



Australian
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FENNER SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY

Strategy 2026–2031

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Swift parrots held during fieldwork — a critically endangered species studied by Fenner School researchers.

Our statement of purpose

Our purpose is to help develop a more environmentally sustainable world.

We draw on a culture of solution-driven research and develop national and international partnerships to address complex “wicked problems”, which are contested and have intertwined environmental and social dimensions. Through effective engagement we work to ensure that our research and education influences practice, policy and attitudes, leading to improved outcomes for society.

Recognising that education is a vital pathway to achieve sustainability and build resilience in the face of uncertainty and change, we deliver an education program that is inclusive of the diversity of undergraduate, postgraduate and research students. We provide our graduates with the practical, professional and intellectual skills required to have an ongoing impact for the benefit of all.

OUR THREE BROAD GOALS

The School’s purpose requires that we are active in a wide range of areas, under three broad goals: **understanding environmental change**, **enabling better decisions**, and **creating sustainable futures**. Under these goals we place priority on seven themes across our research, education and engagement.

Who we are

We are a community of scholars who seek academic excellence and practical outcomes by applying a collaborative, collegiate and creative approach to research, education, and engagement with society.

We seek to have an outsized positive impact by connecting and collaborating with people widely. Our effectiveness in working with diverse students, partners, collaborators and other community members is based on a collegial culture of inclusivity and mutual respect that unites our academic and professional staff.



Fenner School students during the Vietnam Field School.

OUR APPROACH AT A GLANCE

Collaborative · Collegiate · Creative — excellence and practical outcomes, delivered through partnership and mutual respect.

Our history

The Fenner School of Environment & Society at the Australian National University was founded in 2007, bringing together the former Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies and the School for Resources, Environment and Society — itself formed by an earlier merger between the School of Forestry and the Department of Geography & Human Ecology. These origins go some way to explaining the cross-disciplinary nature of the School.

The School is named in honour of internationally renowned scholar Professor Frank Fenner (1914–2010). Professor Fenner was one of Australia’s most decorated scientists — a foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, a Fellow of the Royal Society (UK) and a Foreign Associate of the National Academy of Sciences (USA). While best known for his role in the global eradication of smallpox, Professor Fenner was also passionate about the environment. In 1973 he became the founding director of the new Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the ANU.



Professor Frank Fenner (1914–2010), after whom the School is named.

PROFESSOR FRANK FENNER, 1971

“The rational utilisation of natural resources in a way which is biologically, culturally and economically acceptable to man requires the skills and understanding of integrated groups of people of different disciplines brought together with the common commitment to seek solutions to the practical problems of natural resource management.”

Today the Fenner School is one of the most influential centres for inter- and transdisciplinary environmental research and education in Australia, and one of the longest-standing globally. Our staff profile includes world-leading experts from a diverse range of fields working together to tackle the world’s biggest environmental challenges. The School sits within the newly established College of Systems and Society at the ANU. We host the Institute for Water Futures, partner in other institutes across the University, and collaborate widely with other schools, universities and institutions around Australia and the world. In 2026 the School came together to review its strategic objectives for the coming five years. Our focus was on supporting ongoing School success in an environment where the external pressure on the higher education sector means that growth in the School budget will be harder to achieve, but excellence and impact remain central.

Seven themes, three goals

Our seven priority themes each contribute to all three of our broad goals — understanding environmental change, enabling better decisions, and creating sustainable futures.

Seven themes	Understanding environmental change	Enabling better decisions	Creating sustainable futures
Climate and Energy	●	●	●
Biodiversity Conservation	●	●	●
Indigenous Peoples and the Environment	●	●	●
Water, Soil, Food, Forests	●	●	●
Landscapes and Natural Hazards	●	●	●
Urban Sustainability	●	●	●
Policy and Governance	●	●	●



Students undertaking fieldwork as part of a Fenner course.

What each theme means

■ **Climate and Energy**

Given the nexus between climate, energy, water and land use — and the pressure on all four — we find pathways to the future that lead to sustainable and equitable outcomes for all people and the environment.

