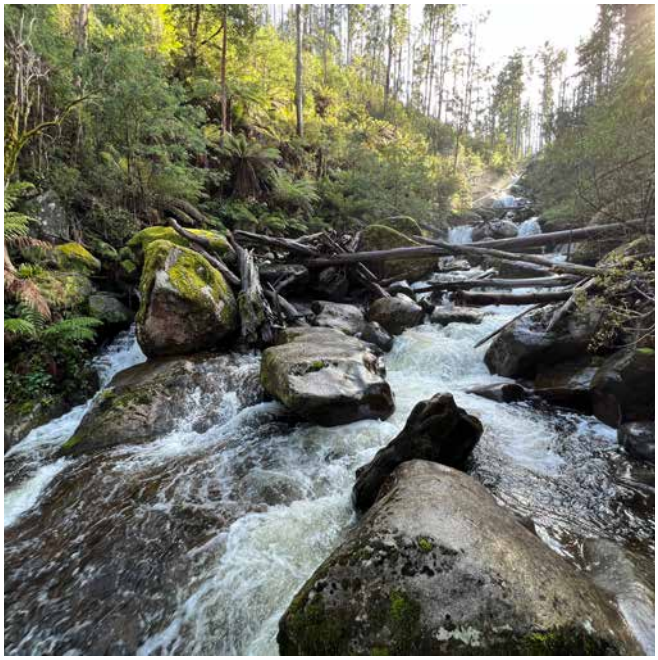
97% of Australians want more action to protect nature

Research purpose and approach

The Biodiversity Council brings together leading experts including Indigenous knowledge holders to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. Biodiversity is the scientific term used to describe the richness and diversity of plants and animals in nature. We are currently undergoing a biodiversity crisis, with recent evidence suggesting that the rate and trajectory of biodiversity loss and resulting extinctions pose an even greater threat than previously thought[1].

The Biodiversity Council undertook this benchmark study to better gauge current understanding and concern for biodiversity issues among Australians. The survey explored Australians' level of connection with nature, tendency to behave in ways that protected nature, sources of biodiversity information, and opinions about government performance and policies relevant to biodiversity loss.

Over 4000 participants across Australia were recruited for an online survey through a market panel, ensuring representation across age, gender and location, benchmarked against the Australian census data.



A mountain stream in Melbourne's water supply catchment. 73% of Australians are aware of the benefits of biodiversity to clean air and water.
Image: Jaana Dielenberg

84% of Australians enjoy spending time in nature and 76% say that they like to get outdoors whenever they get the chance.
Image: Jaana Dielenberg.

1 https://theconversation.com/children-born-today-will-see-literally-thousands-of-animals-disappear-in-their-lifetime-as-global-food-webs-collapse-196286

Results

Key findings

Australians are aware of biodiversity benefits but not biodiversity loss

Most Australians are aware of the **uniqueness** of Australian plants and animals (65%) and some of the benefits provided by this biodiversity, including:

- The production of food, clean air and water, and medicines (73%)
- Improvement to soil health and water retention on farms (68%)
- Protection from heat waves, drought, dust, flood, and storms (55%)

Most Australians also understand that **climate change** is having a direct impact on Australia's biodiversity (74%). However, only around half of Australians are aware of the extent of **biodiversity** loss, including the facts that:

- Since European settlement, Australia has lost most of its forests (54%)
- Australia has one of the highest rates of mammal extinctions in the world (43%)

It is therefore unsurprising that most Australians (60%) feel that the **state of the natural environment in Australia** is 'good' or 'very good'. Even more (71%) feel it is 'good' or 'very good' in their local area.

The most common i**nformation sources** participants used to learn about the state of the environment are documentaries (60%, online or on TV), mainstream news media (55%), and online media (32%, blogs, YouTube, and social media).

Australians are connected to nature

Around one in three Australians indicated that they have a **strong relationship with nature** (36%), while a slightly lower number indicated a moderate relationship (33%). Only 6% of Australians consider themselves completely separate to nature.

Most Australians demonstrate that they are **connected to nature** in some way, with many indicating that they agree with the following statements:

- I enjoy spending time in nature (84%)
- Nature is important for my personal recreation and relaxation (79%)
- I like to get outdoors whenever I get the chance (76%)
- Being in nature helps me deal with everyday stress (75%)
- I feel a part of nature (61%)

Swing voters are more connected to nature than non-swing voters.

