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10 March, 2006

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

Dear Sir/Madam

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

I apologise for the lateness of this submission. I have also made a contribution to the more extensive submission made by the Australian and New Zealand members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. I am making this individual submission to complement that more comprehensive submission and to specifically address issues within my area of personal research and expertise.

I have been involved professionally in protected area management for 30 years, both as a manager (16 years) and an academic (14 years) with extensive experience both in Australia and internationally. I am currently a member of the Executive Committee of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas and am Vice-Chair responsible for the Commission's strategic direction on Science, Knowledge and Management of Protected Areas. Over the past 10 years, I have led the work of the Commission on evaluation of management effectiveness of protected areas. Within Australia, I have been a long standing member of the Fraser Island World Heritage Area Scientific Advisory Committee and was a member of both the Kosciuszko Independent Scientific Advisory Committee and the Parks Victoria State of the Parks Scientific Advisory Panel. I was a member of the Steering Committee for a review of management of the Finnish Protected Area System. Over the past 3 years I have worked with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Parks Victoria in the development of their State of the Parks assessment and reporting systems.

If the Committee wishes, I would be happy to appear in person to give evidence.

Yours sincerely

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IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas

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## Submission

The submission is organized under relevant headings in the Terms of Reference. I note initially that the focus of the enquiry is on funding and resources available for management of protected areas in relation to their objectives and I will direct my comments in this light.

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

Effective management of protected areas is difficult if not impossible without a thorough knowledge of the values and objectives of management. Values-based management allows management actions to be directed towards the maintenance of these values and achievement of objectives and is a foundation stone of adaptive management. However, our knowledge of the values of many of our reserves is scant, or at best not enunciated, and recognition of values such as ecosystem services provided to the wider landscape and adjoining lands and communities is lacking. There is little understanding in the wider community of the social and economic values of protected areas and little data on economic flows generated by parks in a form that is recognized by Treasury officials and politicians who are making budget decisions that affect protected areas. The Commonwealth Government, through the National Reserves System program could play a leading role here in establishing a program to provide a more thorough understanding of these values and the contribution that they make to the Australian community. This information is needed to support a program of awareness and advocacy both within the general public and amongst key decision makers.

Many protected areas lack even a management plan to direct actions towards maintenance of values (I suspect this is the case for the majority of protected areas, although good Australia-wide data is lacking). Management plans need not be extensive (or expensive) documents but they do need to be more than the short, superficial statements of management intent that have been produced in some jurisdictions over recent years. Once values and objectives have been established, monitoring can be directed towards assessing the current state of these values, identifying threats to the values and determining what management actions are needed to maintain or restore values. A clear statement of values and management objectives is therefore a critical first step in establishing what level of funding and resources is needed to effectively manage our protected areas. A significant investment is needed by State and Commonwealth agencies to remedy this situation.

### **2. Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;**

There is ample evidence from around the world that funding for effective protected area management is grossly deficient and Australia is no exception to this picture. Both national (e.g. LGAQ (2000) and international studies (James *et al.* 1999, James *et al.* 2001, Balmford *et al.* 2002) have highlighted this shortfall. Australia has amongst the lowest budgets and staffing levels per hectare in the developed world (James *et al.* 1999). Failure to invest now in both the biodiversity conservation aspects of protected area management and the maintenance costs for infrastructure will lead to higher costs in the future. For example, the Canadian Government has announced significant additional funding to address these needs. Parks Canada will receive \$315 million in new funding over five years beginning in 2005-2006, followed by a permanent increase in its heritage conservation annual budget of \$98 million beginning in 2010-2011. This new funding includes \$209 million over five years, followed by \$75 million in annual ongoing funding, for Parks Canada to repair or replace its ageing national park and national historic site visitor facilities; restore national historic sites; repair or replace critical infrastructure; and update interpretive displays and programs. It also includes \$60 million over five years, followed by \$15 million in new annual ongoing funding, to enhance and maintain the ecological integrity of Canada's national parks. While we have not done the detailed work needed to establish the quantum of funding needed to achieve similar objectives in Australia, I expect that an investment of roughly similar magnitude per capita would be required here to achieve the same objectives (Canada has 1.5 times the population of Australia). The situation in Australia is complicated by our Federal system with the majority of national parks being managed by State agencies. However our national heritage is a matter of national concern and funding responsibility should be shared with between the States and Commonwealth governments.

Additional substantial funding is required to achieve the agreed national goal of establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system. I strongly support the WCPA submission calling for an allocation of \$360 million over six years, with National Reserve System (NRS) support of \$40 million per year on a 2:1 funding system with the States. This contrasts with the current allocation to the NRS of only \$6 million per year.

