

# Australia's national parks: a submission to a Senate Inquiry from the Institute of Foresters of Australia

## Summary

This submission by the Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) focuses on the forested national parks in the higher rainfall areas of Australia. IFA members are intimately familiar with these areas, either through working in them or because the forests were previously State forests, managed and protected for generations by foresters who are IFA members.

Forested national parks represent a magnificent opportunity for Australia – they are areas where humans can work to ensure native forest ecosystems and fine landscapes are protected; but they also allow Australians to demonstrate to the world how to manage such areas sustainably.

The Institute of Foresters does not consider either opportunity is being grasped. We are gravely concerned about the health, vulnerability and long-term survival of most of Australia's forested national parks. Our fundamental concerns are:

- Forests within national parks are not being managed in accordance with the principles of sustainable forest management as laid down in Australia's National Forest Policy;
- Forests are being placed in national parks and their capacity to generate revenue withdrawn. This leads to a demand for "new" externally-generated funds which is not available due to competing demands on the public purse;
- The creation of new forested national parks has transferred responsibility from organisations committed to active sustainable management (i.e. forestry agencies committed to protection and regeneration within a framework of multiple use) to organisations whose philosophy is non-intervention and often anti-human (i.e., national parks agencies committed to 'benign neglect' within the framework of limited or restricted use).
- In forested national parks, the principle and practice of adaptive management has largely been replaced by a bastardization of The Precautionary Principle, i.e., do nothing until everything is known.
- Bushfire management in Australia's forested national parks is a disaster. It fails to meet any of the four key requirements of a successful fire management system, i.e. (i) sustaining health and vitality; (ii) protecting ecological diversity; (iii) minimising damage to environmental values; and (iv) minimising the risk of fire damage to park facilities, neighbours and community assets and infrastructure.
- Australia's forested national parks are infested with feral animals, pest species and weeds. Nowhere are any of these issues being effectively addressed;
- Legislation, policy and planning protocols applied to forested national parks in Australia are piecemeal, uncoordinated and inconsistent between and within jurisdictions. There are in fact no "national" national parks in Australia, and no national approach to establishment, management, funding, research, monitoring or protection.
- No forested national parks in Australia are subjected to regular independent professional audit where management outcomes are assessed (and the results publicly reported) against best practice, objectives and priorities. Nor is there any process for examining and reporting on the cost/benefits of national park creation, on management capability and expertise or on economic factors (e.g., the comparative benefit of ecotourism versus well-managed sustained timber production).
- National Parks agencies responsible for forested national parks in Australia are mostly these days led by people with no practical experience in forest protection or ecological management. Agencies

are characterised by an emphasis on publicity and ecological research rather than active, adaptive field management; are concentrating staff into white collar technical or administrative jobs in the cities at the expense of field staff in the parks; and are in many cases subject to political interference and the influence of urban environmentalists with no land management experience.

The Institute of Foresters considers that the opportunity presented by our forested national parks is neither recognised or being grasped, and their long-term future is (at best) uncertain. A massive shake-up is needed of the institutional structures and their underpinning philosophy and policy. The most fundamental problem to be addressed is the culture of non-interventionist management which pervades, and which has become self-sustaining within State-based national parks agencies.

The IFA understands that the Commonwealth government, to whom this Senate Inquiry will report, has only one mechanism for bringing about change. This is through the development and application of a funding system that rewards excellence in national park management, rather than one which rewards failure. We recommend that this approach be adopted.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Senate Inquiry**

This submission is directed to the members of the committee inquiring into Australia's national parks. This committee was established on 8 December 2005 when the Senate of the Commonwealth Government of Australia referred the following matter to the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee for inquiry and report on *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;
- (b) whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;
- (c) any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- (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; and
- (e) the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

### **1.2 This submission**

This submission is prepared by the Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA). It comprises an overview of the broad principles which should underpin national park management, examines the main concerns of professional forest managers and scientists in relation to national park management and makes recommendations aimed at improving management and thus ensuring the long term capacity of national parks to meet the objectives for which they were created, and the expectations of Australians.

The submission focuses on forested national parks on crown land in the higher rainfall zones of Australia, because this is the area which with the IFA is most familiar. We include a brief review of the key management issues associated with parks in the lower rainfall rangelands and arid regions. The submission does not cover city or urban parks, marine parks or privately managed areas sometimes referred to as "conservation reserves".

