

NatureRefuges

The Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (EHP) can assist landholders to formally protect significant conservation values on their property under a nature refuge.

National parks alone cannot maintain the diversity of plants, animals and ecosystems found in Queensland. Private landholders can play a vital role in protecting the state's biodiversity by establishing a nature refuge on their property.

Nature refuges

A nature refuge is a voluntary covenant acknowledging a landholder's commitment to protect land with significant conservation values. A nature refuge agreement is legally binding and is negotiated directly with the landholder and tailored to suit the landholder's management needs.

A nature refuge is a class of protected area under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NCA).

Nature refuge agreements

A nature refuge agreement is negotiated between EHP and the landholder, and provides a framework for the sustainable management of a nature refuge and for the protection of its significant values.

Owners of freehold land, leaseholders of State land, government corporations (that are separate legal entities from the Queensland Government), local governments, private companies and nature conservancies are able to enter into a nature refuge agreement.

A nature refuge agreement can apply to all or a portion of a property—depending on the conservation values and the wishes of the landholder.

A nature refuge agreement is perpetual. It is registered on land title and binds successive owners or lessees of the land. If a property is sold, responsibility for the nature refuge rests with the new owners or lessees.

A nature refuge agreement is the best way landholders can ensure the good land management practices and conservation works they have initiated will be continued by the property's future landholders.

Flexibility

Nature refuges:

- allow you to retain ownership and/or management responsibility, and recognise outstanding land management practices
- allow for a range of activities including primary production and low impact, sustainable recreation, ecotourism and scientific/educational activities, so long as they are compatible with protecting conservation values
- do not change public access to your property



Waterhole on Teemurra Nature Refuge. Photo: EHP

Determining suitability

The area nominated for a nature refuge will be assessed to determine suitability. The assessment process will take into account the condition of the land, current land uses and management practices, and proposed future uses.

Consideration will be given to:

- areas containing, or providing habitat for threatened plant and animal species
- threatened habitats or vegetation types, such as endangered and of-concern regional ecosystems
- habitats and ecosystems poorly represented in existing protected areas
- remnant vegetation and movement corridors for native animals, especially those linking areas of remnant vegetation or existing reserves
- significant wetlands
- areas identified as having high resilience to the impacts of climate change

Procedure

Potential new nature refuges are identified by EHP and the relevant landholder is then contacted directly. If the landholder is interested in learning more about nature refuges after that initial contact a nature refuge officer will coordinate a meeting to provide further detail.

During that meeting the nature refuge officer will explain the process of developing a nature refuge agreement and declaring a nature refuge, discuss current land use and management, address any concerns the landholder may have, and assess the proposed nature refuge area's conservation values on-ground.

If the landholder and EHP wish to proceed, a draft nature refuge agreement is produced in consultation with the landholder.

Nature refuges are legally binding and the agreement contains conditions designed to ensure the conservation values contained within the nature refuge are managed appropriately today and into the future.

Conditions written into the agreement will always be clearly explained and discussed with the landholder prior to signing, to ensure that mutual obligations are understood and achievable.

In most cases, if a property is eligible as a nature refuge, this generally indicates that current management practices are compatible with the protection of the property's conservation values.

Once both parties are satisfied with the contents of the agreement, the landholder and Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection sign the agreement.



*Gravel downs on Mount Windsor Nature Refuge.
Photo: EHP*

Changes to the agreement

Although landholders are legally bound to adhere to conditions in a nature refuge agreement, the NCA does make provision for changes to agreement conditions through negotiation with the Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection, as long as the nature refuge values are retained.

If landholders feel changes are necessary to the

conditions of the agreement, they need to discuss their concerns with EHP. It may be possible to accommodate these concerns without altering the agreement. Termination of a nature refuge agreement can only be enacted under exceptional circumstances.

A nature refuge is designed to provide permanent protection of conservation values on the property; therefore it is important to uphold the commitment to preserving those values.

Costs of maintaining an agreement

Landholders retain management responsibility for their nature refuge. Financial assistance may be available to eligible nature refuge landholders from time to time, to protect areas with significant conservation values. However, all costs associated with the day-to-day management of a nature refuge remain the landholder's responsibility.

Incentives and assistance

Once a nature refuge agreement is signed, landholders are supported by nature refuge officers who can provide one-on-one advice on how to best protect the conservation values on the nature refuge.

Establishing a nature refuge can also provide access to a range of community groups and other programs that provide training and support.

EHP also coordinates NatureAssist, a targeted financial incentives scheme for landholders with a property identified as being suitable for a nature refuge. NatureAssist may fund activities to enhance protection and management of significant conservation values on new nature refuges or extensions to existing nature refuges.

Benefits

A nature refuge:

- becomes part of a network of protected areas contributing to the conservation and protection of Queensland's biodiversity
- balances protection with ecologically sustainable use of the land
- protects the property's conservation value for future generations
- is tailored to suit the management needs of the property
- gives landholders access to conservation management advice from nature refuge officers

Further information

Visit www.ehp.qld.gov.au
Phone: 13 QGOV (13 74 68)
Email: naturerefuge@ehp.qld.gov.au