

Chapter 9

The future

Australia is home to about seven per cent of the Earth's species. It supports about 1350 species of native vertebrates which is almost twice as many as the next most species-rich nation (Indonesia). We have an extraordinary diversity of mammals, reptiles, frogs and fish which are found nowhere else. Plants, insects and fungi are also extremely species-rich and comprised largely of taxa confined to our continent. The unique nature of our biota places a particular responsibility on the Australian human population to take care of these natural resources, both for future generations and on behalf of other nations. Australia's temperate woodlands are major contributors to the nation's extraordinarily rich and diverse array of native plants and animals. The plant and animal species that occur in woodlands do not exist in isolation from one another but have intimate ecological associations and links which are fundamental to how woodlands function and survive. Therefore, woodlands are far more than simply a bunch of scattered trees.

Woodlands are beautiful places, although this is unappreciated by many Australians. Despite such beauty and their immense ecological value, the future of the temperate woodlands of south-eastern Australia is far from assured. Many processes threaten their survival. These range from salinity and over-grazing by domestic livestock to land clearing and firewood removal. Traditional forms of conservation that have been widely applied elsewhere (such as in forests) like setting aside large reserves are unlikely to be appropriate in woodlands. This is because most woodland landscapes are in private ownership and are dominated primarily by grazing and cropping enterprises. The best way forward will be to better integrate conservation with productive land uses.

Over the past 200 years traditional agriculture and cropping have hugely damaged Australian ecosystems. These two kinds of land use have had greater impacts on rates of species loss and decline than any other form of land management – far greater than forestry and mining. This means that there are immense challenges to be overcome in making a transition towards ecologically sustainable grazing and cropping practices. These challenges

LEFT: Woodlands are being used increasingly frequently for recreation, such as this area in Chiltern Park in north-eastern Victoria.