The submission is a general one, raising issues of concern and of principle, rather than a scientific or technical one. However, Institute members are able to elaborate on all of the issues raised, and to give examples of problems described, and would be happy to support this written document with verbal advice or to provide Senators with any further assistance.

### 1.3 The Institute of Foresters of Australia

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the organisation representing Australian professional foresters. The organisation was formed in 1930, has active branches in all of the Australian States and the ACT, and is governed by an elected Board. A requirement of membership is that members have University level qualifications in forestry or a closely related scientific discipline, or extensive relevant practical experience in forest management or forest science.

The IFA is an advocate for better forest management in Australia, for high professional standards in forest and woodland management and for the active management of our forests so as to ensure the full range of forest values are sustained in the long term. The Institute supports the Australian National Forest Policy and the principles of sustainable forest management which are embodied in this policy.

Current IFA membership is approximately 1200. Members are employed throughout Australia, and overseas, and in a variety of occupations, including native forest, plantation and national park management, research, bushfire management, land care, education, public service administration, private forestry and industry. The age and experience profile of our members ranges from new graduates to retired men and women with over 50 years of experience in forestry, park, conservation and land management in Australia.

Members of the IFA have a deep interest in all aspects of national park management in Australia, especially the forested parks in the higher rainfall regions. This stems from:

- (i) Our professional training and experience in forest and land management and conservation;
- (ii) The fact that some foresters are employed with national parks agencies or are involved in research into wildlife conservation, vegetation regeneration, bushland health and decline and bushfire management;
- (iii) The fact that most forested national parks were formerly State Forests. These areas were managed for decades by forestry agencies who employed professional foresters who were also members of the IFA; and
- (iv) IFA members visit national parks for recreation and for scientific and professional interest.

These factors qualify us to comment on the full spectrum of national park management across the whole Australian landscape.

The IFA has a range of policies dealing with various aspects of land management, and these are listed in the Appendix to this submission. These policies have been developed over many decades and refined with experience; in some cases, for example fire, the IFA's is the only national policy dealing with the issue.

### 1.4 'National parks' and 'conservation reserves' in Australia

In Australia the term "National" in National Park does not indicate that the area is managed by a Federal or Commonwealth Government agency. There are no truly "national parks" in Australia, and no definition of a national park adopted by all land management jurisdictions.

There are internationally recognised definitions of 'protected areas' developed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Within this definition, a protected area set aside to be managed as a National Park is a: *'Natural area of land and/or sea, designated to protect the ecological integrity of one or more ecosystems for this and future generations, to exclude exploitation or occupation inimical to the purposes of designation of the area, and to provide a foundation for spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities, all of which must be environmentally and culturally compatible.'*

The definition of a national park given in the Report on the National Estate (1974) is *"A national park is a relatively large area set aside for its features of predominantly unspoiled natural landscape, flora and fauna, permanently dedicated for public enjoyment, education and inspiration and protected from all interference other than essential management practices, so that its natural attributes are preserved."*

The IUCN definition has been adopted by the Commonwealth government, but not by any of the State Governments, each of whom has their own legislation and terminology, but with general conformity to the

definition provided in the National Estate report. Between the various States there is a wide diversity in the arrangements for tenure, purpose, management and definition of areas called national parks.

A review of the data base developed by the Commonwealth government's Department of Environment reveals that there are 7,720 designated terrestrial 'protected areas' on the Australian mainland (including Tasmania), with an area of approximately 81 million ha. These protected areas occupy 10.5% of the nation. There are 57 different categories of reserve within this area.

There are 544 areas designated as 'national parks' in Australia managed by State governments, occupying an area of 28.7 million ha and a further three 'Commonwealth' national parks with an area of 2.1 million ha.

In this submission, the IFA uses the term 'national park' to encompass all the various forms of crown land reserve which are managed for conservation of flora and fauna, protection of landscape and provision of outdoor recreation and spiritual enjoyment by humans. This includes areas officially designated by legislation as 'national parks' but also includes a range of other reserves, variously named in the different states but which are managed as if they were 'national parks'.