■ **Biodiversity Conservation**

We create the knowledge and approaches required to halt the loss of species and ecosystems and maintain the values these provide to society. We identify how biodiversity considerations can be integrated into everyday decision-making across all sectors of the Australian economy, and derive lessons for global biodiversity conservation.

■ **Indigenous Peoples and the Environment**

We work with First Peoples to develop collaborative methods and approaches that lead to better caring for Country and deeper engagement between the university sector and Traditional Owners.

■ **Water, Soil, Food, Forests**

We create tools and processes to support next-generation water, soil and forest management, informed by current technology, collective learning and knowledge sharing. We identify natural resource management practices and policies that support appropriate food availability while building the resilience of our soils, water, biodiversity and forests.

■ **Landscapes and Natural Hazards**

We design practices and policies to deliver economically, socially and environmentally sustainable management across natural and built landscapes — relating to fires, floods, droughts and other natural hazards in a climate with more extreme weather events.

■ **Urban Sustainability**

We build understanding of cities as human-dominant, complex systems to foster them as powerhouses of technological, social and cultural innovation that are liveable, resilient and sustainable — and identify the mechanisms and pathways to achieve this.

■ **Policy and Governance**

We analyse policy, governance and decision-making processes to support innovations that improve decision-making, enable reform, and equip public and private sectors to tackle complex social-environmental challenges.

Three interlinked areas

The School is committed to excellence in three vital and interlinked domains of activity: **research**, **education** and **engagement**. The overarching outcome we seek from all of them is to create a positive social and environmental impact. Wherever possible we link our activity across these areas — we teach what we research and vice versa, and we engage to advance research impact and improve our education. We educate our students in a way that leads to greater social engagement.

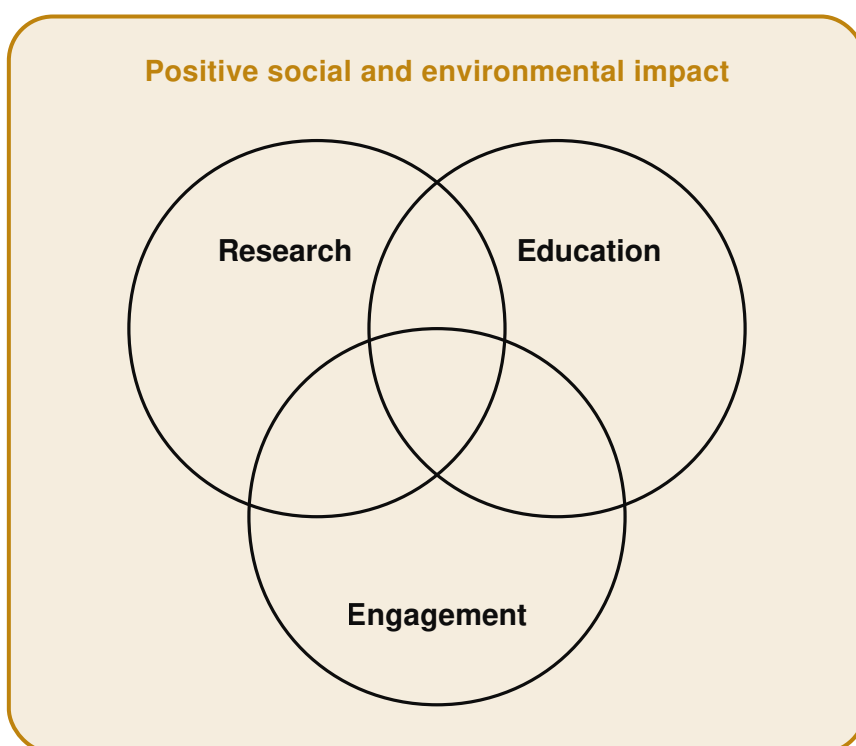


Figure 1: Everything the School does — research, education and engagement, and where they intersect — sits within, and contributes to, a positive social and environmental impact.

TRANSDISCIPLINARY BY DESIGN

The overlaps between areas are transdisciplinary in nature. Our most integrated activities bring research, education and engagement together, with School staff and students working side by side with non-academic collaborators. We seek to be an exemplar in realising ANU's strategic ambition to excel in transdisciplinarity.