83% of Australians agree that it is important for them to know that nature in Australia is looked after.

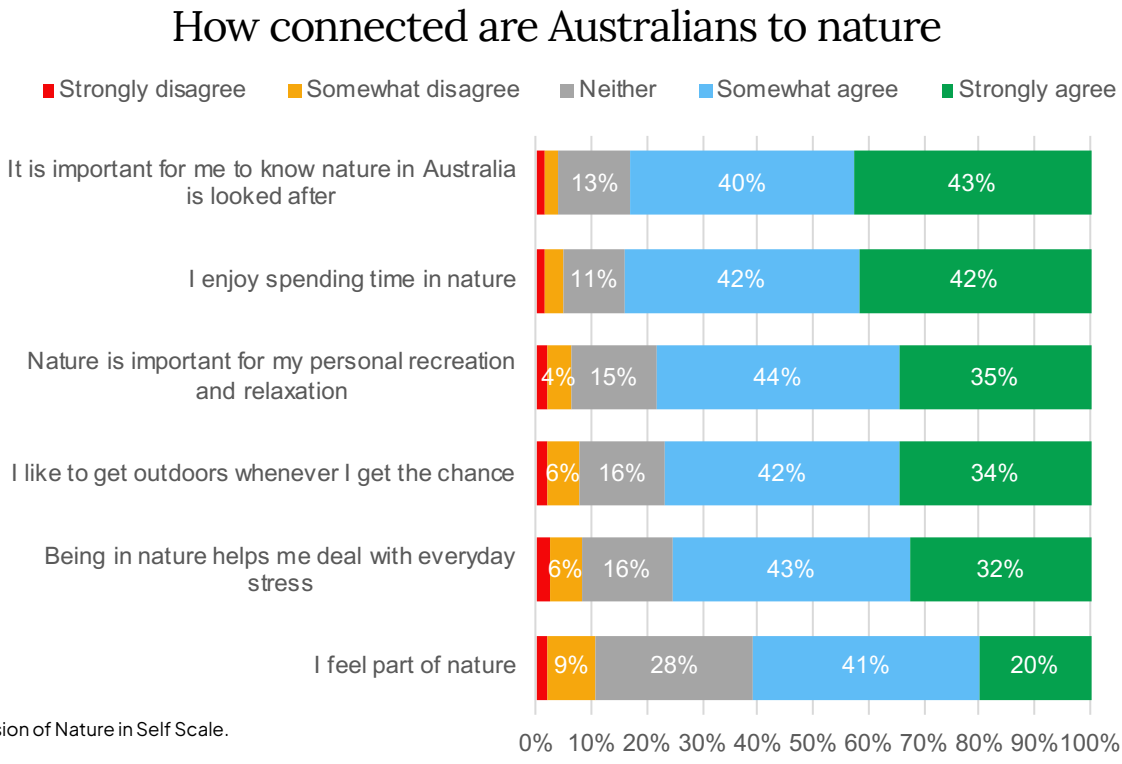


Figure 1. Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale.

Australians are concerned about biodiversity issues

85% of Australians are at least moderately **concerned about biodiversity issues**, and 63% are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned. Swing voters are more concerned compared to non-swing voters.

The issues that concern Australians the most are:

- Increasing levels of waste and pollution (75% are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned)
- The impacts of climate change (69%)
- The decline of pollinator species (69%)
- The loss of natural places (69%)
- Extinction of native plants and animals (67%)
- Land clearing (65%)

Australians believe our environment has been looked after but more action is needed

More than half of Australians (57%) feel **Australia's natural environment has been looked after** by federal, state and territory governments at least 'moderately well'. Only 17% think it hasn't been looked after well at all.

However, almost all Australians (97%) agree that **more action on biodiversity** is needed, and 58% believe 'a lot more' or 'a great deal more' is needed.

Swing voters believe more action is needed compared to non-swing voters.

When asked to select up to five options for who is **most responsible for action** to protect biodiversity, most Australians selected 'every person living in Australia' (68%). However, a majority of Australians also indicated that all levels of government are responsible for taking action, including federal (60%), state and territory governments (56%), and local councils and governments (55%).