Our submission is directed at forested reserves, irrespective of their name or tenure that share five common elements:

- they are crown land and are managed by government agencies;
- they comprise 'natural' or 'native' ecosystems and largely undisturbed landscapes (i.e., they may include areas designated as a conservation reserve in which the native forest is regrowth arising after timber cutting or grazing);
- the over-riding objective of management (as seen by the broader public) is nominally to sustain the 'natural values' of the area in perpetuity, so that they may be enjoyed by future generations and can represent examples of 'natural areas' within landscapes disturbed by agricultural, mining or urban development.
- Recreation is permitted, but is constrained to activities which do not impinge on biodiversity or landscape protection; in some cases recreationists are required to pay for their recreation as a means of contributing to park management;
- "Productive land uses", such as sustainable timber production, wildflower picking or seed collection are generally not permitted as a result of the belief (not universally accepted) that these activities cannot be managed without permanent destruction of the natural values of the area.

The IFA endorses the IUCN definition of national park as it is the only internationally-agreed terminology available. We agree with the spirit of the definition as set out in the Report of the National Estate, but consider that it is open to wide interpretation with respect to what is "essential management". We oppose the plethora of categories arising across the nation, the confusing terminology and inconsistency in tenure arrangements from one state and territory to the next. This makes impossible consistency in policy, planning and operations or nation-wide audit of management performance.

The IFA also rejects a definition of national park that makes it impossible to incorporate some revenue-generating activities (for example sustainable timber production or carefully managed salvage of fire-killed timber). Clearly it is possible to manage forests in such a way that all values are retained, while generating funds which can be used for management. This view is reinforced by the fact that many new national parks comprise regrowth forests arising after timber cutting and regeneration in the past and these stands are clearly able (in conjunction with old growth forests) to provide all the values necessary to justify their inclusion in the park system. Indeed most visitors to older regrowth forests see them as 'pristine'.

The IFA does not support the current view that forests must be subdivided into two major categories: 'State Forests' and 'conservation reserves'. State forests *are* conservation reserves. Furthermore, to the extent that State forests are actively managed with a view to long term sustainability of ecosystems as well as of forest resources, they are in fact more in line with IUCN definitions of 'conservation' than are national parks. The

only exception to this statement occurs where State forests are subjected to open cut mining (e.g. for gold, bauxite or coal) where the forest soil is removed and regeneration of the native forest is impossible.

**Recommendation 1:** The IFA recommends that the Senate establish a new formal mechanism for the States and Commonwealth to meet, thrash out and agree on a standard definition of a national park for incorporation in legislation across the country with a view to bringing about a truly “national” national park system

**Recommendation 2:** The IFA recommends that national parks should be so defined as not to inhibit their potential use for the generation of revenue, provided this is done in a sustainable way.

**Recommendation 3:** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth and the States formally recognise that State Forests are ‘conservation reserves’ in the true meaning of the term.

## **2 The management of forested national parks in Australia**

### **2.1 Two positive aspects of national park management**

The IFA acknowledges the general high standard of management of visitor facilities these days in most forested national parks. Camp ground, picnic sites, walking tracks and interpretative material is mostly of a high standard, and these developments have been professionally undertaken. It is noted however, that the vast majority of national park users go to “development features” such as tree-top walks, rather than to wilderness areas or undeveloped forest, the allocation of which is totally dis-proportionate to demand for its use.

The literature put out by national park agencies is also generally of a high quality, but is generally aimed at recreationists and is frequently guilty of self-promotion. There is a paucity of material which appropriately addresses controversial issues (e.g. fire) in an objective way, and which would help the community to understand management options and practices.

### **2.2 The main concerns of the IFA**

The IFA has a wide range of concerns about the way forested national parks are being managed in Australia. The most grave is that these forests are not being managed sustainably. Forests within national parks are vulnerable to forces which are leading to a decline in health and to homogenisation (i.e. loss of biodiversity) of ecosystems.

The principal causes of these problems are that national parks managers have failed to

- (i) Recognise the value of frequent, mild intensity fire in maintaining forest health and preventing landscape-level high intensity wildfires;
- (ii) Control feral animals, especially feral predators, and weeds; and
- (iii) Set up organisations capable of effective land management in forested parks.

Underlying these failures is a more serious situation. This is that the principles of ecologically sustainable forest management (ESFM), established in the National Forest Policy, and applied by all forest services, have never been adopted and implemented by national park managers for forested national parks in this country.

