



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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4th September 2023

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
jscncet@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into fostering and promoting the significance of Australia's National Capital

We appreciated the opportunity to provide verbal evidence to the Committee on the 21st August 2023.

We are providing a note below that elaborates on our opening statement that provides some key data and links in the hope that this will aid the Committee's deliberations.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Jamie Pittock, President of Friends of Grasslands, and
Dr John Fitz Gerald, former President of Friends of Grasslands.

Introduction to FOG

Friends of Grasslands is a community group based in Canberra that is dedicated to the conservation of endangered natural grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia.

Our submission to your inquiry was made jointly with the Conservation Council ACT Region, the peak non-government environmental organisation for the ACT, of which FOG is a member.

Our evidence is based on our work to conserve habitats on Commonwealth "national lands" in central Canberra. Since 2009, FOG has had a formal "environmental care agreement" with the National Capital Authority for the conservation of nearly 100 hectares of significant habitats. In the past 14 years we have held 159 work parties contributing over 8,300 volunteer hours undertaking activities like public education, weeding, planting and removing rubbish.

Focus on the environment of the 'bush capital'

The establishment of the ACT resulted in the inadvertent conservation of areas of native grasslands and grassy woodlands. Habitats and species lost to agriculture development elsewhere in south eastern Australia still thrive in small remnants in the ACT. National lands include habitats of 2 of Australia's most endangered ecosystems and 11 species that are designated as matters of national environmental significance under Commonwealth legislation. These include native temperate grasslands and box-gum grassy woodlands, the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon (lizard), and Button Wrinklewort (wildflower). The Commonwealth Government's commitment to recover threatened species can only be achieved if these habitats are conserved.

We have three recommendations for inquiry consideration:

1. Commit to conserving the biodiversity and Indigenous cultural heritage of the bush capital.

Commonwealth agencies need to protect remaining grassy ecosystems on their lands. This includes abandoning Defence Housing Australia's revised project that would bisect the North Lawson grassland, as well as the Canberra Airport Group's unnecessary northern road proposal that would bisect the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon habitat.

We ask that Commonwealth lands that have a different primary purpose, for example, The Defence Majura Training Area, be secondarily protected as "other effective area-based conservation measure" (OECM) sites under revised environmental legislation. This is detailed in our submission.

The Commonwealth Government on its own lands in its capital should be an exemplar of the environmental stewardship that it expects of the rest of the nation.

2. National lands in central Canberra need to be reserved as nature reserves

We ask your inquiry to support the reservation for nature conservation of three Commonwealth owned sites covering 219 hectares of grassy ecosystems at North Lawson, Yarramundi Reach and Gurubung Dhaura (Stirling Park). The lands could be designated as nature reserves under section 344 of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. There are international precedents for promoting national capitals through nature reserves. For example, the United States National Parks Service manages such parks in the District of Columbia <https://www.nps.gov/state/dc/index.htm>

3. Promotion of the 'bush capital' should include the bush

The planning of Canberra is renowned for reserving bush in the heart of our capital. However, the level of investment in managing bush on national lands is woefully inadequate. For example, the National Capital Authority's budget has been insufficient to pay for the weed control and controlled burning needed to restore the health of significant habitats like Yarramundi Reach and Gurubung Dhaura (Stirling Park). For example, the Australian National Botanic Gardens has insufficient resources to maintain areas of its estate. We ask your inquiry to recommend greater investment to manage Commonwealth lands in the ACT.

Our contention is that the natural landscape of the capital is a major attraction and part of our national story in understanding and caring for our environment.

We suggest that one option to enhance the capital would be collaboration with the ACT Government to establish, conserve and promote a 'National Botanical Precinct'. The National Botanical Precinct could include:

- Commonwealth assets - Australian National Botanic Gardens, Lindsay Pryor National Arboretum, and grassy ecosystems at Yarramundi Reach and Gurubung Dhaura (Stirling Park); and
- ACT Government assets – Black Mountain Nature Park, National Arboretum Canberra and adjoining urban parks.

Further, Canberra could follow Adelaide's example as be designated as a National Park City <https://www.nationalparkcity.org/> to reinforce a commitment to managing the capital as an environmental attraction.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.