The shift to a regional focus for delivery of Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) programs has led to a dominant focus on local and parochial issues in the formulation of programs at the regional level. In my experience as a member of a Scientific Advisory Committee for one of Australia's World Heritage properties, it has proved very difficult to get the Regional NRM bodies to give attention and priority to national conservation objectives, especially in relation to protected areas. The NRS Program is one of the few remaining components of the NHT with a national focus. Achieving the national and state objectives set out in policy documents relating to biodiversity conservation is only likely to be possible if this significant national program and funding mechanism is maintained.

### **3. Any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;**

I will not attempt to catalogue all the threats to protected areas here but will focus my attention on some key threats and their implications for funding and resourcing. It is noteworthy that the 2004 State of the Parks Report for NSW (DEC NSW 2005) identified weeds, pest animals and inappropriate fire regimes as the most commonly reported threats across the park system. All three threats have the potential to impact severely on biodiversity values and all require responses that are resource and staff intensive. Climate change is an emerging threat that is increasingly being recognized by protected area managers. A comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system is also likely to be one of the best responses that we have available to mitigate the impact of climate change on biodiversity, especially if that system is designed and built with a view to dealing with this emerging impact. Incorporation of landscape level linkages within the protected area system is one such means of mitigating climate change impacts.

Lack of staffing and inadequate budgets have commonly been recognized as key threats to protected areas by Australian respondents to global studies of protected area management (McNeely *et al.* 1994, Hockings *et al.* 2005). Problems of inadequate budgets and staff have been exacerbated by the rapid growth in protected areas in a context of fairly static, or even declining, staffing and budget levels. For example, the LGAQ inquiry into national park management in Queensland found that there was a 7% growth in real funding over the period 1993-1999 but a 28% growth in the protected area estate over the same time and a 60% increase in area over the period 1991-1998 (LGAQ, 2000). Staffing numbers were also almost static over the period 1993-1999.

A survey of Australian and New Zealand delegates at the Vth World Parks Congress in 2003 identified lack of monitoring and evaluation of park management as the second most significant impediment to effective management after inadequate funding (Hockings *et al.* 2005). Recent policy decisions at the international (e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity Programme of Work on Protected Areas – CBD PoWPA) and national level (e.g. NRS Directions Statement) have committed the governments in Australia to implement systems of monitoring and evaluation of management effectiveness. Ambitious targets have been set. The NRS Directions Statement establishes a target for all jurisdictions to establish “a reporting system, such as State of the Parks report, which identifies programs to monitor management effectiveness and progress towards achieving protected area objectives”. The CBD PoWPA establishes a target for all signatory countries to establish systems to assess management effectiveness of their protected areas and to complete assessment of at least 30% of their reserves by 2008. Significant progress has been made in some jurisdictions, for example in NSW and Victoria where State of the Parks reporting systems are already in place. Work remains to be done in most jurisdictions and targets will not be met without a significant increase in funding and resourcing for monitoring and assessment activities. Development and acceptance of a culture of open and transparent assessment and reporting within agencies is also necessary. This culture will not develop and thrive unless politicians and governments recognize and accept that this process will not always deliver “good news” but that an honest examination of performance is a necessary prerequisite for adaptive management and lays the foundation for improved performance over time.

### **4. 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**

I will focus most of my comments here on the role of the Commonwealth Government and the way in which it could contribute to effective long-term management of protected areas

Much attention in the last decade has focused on the acquisition of new protected areas, in part as a result of funding provided under the NRS program. This has gone a long way towards establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system for Australia, although significant gaps remain to be filled. However, acquisition is only the first step in this process. Establishing effective management of new and existing reserves remains a significant challenge. The National Land and Water Resources Audit (2002) identified that the standards of management was an issue of great concern (management was rated as being

good or very good in only 17 of the 85 bioregions). Declaring reserves without establishing an effective management capacity will not achieve biodiversity conservation objectives. Responsibility for management rests with State agencies in most instances (although the importance of Indigenous Protected Areas and private reserves is growing), but there is a significant role that the Commonwealth could play through the NRS Program in developing and promoting best practice management approaches for protected areas. Progress in this area has already been achieved at a policy level through the NRS Directions Statement but there is much to be done to turn these policy intentions into sound management on the ground. The NRS program, in conjunction with park management agencies, academic institutions and other stakeholders could play a significant role in coordinating and facilitating a national approach to issues of general concern. The NRS involvement in a project to develop and apply management effectiveness evaluation and monitoring systems, in collaboration with the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, Parks Victoria and the University of Queensland is a good example of such an approach. It is possible that the Commonwealth through the NRS Program could form the hub of a coordinated national, multi-institutional approach to addressing critical issues in reserve management.

Additional objectives for the NRS program could be framed around ensuring achievement of Australia's international commitments relating to biodiversity conservation and protected areas. For example, in 2004 the States Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, including Australia, agreed to an ambitious set of goals and targets under the CBD Program of Work on Protected Areas. We will only achieve these targets as a nation if all protected area institutions work together and the NRS program offers the best and most efficient means to achieve this result.

## References

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