### **2.3 The ESFM principles and their application in forested national parks**

Australia’s National Forest Policy (NFP) was formally adopted in 1992 by all Australian State governments and the ACT. The primary target of the new policy was State forests managed for multiple use (i.e. areas in which timber cutting and regeneration took place), but the policy clearly should apply equally to forests within national parks. The NFP contains a firm commitment to the four key principles of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management, which are (paraphrased):

- Maintenance of ecological processes;
- Protection from damage by fire, diseases and pests;

- Adaptive management; and
- Application of the Precautionary Principle.

It can be readily demonstrated that the first three of these principles have never been adequately applied in forested national parks, and the fourth has been seriously mis-interpreted and mis-applied. Forested parks all over Australia are declining in canopy health, have an understoreys which is becoming dominated by woody shrubs, or are being devastated by large high intensity fires. The over-riding emphasis in relation to forested national parks today is not sustainable forest management of forests, but the acquisition of new parks through the reclassification of State Forests. This emphasis reflects the ill-informed view amongst politicians and within national parks agencies, that changing the tenure of a forest is all that is needed to ensure its all-time protection and survival.

Ecologically sustainable forest management implies active management on the ground. It requires clear objectives, works programs aimed at achieving these objectives, the monitoring of outcomes compared with objectives and targets, research and development, and a commitment to progressively modifying management in the light of experience and new knowledge. This was how forestry was practiced in Australia's native forests for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the process of which were generated the very forests which are today being transferred to national park.

The IFA rejects completely the approach advocated by many national parks managers, i.e. "do nothing because we are not sure what to do." This is an abrogation of the Precautionary Principle.

**Recommendation 4:** The IFA recommends that the principles of ecologically sustainable management as set out in the National Forest Policy be applied to forests in national parks, and that it must be a requirement of park managers to implement these principles. The long term aim is to have all forested national parks in Australia conforming to the highest possible standards of management.

**Recommendation 5:** The IFA recommends that the Precautionary Principle be properly defined and the new definition adopted uniformly by national park managers across Australia.

## 2.4 Other principles

In addition to the principle of ESFM, the IFA believes that there are nine key principles that must underpin the management of Australia's national parks if objectives are to be achieved and values protected in perpetuity. These principles represent 'a template' against which current management can be measured.

1. **Identification of values.** National parks must be managed to protect a wide range of values, including human values, and not restricted to 'preservation of biodiversity'. These values must be explicitly identified, ranked and publicly endorsed, and if necessary supported by legislation. Only then can management policies and practices be designed to protect designated values and ensure they are sustained in the long term. The concept that forests in national parks are 'museums', i.e. areas to be locked away from the everyday world, must be rejected. Human needs and cultural values are of at least equal importance to the needs of the biota, and through good management, need not be incompatible.
2. **Legislation and policy.** All national parks must be established via legislation which ensures security of tenure and purpose, establishes responsibility for management, accountability for management outcomes and defines the priorities for park protection with respect to other Acts (e.g. Mining Acts). Legislation should be coordinated nationally, using uniform definitions and terminology, thus leading to (eventually) a truly national system of national parks.

The day-to-day management of national parks in all States and Territories should be in accord with an overarching published, nationally endorsed policy. This will be based on the principles of ESFM. It will state the processes and values to be protected, outline the priorities for management, the planning protocols to be employed, identify the land uses/activities which are permitted and not permitted, identify the threats and threat-minimisation strategies to be adopted and provide for a policy review timeframe and mechanism. This overarching policy framework will also lead eventually to a national system of management for Australia's forested national parks.