Across these areas of activity we have identified nine priority actions.

Priority actions

RESEARCH

Building capacity for wicked problems

We aim to build Australia's capacity to tackle wicked environmental problems of national and international significance, engage with technological transformations across many sectors, and foster collaborative research links throughout the ANU that reinforce its status as a place of research excellence. We seek to continue our strength in impact-oriented research with partners including governments and non-governmental organisations.

PA1

RESEARCH

The School commits to investing resources in activities that encourage conversation and sharing of ideas to better connect, mentor and engage our developing researchers (HDR and ECR) within and across the school. These activities should be designed in consultation with HDR and ECR cohorts to ensure alignment with their needs and helps the school to reinforce its strong positive culture, while adapting to the changing environment. Activities could be based around the School's themes or other activity areas that span beyond single projects.

PA2

RESEARCH

The School commits to a program of research activation workshops, led by School researchers, that aim to build, maintain or reinvigorate partnerships with organisations external to the University. Recognising that partnership research requires responsiveness and adaptability, the School will continue to support partnership development through careful investment of School funds generated by past research success.

PA3

RESEARCH

The School commits to fostering a dynamic research-focused community that analyses, develops and reflects leading practices in transdisciplinary research methodologies, theories and methods. This work builds on our long history of leadership in this area, connects with diverse thematic research projects, and proactively coordinates with ANU's strategic goals of transdisciplinary practice.

EDUCATION

Work-ready, adaptable graduates

We aim to train work-ready graduates with adaptable, lifelong skills who are outward-looking, resilient and able to accommodate complexity with disciplinary depth and multi-disciplinary breadth. Our graduates will have cross-cultural intelligence for collaboration and professional integrity.

PA4

EDUCATION

The School commits to a review of teaching programs, including a focus on postgraduate coursework. The review will consider programs that combine our strengths with other schools so that we teach into stronger, more attractive programs with larger enrolments, and that develop critical thinking and collaborative skills. We will continue to adapt our Bachelor of Environment and Sustainability to ensure it attracts a strong undergraduate cohort and leads the way as an exemplar ANU undergraduate program.

PA5

EDUCATION

The School commits to adapting our teaching to the fast-developing impact of artificial intelligence (AI). We will go beyond the immediate focus on adapting assessments to the longer-term goal of engaging with rapidly evolving technologies relevant to the workplaces our students are preparing for, including their ethical deployment and use. We will support course conveners to learn from colleagues and from experts outside the University, working within ANU policy but not waiting for others to lead the way.

ENGAGEMENT

Collaboration beyond academia

We aim to support our staff and students in building constructive collaboration with partners outside academic circles — including government, civil society and NGOs — to enhance the development and application of knowledge for environmental sustainability.

PA6

ENGAGEMENT

The School commits to running at least three externally facing events each year. Each event will have at least one academic lead who takes responsibility, and should synergise with activities generated by priority actions PA1 and PA2.

PA7

ENGAGEMENT

The School will invest strategic resources and mentorship in developing new partnerships with non-academic organisations where there are clearly identified impact pathways and opportunities, and academic leadership.

CROSS-CUTTING

Connections that enrich everything we do

We aim to continue building meaningful and positive connections with individuals and communities whose expertise, knowledge and wisdom enrich all areas of activity across the School.

PA8

CROSS-CUTTING

The School commits to the ongoing provision of an Indigenous Fellows program that builds partnerships of mutual benefit with First Nations' communities and Indigenous organisations, relevant to our education, research and engagement activity. The School will continue to play a leading role in delivering ANU's strategic objectives for Indigenous Australia.

PA9

CROSS-CUTTING

The School will engage with its community of affiliated staff — honoraries and visitors — to ensure that their professional experiences and networks enrich education, research and engagement outcomes. This includes engaging affiliates with the seminar program and with research students.



Fenner School students hearing from an ACT Government colleague during a field trip.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian National University acknowledges, celebrates and pays its respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of the Canberra region, and to all First Nations Peoples on whose lands we gather and work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Fenner School of Environment & Society

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