Australians engage in many behaviours that promote and support biodiversity, including voting

Most Australians engage in multiple behaviours that support nature. The most common pro-biodiversity behaviours semi-regularly or regularly engaged in by Australians are:

- Spending time in nature (78%)
- Being a sustainable consumer (58%)
- Managing pets or gardens for nature (56%)
- Talking with others about nature (55%)

There is also **a significant proportion of Australians who have engaged in more involved behaviours to protect biodiversity at least once,** such as:

- Being a supporter for nature (53%)

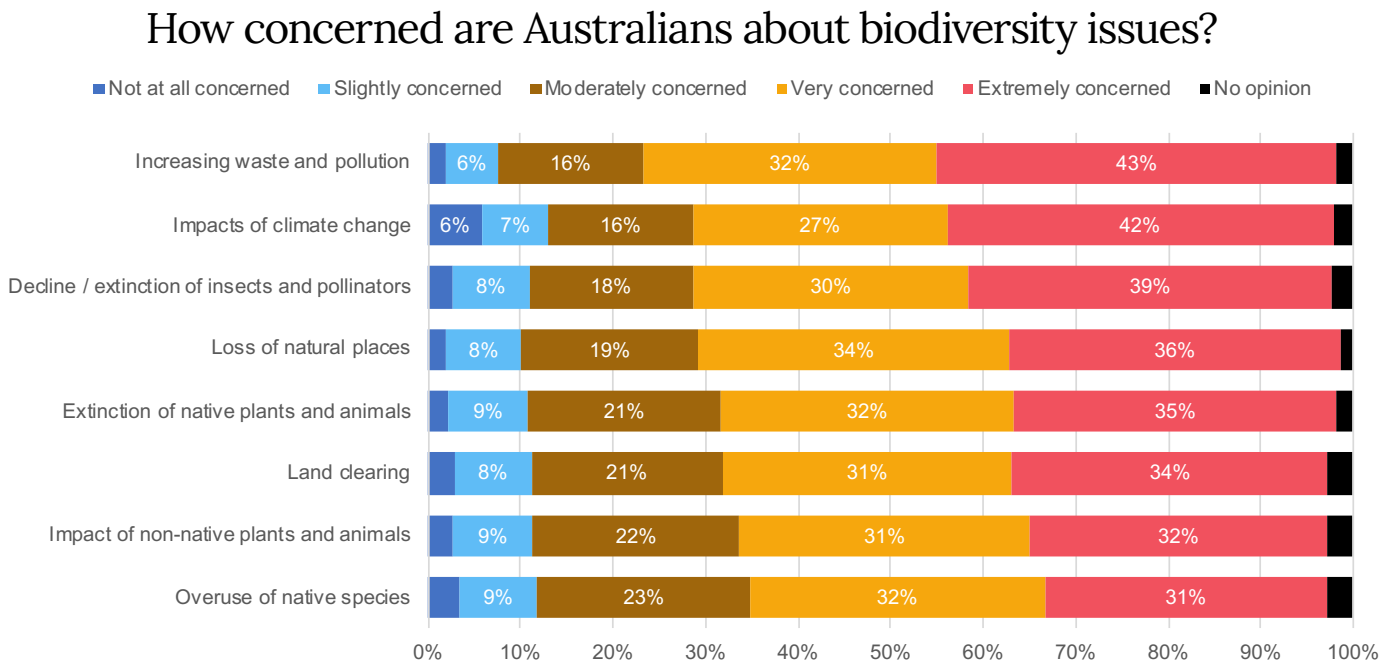


Figure 2. Concerns about biodiversity issues

- Getting involved in protecting nature (45%)
- Making big decisions to support nature (37%)
- Advocating for nature (33%)

Looking at the big picture, three quarters of Australians have engaged in three or more behaviours (76%), one in six have engaged in all the eight surveyed behaviours, and only 5% of survey participants have not engaged in any. Swing voters engage in more behaviours that support nature than non-swing voters.

7 in 10 Australians indicated that nature conservation issues would have a 'moderate', 'strong' or 'very strong' influence on **how they would vote** in future local (69%), state (70%) and federal (68%) elections.

