

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water





Research Participant Information Sheet (248/23, 049/24)

Habitat Condition Assessment Tool: using expert knowledge to improve our understanding of the condition of Australia's native ecosystems



Project overview

The Habitat Condition Assessment Tool (HCAT) is a web-based platform hosted by the Atlas of Living Australia's <u>BioCollect information system</u> that enables experts with deep ecological knowledge and experience to contribute site-level ecosystem condition scores. Using this tool, experts delineate areas they are familiar with and provide an overall condition score for each area, benchmarked against extreme end points (0 – completely transformed ecosystem in which all native species have been removed, and 1 - ecosystem with highest integrity as might have existed prior to European colonisation).

HCAT was initially tested in 2017–18 as a collaboration between the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA). Following feedback from early participants and researchers, the HCAT has been updated and streamlined. The refurbished website is now being relaunched across Australia in partnership with the DCCEEW-funded Ecological Knowledge System (EKS) through a rolling series of regional elicitation campaigns. The EKS is being designed to provide information for use by participants in the <u>Nature Repair Market</u> and others interested in enhancing and protecting biodiversity.

Contributions to HCAT will support a variety of endeavours in research, natural resource planning, monitoring, and reporting. Most notably, it will support ongoing development of the Habitat Condition Assessment System (HCAS), which uses satellite remote sensing and site data to estimate ecosystem condition across the Australian continent. Data collected via HCAT informs HCAS by providing contemporary examples where ecosystems are relatively intact, as well as sites where ecosystems have been modified. HCAT data will also be used to improve conceptual models of ecosystem dynamics (via the <u>Australian Ecosystem</u> <u>Models Framework</u>). The HCAS and ecosystem models are important inputs to the <u>EKS</u>.

The <u>HCAT</u> will be introduced to participants attending face-to-face workshops, focussed on developing or improving conceptual models of ecosystem dynamics, and who will subsequently be invited to contribute site condition assessments. Participants can contribute condition assessments for reference and modified sites at any time following the workshop and preferably within about four months of the initial workshop. The HCAT team also invites other experts to contribute at any time based on their expertise.

What does participation involve?

Following online or face-to-face workshops, participation involves using the HCAT to contribute site-level ecosystem condition scores for any location the expert is familiar with (referred to as Site Condition Assessments). Participants will also be asked to score the condition of a small set of images which will be used to calibrate and support consistency in scoring across participants (referred to as Image Assessments). More specifically, to participate in this project, experts will need to: (1) register with the <u>ALA</u> (if they have not already) and use their login to access the HCAT website; (2) familiarise themselves with the <u>HCAT</u> <u>instructions booklet</u> detailing definitions and outlining what to expect and, optionally, attending a training webinar, which aims to standardise participant understanding of the data capture process; (3) complete a brief survey on geographic areas of expertise; (4) provide condition scores for a small number of photos (Image Assessments) for calibration purposes; (5) contribute as many site condition assessments as able to and, if available, upload photos relevant to each site assessment; and optionally, (6) contribute additional information about the anthropogenic drivers of condition for that site assessment.

Further details are provided in the accompanying HCAT <u>factsheet</u> and <u>instructions booklet</u>.

The project team may hold periodic webinars for training purposes, as needed. At intervals, we will seek anonymous feedback on the <u>HCAT</u> through an evaluation survey to guide future improvements.

Intellectual property

Intellectual property of contributed information remains with the participant and, by registering and engaging in this process, the participant agrees that their contributed information will be made freely available at the end of the project, thereby allowing that information to be placed in the public domain via CSIRO's <u>data access portal</u> for others to use without asking permission.

Data contributed through the HCAT website will be securely stored within the ALA's <u>BioCollect information</u> <u>system</u> and visible only to the registered participant and those with administration rights (project team members and web developers). The registered participant can make corrections to their site assessments at any time.

At the Image Assessment step, participants will be asked to decide whether their name is to be associated with their contributions. If a participant selects 'De-identify my data', their site assessment data will be deidentified before the dataset is downloaded by the project team. The downloaded data is put through a calibration protocol and the scores are rescaled and validated for use in various applications. The original and rescaled scores are published along with additional site assessment information, but de-identified if that is the nominated preference. If after making a selection, a participant changes their mind about whether they want their contributions to be de-identified or credited, they must contact the project team at <u>expertconditionassessments@csiro.au</u> and make that request in writing. Once the dataset has been published it will not be possible to make a change. De-identifying the data does not signify withdrawal from the project.

