

Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Email: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

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

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. With regard to the terms of reference the Hobart Walking Club has the following comments:-

The funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

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

The Hobart Walking Club has had a long history of advocacy towards creating national parks to preserve areas of scenic beauty.

We have some concerns that the balance between conservation and minimal impact recreational uses has shifted too far towards conservation in Tasmania. Policies and management plans are moving towards excluding even minimal impact recreational users to preserve conservation values. This is partly due to under financing as there is insufficient money for track formation and/or hardening to allow recreational use.

b. Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements.

There are insufficient resources available for management of parks for minimal impact recreation purposes. The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service has reduced its track work team due to funding shortages. Parks policies have also made it very difficult for walking clubs to do volunteer track work. Many tracks are overgrowing due to lack of attention and the Parks Service priorities mean that many of these tracks (those classed as T3 or T4) will never receive any Parks funding for remedial work.

Recent large increases in park fees in Tasmania and the introduction of a fee to use the overland track illustrate that the lack of resourcing available from Governments from taxpayer funds is leading to high user fees for bushwalkers.

Our members do not mind paying for the use of amenities such as huts and toilets but are concerned about high access fees when no amenities other than the track itself is used. In general we consider that access to a park necessarily includes access to its tracks.

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

Inadequacy of Government funding is the major threat to the management of these areas. This has led to declining track standards in some areas and management decisions not to maintain some existing tracks.

What we are talking about are legal tracks, mostly only known to fairly keen bushwalkers and locals. Quite a few Rangers do not support our use of minor tracks due to their personal views, which are more preservation minded rather than conservation minded. Without work most tracks necessarily deteriorate and disappear. We have never been after 'fancy' tracks, but tracks where one does not have to be in shin deep mud or forcing their way through entangling vegetation or cutting grass. There needs to be more effort to deal with problems such as track erosion, but not by closing tracks without providing an alternative route. Most issues of poor track location can be addressed but require money and labour; the easier option where resources are scarce is to close tracks.

There has been a recent trend towards tourist resorts, commercial huts and other commercial developments in National Parks, which are actively compromising natural values for commercial gain.

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

It should be a core responsibility of Governments to create and sustainably manage national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Parks should be managed to cater for a wide range of users. We have been concerned for some time at the shift in trackwork and other items away from the needs of locals towards tourism, especially short walks for car based tourism. While it is good to have infrastructure for that purpose we are losing our infrastructure for overnight walking and more challenging walks. Tracks suffer vegetation falls and overgrowth or erosion, etc. Many have been closed or lost. We have been prepared to help keep some tracks open by doing some minor remedial work while on a bushwalk or through Club working bees. None-the-less track work should not depend so much on volunteer efforts.

We have a lot of pressure put on us to volunteer, but most commonly we find we are to be persuaded to work on the tourist-like tracks. Most of us are pushed towards formal arrangements which do not suit the volunteer. The volunteer is treated as if they were a paid employee. Red tape abounds. Volunteers often find they end up with added expenses like running around (added travel) for Parks and Wildlife Service tools, undertaking training which they do not need for the kind of work the person does and unimportant meetings for groups where overnight accommodation and travel are required for attendance.

Volunteers need arrangements which suit them, not just the Parks and Wildlife Service. After all, the volunteer is the one who is providing the labour at some cost to themselves. Some regard the volunteer system, especially the Adopt A Track Program, as more like a slave-master relationship rather than a genuine partnership. Flexibility and meaningful dialogue is required. Volunteers just want to work when they have the time and the weather suits and cannot afford extra out-of-pocket expenses.

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

Governments have a mixed record in relation to the creation of national parks. It has often taken significant community lobbying and/or protest to have significant areas of natural beauty or cultural or environmental significance protected. In the case of Lake Pedder in Tasmania a declared national park was revoked to make way for a hydro electricity scheme storage. The Franklin River was only saved through Federal Government intervention from a similar fate.

Some of our parks came into being explicitly to cater for enjoyment and access (like that on the Tasman Peninsula), some were multipurpose, but most now seem to be pushed towards preservation with an emphasis on day visitor tourism around the fringes of the park.

The Mt Field National Park has always had a volunteer organised, affordable ski field as an integral component of its recreational use but recent Parks management plans have actively discouraged this activity in favour of preservationist natural values while more intrusive commercial activities are encouraged in other parks.

The allocation of sufficient management resources to adequately administer declared national parks is an issue for Governments as current resources allocated are generally insufficient for this purpose.

There needs to be more support for parks infrastructure and pressure on State Parks and Wildlife Services to increase funding. Locals need to be heeded and their recreation needs adequately met as they are the main payer in their respective States.

Parks are better appreciated when leisure activity is enjoyable and reasonable facilities, including maintained minor tracks, are available.

Vicki Martin
Secretary
Hobart Walking Club