COAST & WETLANDS
SOCIETY INCORPORATED

P.O. Box A225, Sydney South, NSW 1235
A.B.N 84 775 415 708

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The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts Reference Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas

The Coast and Wetlands Society Inc welcomes the opportunity of making a submission to the Inquiry.

We note that what can be collectively referred to as the conservation estate consists of a large number of area designations. Despite recommendations from an earlier Senate Inquiry that there be a rationalization of the categories and uniformity between the states this has not occurred.

ToR a)
values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Since the early 1990s there has been a shift in emphasis in most jurisdictions such that the primary focus of conservation reserves is clearly on meeting the objectives for biodiversity conservation established by the Rio convention.

Formal reserves clearly have a major role to play in biodiversity conservation strategy, although biodiversity, either now or in the future, cannot be conserved in its entirety within conservation reserves. One of the consequences of adopting the biodiversity paradigm is that it clearly requires that much more attention has to be given to the development of sustainable off park conservation measures.

Notwithstanding the importance of biodiversity as a driver for reserve selection it needs to be recognized that there are other values which may also be met by conservation reserves. These include

- conservation of landscapes (including wilderness) and the provision of opportunities for various forms of outdoor recreation. (Historically this was a major reason for establishment of conservation reserves).

- conservation of features of cultural significance (for both the indigenous and immigrant community).

- conservation of geodiversity – this has been a relatively neglected (except in Tasmania) field of conservation – despite the importance accorded to geodiversity in the Natural Heritage Charter.

There is, however, an important difference between the objectives for marine protected areas and for terrestrial conservation reserves. One of the justifications for establishing MPAs is that they provide 'safe' areas for the recruitment of fish stocks which will in the future be available for harvest in areas outside the MPA. There is increasing evidence that harvestable yields are positively increased through establishment of conservation areas. In the terrestrial environment reserves are not established so as to increase the numbers of (for example) kangaroos which might be shot elsewhere. However, an important argument for conserving biodiversity is that biodiversity sustains a variety of ecosystem services upon which we depend. Thus in part establishment of terrestrial reserves will help maintain ecosystems services.

In both the terrestrial and marine environments the conservation of biodiversity is to be achieved through establishing a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative reserve network. This is an admirable objective but we need to be careful to ensure that we do not find yesterday's solution (given that much of the data on distribution and abundance of components of biodiversity will have been collected over a period of time) rather than establishing reserves for the future. While there may be uncertainty about the course of environmental change there is no doubt that environments will change – they have in the past and the only difference for the future is that superimposed on 'natural' patterns of change will be a substantial anthropogenic component. Reserve selection and design needs to be able to accommodate future environmental change through, for example, the provision of wildlife corridors and networks. Many existing reserves are irreparably isolated and their future value may suffer as a result.

In terrestrial environments the history of land tenure may have resulted in reserves being a very biased sample of the environment. The terrestrial reserve system has been created very largely from public land. This means that environments which were selected for private ownership early in colonial history are extremely poorly represented in reserves (areas of highly fertile soils, favourable topography, permanent water). Of particular interest to the Coast and Wetlands Society is that most permanent wetlands left public land long ago. Given that the purpose of selecting these areas was to modify them for agricultural or other use, there are few examples left in a form suitable for becoming conservation reserves, and even if there were, the acquisitions costs of returning them to conservation would be very high.

b)
whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management.

Historically most of the land reserved for conservation has been obtained "on the cheap" in the sense that it has involved reclassification of public land (vacant crown land, state forest etc). While there may have been political costs, and perceptions of profits foregone there was rarely government money involved in purchase of land. Governments do have the ability to purchase land for conservation, and, in certain circumstances, power of compulsory purchase – this latter option having been rarely if ever exercised and is unlikely ever to be a serious possibility.