We will acknowledge contributions in project reports, datasets and other publications where participants have not selected the 'De-identify my data' option. If no acknowledgement is preferred, those participants can make that request in writing via <u>expertconditionassessments@csiro.au</u>.

Risks and benefits

Aside from giving up their time, there are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this project for participants. Whilst participants in this project may not benefit directly, their input will be made freely available and help advance development of the HCAS method and ecosystem state and transition models. These may be used to inform projects suitable for the nature repair market scheme, and other uses.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary and a person's decision to participate or withdraw will not affect their current or future relationships with the researchers or staff at CSIRO, DCCEEW, or the ALA.

How will my privacy be protected?

Personal information provided by participants in registering with the ALA, during online HCAT webinars, through the HCAT website, or via email conversations and surveys will be treated confidentially. Unless requested, we will retain any information collected prior to a participant's withdrawal from the study. If

any topic is raised during an online HCAT webinar that a participant prefers not to discuss, they are welcome to leave the webinar.

Other personal data that may be collected as part of this project (e.g. email correspondence, meeting notes, re-identifiable data from the <u>HCAT</u>) will be securely stored as per <u>CSIRO's Recordkeeping Principles</u>. Only the ALA web administrators will have access to participants ALA registration data, such as emails.

Note that while CSIRO will make all attempts to secure participant privacy and ensure they cannot be identified from summarised information contained within project publications and reports, if that is the nominated preference, this risk can never be completely removed. It is possible that participants may be reidentified within project publications if there is only a small number of experts familiar with a particular geographic region or ecosystem.

Personal information collected in this project, including name and contact details, is protected by the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) and CSIRO will handle participants' personal information in accordance with this Act and the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, updated 2023), or as otherwise required by law.

With participant consent, CSIRO may also collect sensitive information, such as a participant's image (e.g. in recordings during training webinars) for the purpose of recording outputs and to refine training methods. CSIRO may disclose a participant's personal information to third parties including project partners/funders (DCCEEW), sub-contractors (ALA), data storage systems (e.g. Microsoft Teams), and by virtue of their participation, to other participants in HCAT training webinars, for purposes outlined above.

For further information on how CSIRO handles personal and sensitive information and our access, correction and complaints process please read our <u>privacy policy</u> available on our website or by contacting us at <u>privacy@csiro.au</u>. The ALA's privacy policy is explained at <u>https://www.ala.org.au/terms-of-use/privacy-policy/</u>. For information about how DCCEEW generally handles personal information, please refer to their privacy policies available at: <u>https://www.dcceew.gov.au/about/commitment/privacy</u>.

How will my information be used?

It is anticipated that the information contributed through the <u>HCAT</u>, and anonymised evaluation surveys, will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums, such as technical reports, project summaries and datasets of rescaled site condition assessments, as well as scientific journal publications and conference presentations. Data collected through the <u>HCAT</u> and subsequent evaluation surveys may also be reused in future research being undertaken by CSIRO, ALA or DCCEEW on the further development of methods to inform spatial and temporal ecosystem assessment, including to improve the HCAT, the <u>HCAS</u>, <u>ecosystem conceptual models</u>, and the <u>EKS</u>.

Consent

By participating in this project, participants agree to the collection, use, reuse, and disclosure of the data they provide in the ways described in this document, their personal information (name and contact details) and sensitive information (photographs during webinars). If participants request that we delete their personal information, we will do so if permitted by and in accordance with any applicable laws (including the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) and the *Archives Act 1983* (Cth)).

Ethical clearance and contacts

This project has been approved by CSIRO's Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee in accordance with the *Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) updated 2023:* ethics clearance 248/23 (participant selection and engagement) and 049/24 (expert elicitation). If you have any questions concerning your participation in the project please contact the project leaders via the details provided. Alternatively, any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project can be raised with the Executive Manager of Social Responsibility and Ethics on +61 7 3833 5693 or by email at <u>csshrec@csiro.au</u>.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

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