Australians support increased spending and new policies to protect nature

Most Australians (72%) feel that **more money should be spent to protect the environment**. Only 6% believe less money should be spent. Of those who agree that more money should be spent, the most frequently prioritised initiatives are:

- Protection of habitats and special places during and after bushfires
- Programs to prevent extinction
- Incentives for organisations to reduce pollution

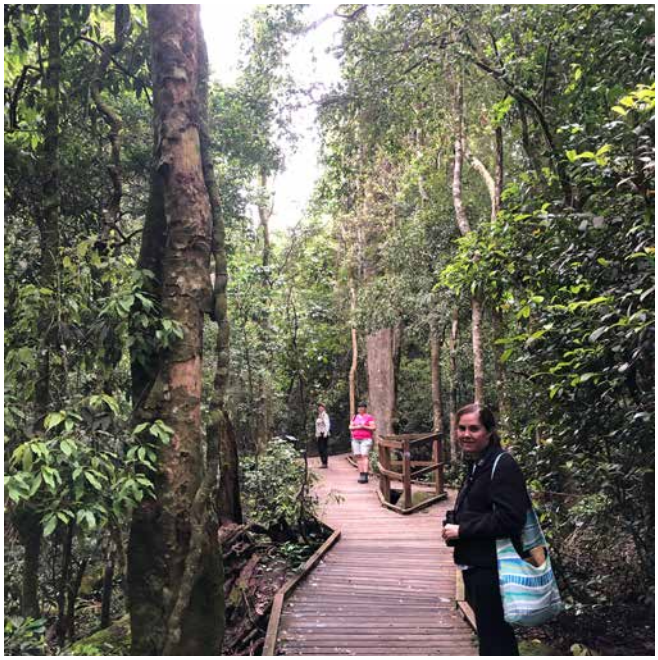
Other supported policies included incentives for landholders to protect and restore nature on their land, feral / invasive animal control, community activities (e.g. tree planting days and citizen science), Indigenous cultural fire and land management, fuel reduction burning, programs encouraging people to spend more time in nature, and Indigenous Ranger programs.

Most Australians also support the introduction of new policies, including penalty actions to prevent biodiversity issues, restorative actions, and the introduction of laws and markets that assist biodiversity, including:

- Restoring water to wetlands and rivers (85%)
- Increasing fines for people caught importing / smuggling illegal wildlife or products (84%)
- Restoring nature in cities and towns (83%)
- Increasing fines for high polluters (83%)
- Tougher fines and stronger laws to stop illegal tree clearing and forest / habitat destruction (81%)

Older Australians tend to be more supportive of policies involving penalty actions (e.g. increasing fines for damaging behaviours), while younger Australians are more supportive of changes to laws and markets (e.g. require businesses to report their impact on nature).

78% of Australians regularly spend time in nature, like these beach goers on Sorrento Beach in Victoria. Image: Pat Whelan / Unsplash



83% of Australians agree that it is important for them to know that nature in Australia is looked after. Image: Jaana Dielenberg