3. ***Underlying processes must be part of management.*** Forest management must look to the long-term and to the protection/enhancement of underlying processes. Soil conservation and the protection of hydrological systems are absolutely fundamental. These things must be secured before tall trees, furry animals or provision of camp grounds, picnic areas or walking trails.
4. ***Management philosophy.*** National park managers must accept and promote the need for active intervention to protect the values for which the park has been created, and to ensure forest values are passed on to future generations. Active management may involve activities which are controversial, including fuel reduction burning, poisoning feral animals, weed control using herbicides, and burning for regeneration and maintenance of forest health. The principle of adaptive management must be adopted and implemented, with constant updating of plans and prescriptions in the light of research and experience. The notion of “doing nothing” on the grounds that we don’t know what to do (a misinterpretation of “The Precautionary Principle”) must be rejected as foolish and cowardly.
5. ***Integration across landscapes and tenures.*** National parks form part of a wider regional landscape, and often are located within freehold land, pastoral leases or State forests which also contribute to environmental and social outcomes. Integration of management across tenure boundaries is essential to ensure overall regional environmental and social benefit. Key aspects requiring integration are fire, feral animal control, waterways conservation and endangered species recovery programs. The concept of the national park as an island, where planning is insular and inward-looking and day-to-day management denies the reality of the Australian landscape (where environmental influences do not recognise tenure boundaries) reduces the overall opportunity for excellence in natural resource management in rural Australia.
6. ***Adequacy of resources.*** Australia’s national park system must have access to professionally trained staff, funds, equipment and management systems which will permit effective programs of conservation, protection and visitor management in the long term. At present, most national parks cannot themselves generate revenue, due to ideological constraints, and corporate investment in projects on crown lands is minimal. This means that the only source of money for park management is the State and Federal governments, and parks must compete with all other government activities.  
  
There are three key issues in relation to funding of national parks in Australia: (i) the role of the Federal government with respect to promoting the evolution of a truly “national” system of national parks; (ii) the need for a review of the ideological constraints on self-generation of funds from national parks; and (iii) the crying need for a better system of resource allocation by national parks agencies, so that scarce funds are channelled away from white-collar administrative and semi-technical staff in the cities to land management and ranger staff in the field.
7. ***Research.*** Land and forest management must be supported by research. This is a key aspect of application of adaptive management. In our forested national parks, there is also a need for monitoring changes in the condition and health of forest ecosystems, testing management options and providing a basis for management and policy audits and policy review.
8. ***Independent audit and public reporting.*** National parks in Australia and park management agencies must be subject to periodic independent audit to determine the extent to which objectives are being met and values protected. The results of the audits must be made public.

The IFA has examined the degree to which these principles have been adopted and translated into management arrangements on the ground by Australia’s national parks managers. We find:

- ***Values.*** Mostly, the values inherent in our national parks have been identified and are explicit in management plans where these exist; a more important question concerns priorities. The IFA considers that unless values are ranked, and these rankings are endorsed by the community, it will not be possible for agencies to manage national parks appropriately or in accordance with the wishes of the community.

- **Legislation and policy.** There is a mishmash of legislation dealing with national parks across the Australian States and Territories. These are still evolving independently, and without any coordination. The only park managing agency in Australia to adopt and abide by the IUCN definitions of protected areas (including National Parks) is the Commonwealth. There is no overarching national policy for national park management in Australia. States and Territories have developed and are continuing to develop their own policies without coordination.
- **Maintenance of underlying processes.** Insufficient attention is given to the conservation of soil and hydrological processes in the majority of forested national parks in Australia as evidenced by the prevalence of large, high intensity summer fires.
- **Philosophy.** The philosophy on which national parks management is based varies greatly around the nation, even from park to park within the same jurisdiction and is rarely explicit. The general impression is that current park managers have a negative attitude towards active interventionist adaptive management, as exemplified by the attitude towards fire and the creation of “wilderness” areas.
- **Integrated management.** In most forested national parks in Australia, management plans are prepared for individual parks. Integration of management across tenure boundaries does not occur, or is constrained by lack of institutional cooperation. The situation is at its worst where different agencies manage different parcels of land, and where national parks are surrounded by freehold land.
- **Resources.** Agencies responsible for managing forested national parks in Australia are mostly short of resources, but the problem is not severe, especially for Commonwealth funded agencies, and is exacerbated by poor resource allocation and failure to take advantage of opportunities to raise revenue from within parks.
- **Research.** As far as the IFA can determine, no agency managing forested national parks in Australia has an adequate research capability, or is undertaking appropriate monitoring and assessment of forest health and status or of management plan implementation.
- **Independent audit and public reporting.** No agency managing forested national parks in Australia is subject to independent audit of management outcomes (including achievement of objectives and targets) with the results being reported to the community on a regular basis. Agencies report on themselves.

The IFA concludes that the standard of management for forested national parks in Australia is low, and well-below the standard required to protect and conserve the values of these areas in the long term.

