

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find below, comments the relate specifically to the management of protected areas in Queensland for the WCPA Senate enquiry into Protected Area Management. I am currently an employee of the Qld Government, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, however I make this submission in my capacity as a private individual. I have worked in the area of park management for the past 14 years in two states and have a B.App. Sc., MBA and am currently a PhD student with the University of Queensland. Contact details are provided below.

A number of problems exist in relation to the Government management of protected areas -

1) conservation and, in particular protected area management, has been a low priority for Government expenditure in comparison to other portfolios such as health, police and the like. This is quite understandable and given limited budgets, the reasons for this imbalance are no doubt set to continue and will be successfully defended by Government. Occasionally, a major failure in our conservation efforts might bring a flush of new funds for a short period, and then will dry up again. This typically happens after a major wildfire season or when an issue such as salinity hits the headlines. Mostly however, failure to manage protected areas attracts very little voter attention. From a political perspective, the relatively recent introduction of third party rights to a range of state legislation may have given cause for political concern and indeed we have seen several conservation groups use this avenue to move against the killing of flying foxes in Qld. Such actions have potential to embarrass Government in that they may highlight poor performance - however the likelihood of serious embarrassment is probably quite low.

- Protected area management receives a low priority for funding in Government and will no doubt continue to do so.

2) In recent years, the Regional Forest Agreements in NSW and Queensland have seen the addition of very large tracts of land to the protected area estate. So in terms of creating new protected areas and increasing the total percentage of the State's area under protected title, the Qld Government would probably be rated quite highly. Human and financial resources were also transferred as part of this process, however park management remains critically understaffed.

Two hundred years ago, Australian ecosystems were able to function effectively with minimal or zero human management input (although it must be acknowledged that Aboriginal management was probably quite advanced, from an ecosystem perspective) but now, with the introduction of a range of environmental weeds, feral animals and diseases, active management is required to prevent ecosystems from degenerating. It is no longer appropriate to adopt the mentality that if we lock an area up and leave it alone, conservation values will be maintained or improve. They will in fact decrease. As we continue to expand our influence on natural ecosystems, the level of intensity and expertise of management will most certainly need to increase if we are to maintain biodiversity, and there is no doubt that we will not be entirely successful in this. To a large extent, much of our effort in protected areas today has to focus on the control of weeds and feral animals.

- Natural ecosystems will require more intensive and more sophisticated management in the future if they are to survive and we are already understaffed in terms of on-ground labour and we are even further behind in developing future potential to manage smarter (research).

3) The level of expertise in government senior management has to be called into question, in relation to conservation. Since the Hawke Government, there has been a move away from the old career public service model and many reforms have worked to create a more mobile pool of management expertise in the Senior Executive Service - officers who have senior management expertise and are transferable between departments at the most senior levels. While these reforms have addressed some of the shortfalls that existed in the previous model, it has also introduced problems of its own. In most conservation departments there are now very few senior managers with a conservation background and very few that have any true understanding of protected area management or the associated costs. The result in some departments (such as the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service) has been a decline in the quality of park management services and destruction of research capabilities. Many of the senior "researchers" in such organisations are now more "administrators" rather than true "researchers". A notable exception to this exists in WA's C.A.L.M. where research activities are still alive and well. In many other states, the erosion of research capabilities have undermined our ability to develop smarter management options for the future.

- Lack of conservation expertise in senior management has led to a downgrading of overall performance and undermining of research capacity.

4) Protected areas are considered to be integral to the conservation agenda, and the maintenance of our biodiversity has traditionally thought to be inextricably linked to the competent management of these areas. However, many species can not be effectively conserved in protected areas. These include nomadic and wide-ranging species such as our Australian flying foxes, two of which are now threatened species. Even apart from this aspect, it now being realised that effective conservation can not be restricted entirely to protected areas. I hope therefore, that the inquiry will take a holistic approach and consider the broader aspects of conservation management where applicable.

- I would urge that the enquiry consider protected area management in the broader context by considering the goals of protected area management, many of which have broader application outside protected areas.

5) There now exist in Australia, a number of non-profit private organisations that are buying and managing lands in a defacto protected area fashion. These include the Bush Heritage Fund and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. The work that these groups do, should not be underestimated. They demonstrate real commitment from the most senior levels of their management to the lowest, and they are also free from the political constraints that bind the thinking and decisions made in government organisations. I would anticipate that in the future, they will develop as a major force for effective conservation and every effort should be made by government to support and facilitate their work.

- Consider the possible advantages inherent in outsourcing protected area management to non-profits and other non-government groups. Consider the role that such groups may play in the future and the incentives that may be developed to assist in guiding such groups in developing best practice management techniques.

6) The strategic targeting of key threatening processes may be an effective way to assist protected area management and to greatly reduce the future costs of conservation. For example, the biological control of foxes would positively impact every protected area in Australia, apart from a few tropical areas. It would no doubt save many endangered species such as brush-tailed rock wallabies (declining due to fox predation recognised as the single most critical cause of decline) and central Australian Rufous Hare Wallaby (recently made extinct on the mainland by foxes but could be reintroduced from WA islands), common wombats (where sarcoptic mange is extirpating populations - a parasite spread by foxes). The overall costs of maintaining separate recovery plan actions for all of these species will amount to hundreds of millions of dollars over the coming years; costs that may be mitigated through support for a single project to develop a biological (genetic) control to remove foxes. I understand that such work has been underway but now in limbo due to DNA ethical issues. We need to progress these types of projects as a highest possible priority. The strategic direction of funds into these types of research areas will greatly reduce the future costs of maintaining protected areas - almost incalculable cost savings.

- strategic targeting of key threatening processes should be the highest priority for conservation and would greatly reduce the future costs of protected area management. This relates mainly to the biological control of environmental weeds and introduced ferals, primarily foxes and rabbits.

Thanks for the opportunity to provide comments to the enquiry. I hope you find the above of interest.

Bruce Thomson