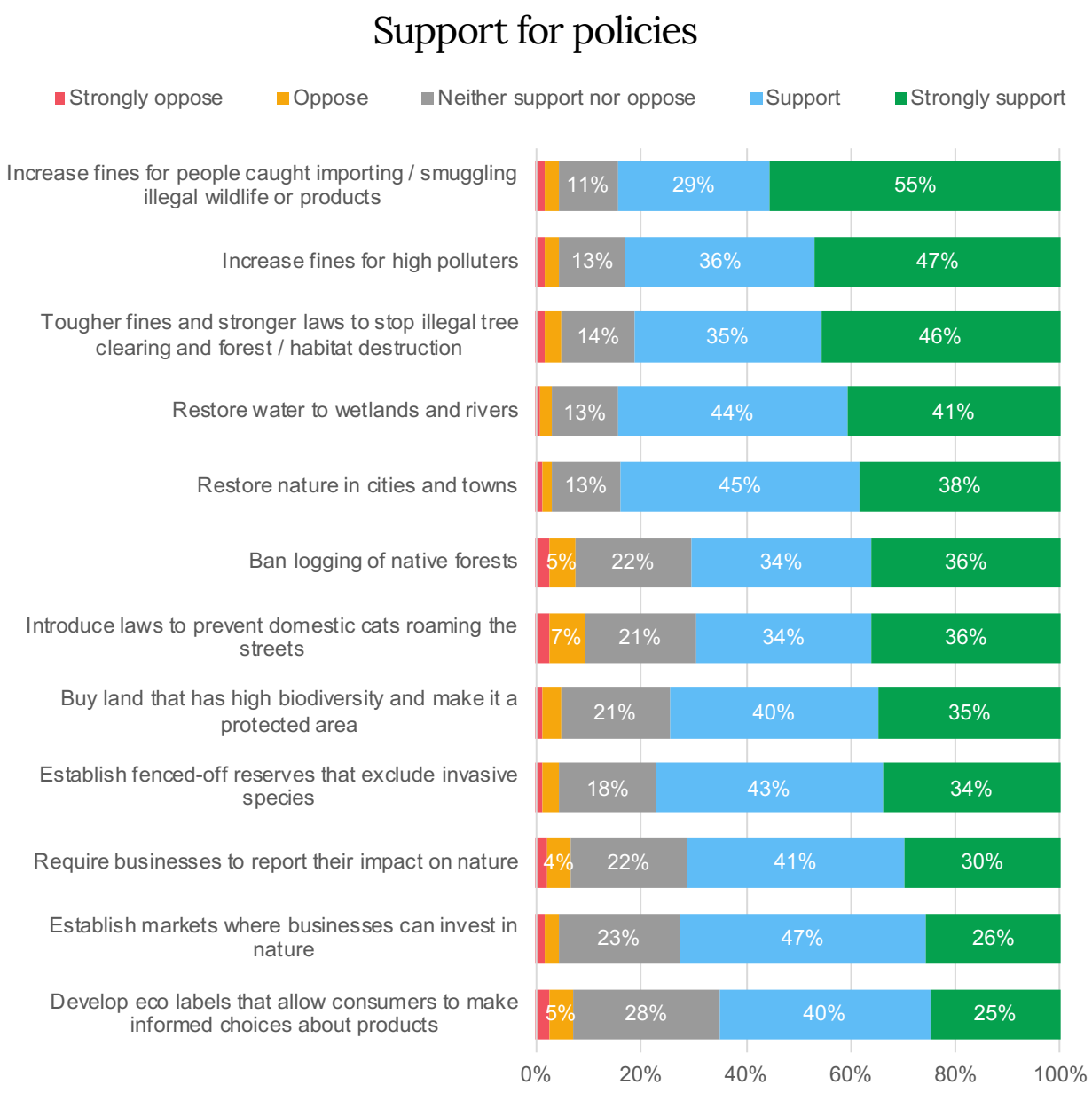


Figure 3. Policy support

Predictors of biodiversity action

Model testing revealed that Australians are more likely to engage in behaviours that benefit biodiversity, be influenced by nature conservation when voting, and support new policies, if they are:

- More connected to nature
- More aware of biodiversity and biodiversity loss, and
- More concerned about biodiversity.

Australians are also more likely to be concerned about biodiversity and influenced by nature conservation issues when voting if they have poorer perceptions of the state of the Australian environment.

97% of Australians want more action to protect nature. The western swamp tortoise is one of over 1900 threatened species in Australia. Image: Nicolas Rakotopare

A young kangaroo in a burnt landscape. Australians support increased spending on the protection of habitats and special places during and after bushfires. Image: Nicolas Rakotopare

83% of Australians support policies to restore nature in citites and towns. Melbourne viewed from Collingwood. Image: Pat Whelen / Unsplash

Implications

The results from this report have clear implications for the Biodiversity Council and the **97% of Australians who want more action to protect nature.** Biodiversity loss is an issue that a vast majority of Australians are concerned about, and a strong majority (58%) feel that either "a lot more" or "a great deal more" action is needed.

Most Australians agree that **every person living in Australia** bears responsibility for acting for the natural environment, and this is reflected in that many Australians are already engaging in everyday behaviours that support nature, such as trying to purchase sustainably (58%) and managing pets for nature (56%).

However, given that the majority of Australians (55–60%) also see all levels of government as responsible for acting for nature, this report holds clear implications for **political representatives, policymakers, and government bodies**. 7 in 10 Australians indicate that nature conservation issues may have a significant influence on how they would vote in future elections, and there is strong support for greater spending for biodiversity conservation and new policies, including penalty actions, restorative actions, and changes to laws and markets. In particular, **there is significant public support for strengthening environmental laws and ceasing native timber harvesting.**

The report also has relevant insights for **businesses and business leaders.** One of the new policy ideas most strongly supported by participants was to require businesses to report their biodiversity impact and for businesses to invest in nature. Individuals were also highly concerned about land clearing and pollution, and supported increased fines and stronger laws to prevent further clearing, indicating that corporations and government bodies involved with agriculture, forestry, urban and town planning and development, and other industries with significant biodiversity footprints, may need to reassess their environmental impact to avoid negative community sentiment.