As we have indicated, many of the lands needed to fill the CAR objective will be currently private freehold or leasehold land, simply because of the history of land occupancy. To bring these lands into the conservation estate will be very expensive. In this regard we would point to the recent purchase by the NSW government of Yanga Station for $30 million. This brings into conservation a diversity of previously poorly represented habitats, including large areas

of river red gum forest. While we are very strongly supportive of the purchase, similar events are unlikely given the cost involved. The purchase of Yanga Station was a one-off, although there is a budget for acquisitions it would have been inadequate for a purchase of this size,

Meeting the CAR objective is thus unlikely if it relies on purchases. Greater co-operative ventures, and conservation agreements between governments and landholders will be needed to fill gaps in the reserve network.

Australia leads the world in research on reserve selection (particularly in NSW through the work of Dr Bob Pressey and Dr Simon Ferrier) but although we can identify properties of key conservation importance there are not yet in place strategies to convert this knowledge to secure long term conservation.

Increases in the conservation estate have not been accompanied by a concomitant increase in staffing levels. By world standards the ratio of conservation land area to conservation staff is amongst the highest. While this is in part achieved by efficient management practices there are some management tasks which are essentially labour intensive and there must be doubt that there are sufficient resources to meet management requirements. Naturally every area of government activity could mount a case for more funds, but in the case of conservation agencies this is perhaps better justified than in some other areas.

c)
any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Conservation reserves in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, face a variety of threats, although the intensity and immediacy of threat will vary on a case by case basis.

On land, many of these threats arise from the fact that the conservation network now consists of fragments of habitat within a modified matrix; the consequences of fragmentation and the impact of edge effects may take decades to be fully experienced.

Other threats include invasion by non-locally native animals and plants, impacts of visitation, likely effects of environmental (including climate) change, etc. Governments (State and Commonwealth) have been creating lists of key threatening processes (which apply more broadly than just to conservation reserves), but have been woefully slow in developing practical responses in terms of preparing and implementing threat abatement plans.

Many of the threats on land also apply in marine environment but in the marine environment exploitation and harvesting is still an issue in a number of reserves.

d)
The responsibilities of government with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long term plans.

In Australia conservation, since the late 19th century, has been perceived as primarily a government responsibility - initially of the states alone, but more recently, with the advent of international environmental treaties, of the Commonwealth as well. In terms of establishing reserves State governments exercised their responsibilities through dedication of crown land.

This is in contrast to the situation in the northern hemisphere where reserves established by conservation charities in many cases long preceded government involved. A recent development in Australia has been the establishment of a number of reserves (in some cases large ones) by non-government organizations. Since these organization can purchase

freehold land on the open market, they have the potential to address the gaps in the CAR network.

We welcome these developments, although stressing that the great bulk of reserves will necessarily remain government responsibilities. However, governments may need to look at whether changes to legislation/regulation are required to facilitate NGO involvement in landholding and conservation management. (For example in the UK, land and property of the National Trust has greater security from a variety of encroachments than "ordinary" freehold land – would such measures be appropriate in the Australian context?)

The situation in the marine environment is different. There are no avenues for private ownership so that establishment and management of marine reserves necessarily will remain the sole responsibility of government.

In terms of the responsibilities of government for long term conservation then there is a continuing need to gather and analyse data to identify conservation needs. Conservation research tends to be ad hoc and opportunist and long term systematic data collection and monitoring is difficult to find, particularly given the budget consequences of short term election cycles. In our view governments need to give much more attention to planning to accommodate future environmental change – even if we cannot necessarily predict specific changes, that change will occur is inevitable.

e)
the record of government with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Our views under these terms of reference have already been expressed under ToRs b) and d). Governments have, in terrestrial environments, a good record of reserve establishment for those ecosystems which occur primarily on crown land. For other ecosystems and habitats, which occur primarily on private land, the record is very poor. Little thought has so far been given for planning reserve networks for changed environments. Management of most terrestrial reserves is probably under resourced.

Establishment of Marine Protected Areas is a more recent phenomenon and there are still many gaps in the system. Many established reserves are centred on "special" features – and there is clearly strong justification for this. However, in order that a marine CAR network can be developed we would urge that consideration be given to establishing reserves to protect areas of sandy and muddy substrate – habitats which have been relatively neglected.

Yours sincerely

E. O'Brien
Vice President

ellen.obrien@envirostrategy.com.au