

The 1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants - the first global list of the world's threatened flora

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An event of global significance for threatened plants occurred on 9th April 1998 Australian time. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants was launched with events held in Canberra, London, Cape Town and Washington.

The publication (over 900 pages) is the first attempt to list all vascular plant species known to be globally threatened or extinct. Ferns, fern-allies, gymnosperms and flowering plants are covered, but not the lower plants, such as fungi, mosses and lichens. Of the estimated 270,000 known species of vascular plants, 33,798 of these, or 12.5%, are listed as globally threatened or extinct. Of these, 91% are limited in their distribution to a single country.

The pre-1994 IUCN Threat Categories are used. ie. Extinct (Ex), Extinct/Endangered (Ex/E), Endangered (E), Vulnerable (V) Rare (R) and Indeterminate (I). The term 'Threatened' covers all categories except Ex.

Extinction figures are arguably a conservative estimate, as only recorded extinctions are listed.

The countries which were able to provide complete data

Numbers of species globally threatened or extinct by threat category

Threat Category	World	Australia
Ex	380	71
Ex/E	371	
E	6,522	246
V	7,951	630
R	14,504	1,366
I	4,070	3
Total	33,798	2,316
% of Flora	12.5#	14.8*

Calculated against a world flora of 270,000 species

* Calculated against a flora of 15,638 species

sets are among those listed as having the highest percentage of their flora globally threatened. These are Australia with 14.4% (14.8% including extinct species), South Africa with 9.5 % and USA with 29%.

Islands, with their greater degree of risk due often to higher rates of endemism, ranked among those countries with the highest percentage of species threatened. eg Mauritius (39.2%), Seychelles (31.2%) and St Helena (41.2%).

The List was generated from the Threatened Plants Database of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, and is the culmination of around 30 years of data gathering from thousands of sources. However it represents the "tip of the iceberg" as there are still enormous gaps in taxonomic, distributional and conservation information, particularly from parts of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and South America. In addition, if data were only available for part of the known range of a species, the species was not

included in the listing, even if it was suspected of being threatened.

Another important aspect not captured by the data, but noted in the Introduction as representing a much worse conservation scenario, is that of "genetic erosion and diminishing genetic diversity at the population level".

The urgency for filling these knowledge gaps is highlighted by this publication.

One of the major purposes quoted for the production of red lists (once called ROTAP* lists, now ANZECC lists, in Australia, one of the pioneering countries in developing these), is "To motivate people to participate in conservation networks, actions, and educational programs".

They are also described as the "unspectacular but indispensable root system from which true judgement and real conservation can grow."

* Rare or Threatened Australian Plants.

Reference:

Walter, K. S. and Gillett, H. J. [eds] 1998, *1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants*. Compiled by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre. IUCN - The World Conservation Union, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK. lxiv + 862pp.

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Australia is fortunate in being a well botanised country. Yet the last revision of ROTAP listed 2,376 taxa that were considered to be too poorly known to assign to a conservation category. The 'poorly known' figure for many countries would be huge.

Australia is listed among the 32 countries that have at least 5% of their native flora threatened, with a figure of 14.4%. Even though the editors of the List used a lower number of taxa (15,638) than most Australian workers would consider representative of the total national flora, the true figure must still be around 12%. If we remove all oceanic islands, such as Mauritius, from the world equation, such islands having experienced a vast reduction in their native floras, only USA, Turkey and Spain have a higher percentage of their floras threatened.

The editors also point out that the three countries providing complete electronic data sets (including Australia) are also listed as having the highest percentage of their national flora threatened. I would suggest that this reflects the accuracy of information. We know more about our flora and are able to access our

information more readily than many other countries that may have very little data recorded.

The list is not intended to indicate what, if anything, is being done about the problems. But it should be said that the Australian Federal Government alone is spending \$16 million on the conservation of threatened species and ecological communities, and state governments and NGOs are adding to that sum. It is never enough, of course, and it will take years before we will see the results of much of this spending. But we are making a difference. The 1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants helps us put our efforts into a global perspective.

Note: Information for Australia was supplied from Environment Australia's National Threatened Flora Database.



Roger Beale, AM, Secretary, Federal Department of the Environment, launches the 1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, beside a specimen of the globally endangered *Allocasuarina portuensis*. With him are Roger Lembit (left) and Tim Richmond (centre).



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