Already **engaged members of the public,** community groups and conservation professionals should take heart from the report findings: 85% of Australians are concerned about biodiversity issues, and 97% want more action for nature. Many Australians are also already engaging in behaviours that benefit biodiversity. However, given the substantial level of concern for nature, there remains significant potential for even more Australians to engage in relatively low-effort behaviours (e.g. pet management, sustainable purchasing). In addition, while there is a significant cohort regularly engaged in more active behaviours, such as supporting (53%) and advocating (33%) for nature, there remains substantial potential to engage individuals who are highly concerned about biodiversity loss but not yet actively engaging in these behaviours.

How to increase engagement with biodiversity?

This report indicates that individuals who have greater awareness of biodiversity, are concerned about it, and feel a connection to it, are more likely to engage in behaviours to protect it, including policy support and voting with nature in mind. This highlights the potential value of working with audiences **to increase connection to nature, and strengthen awareness and concern about nature and biodiversity loss.** Focusing on these pathways may increase engagement in behaviours to benefit nature, policy acceptance and support, and future voting intentions. This approach is likely to be particularly successful with younger Australians.

However, we also encourage individuals and organisations to **create opportunities for audiences to engage in behaviours to promote and protect nature, to provide specific calls to action, and to share this information with others.** Recognising which pathways are most appropriate for which audiences will increase the effectiveness of these approaches. For example, individuals who are already highly connected to nature and highly concerned are likely to be moved to action more effectively by strategies that focus on providing opportunities to engage with clear and actionable behaviours.

Recommendations

This report provides a baseline on public awareness, concern for and connection to nature and biodiversity. The results presented here will inform the Biodiversity Council's strategy and communications over the coming year, and the survey will be repeated annually to provide longitudinal data for research and evaluation.

The Biodiversity Council recommends that policymakers accept the **community mandate to take stronger action for nature** presented in this report, particularly noting the strong public support for:

- Strengthening environmental laws
- Ceasing native timber harvesting
- Increasing expenditure: investment in biodiversity protection and restoration should be proportional to the public mandate.

The Biodiversity Council is excited to work with and engage further with the public, government, and industry stakeholders to build on public and business engagement with biodiversity. In doing so, the Biodiversity Council hopes to support the much-needed actions to prevent biodiversity loss and protect our unique species and natural ecosystems for all Australians into the future.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the 4048 survey participants

Demographic characteristics		valid %
Age	18–24	12%
	25–34	19%
	35–44	17%
	45–54	15%
	55–64	16%
	65–74	11%
	75+	9%
Gender	Man	47%
	Woman	53%
	Non-binary / gender diverse	<1%
	My gender identity isn't listed	<1%
	Prefer not to say	<1%

Demographic characteristics		valid %
State	NSW	31%
	VIC	26%
	QLD	21%
	SA	7%
	WA	10%
	TAS	3%
	ACT	1%
	NT	1%
Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander	Yes, Aboriginal	5%
	Yes, Torres Strait Islander	<1%
	Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	1%
	No	94%
	Prefer not to say	<1%
Country of birth	Australia	81%
	Other country	19%
Language	Only English	89%
	Other language(s)	11%
Employment status	Employed full-time	37%
	Employed part-time	14%
	Employed casually	4%
	Self-employed	5%
	Student only	2%
	Student and working	2%
	Engaged in home duties or volunteer work	7%
	Retired	22%
	Unemployed	7%
Education status	Did not attend school	<1%
	Primary school	1%
	High school: year 11 or below	15%
	High school: year 12	19%
	Certificate, diploma, or advanced diploma	31%
	University undergraduate	23%
	University post-graduate	10%
Household income	$1–$25,999 per year	9%
	$26,000–$51,999 per year	22%
	$52,000–$77,999 per year	19%
	$78,000–$103,999 per year	16%
	$104,000–$155,999 per year	20%
	$208,000–or more per year	7%
	Negative or nil income	1%
	Prefer not to say	6%

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