**Recommendation 6:** The IFA recommends that the Senate puts in place a mechanism by which the Commonwealth and the States can develop and agree upon a set of principles to underpin management of forested national parks in Australia, with a view to ensuring forested national parks across the nation conform to high and uniform standard of management.

**Recommendation 7:** The IFA recommends that these principles be elaborated upon into a “best practice template” which can be used to assess management performance and outcomes and as a basis for funding.

### 3. Bushfire management

The IFA draws the attention of Senators to the disastrous policies regarding bushfire management which apply in Australia’s forested national parks. These policies represent the most eloquent demonstration of the failure of park management agencies.

Fire is a natural feature of the Australian environment. Our forests evolved in a fire climate, and are adapted to fire. In the case of the dry sclerophyll forests and included ecotypes such as wetlands, grass plains or rock outcrops, ecological processes are maintained by frequent mild patchy fires, and fire-vulnerable types are protected. In the prolonged absence of fire (as is the policy for many national parks)



forests deteriorate in health, they become less biologically diverse and their structure changes. In wetter forests, fire is needed to ensure regeneration of the iconic eucalypts. Without regeneration, the old trees die and are not able to replace themselves.

The application of frequent mild fire in most Australian forests is essential for ecological reasons.....but there is a spin-off. Areas which are regularly burned do not accumulate heavy fire fuels, and are thus less likely to be subject to large high intensity summer fires, as have occurred in many forested national parks in NSW, ACT, Victoria and WA in recent years. Large, high intensity fires are the inevitable consequence of a policy based on little burning and constant suppression. Large high intensity forest fires:

- Cause enormous environmental damage, especially to soils and hydrological systems;
- Homogenise ecosystems across whole landscapes, by re-setting the entire regeneration cycle back to scratch;
- Kill wildlife in vast numbers;
- Damage water catchments;
- Destroy endangered species recovery programs and research projects;
- Destroy recreational infrastructure;
- Are a threat to rainforest communities;
- Escape from the national parks and cause heavy social, economic and psychological damage to neighbours and to community infrastructure;
- Are a serious threat to the lives of firefighters.

None of these outcomes result from frequent, low intensity fire carried out for ecological reasons.

The agencies responsible for management of forested national parks in Australia have nowhere demonstrated an effective approach to preventing the damage caused by large high intensity bushfires. In opting for a no-burn, or restricted burning with suppression approach, they are dooming these forests to poor health in the form of the crown decline evident in forests in parks all over Australia. National parks agencies have also adopted the foolish policy of “low impact fire fighting”. This means fires are not attacked effectively by men and machines on the ground, but are doused from the air by waterbombers, or are left to be tackled in private property when they emerge from the park. Experienced bushfire managers know that if a fire is to be suppressed safely and effectively, men and machines must tackle it on its face. If left to “build a head of steam” or allowed to burn until weather conditions worsen, suppression becomes impossible irrespective of the number of waterbombers.

Good fire management in forested national parks is hampered by three other factors: (i) for many forests, particularly along the eastern coast, there is an inadequate knowledge of fire behaviour in the various forest types, and an absence of scientifically designed burning guides; (ii) national parks agencies are less likely to have staff with solid experience in fires and in burning, rendering them over-cautious or fearful of fire; and (iii) the very large and rapid increase in the number and size of forested national parks in recent years has not been accompanied by appropriate increases in staff (especially at the worker level) or technical resources.

**Recommendation 8:** The IFA calls for a complete review of the fire management policies and practices applying in Australia’s forested national parks. Policies must be judged on their capacity to meet basic requirements of effectiveness and practicality.

**Recommendation 9:** The IFA calls for a new emphasis on practical fire research in forests in national parks, aimed at developing burning guides based on sound fire behaviour information.

**Recommendation 10:** The IFA calls for an independent review of the resources available for fire management in forested national parks across the country.

## 4. Access management

The problem of fire management is allied to that of access management in forested national parks. Forests in higher rainfall zones of Australia can only be accessed for firefighting vehicles on roads. Roads (especially crossings of water courses) must be maintained or forest roads quickly become impassable. Maintenance is needed to repair bridges, remove logs and limbs, cut back scrub and regrowth, repair drainage and gravel wet spots. Access management is costly and never disappears.

The attitude to roads in national parks is very different from the attitude to roads in State forests. Mostly, national parks managers do not like roads, and their closure, or withdrawal of maintenance is the first consequence of management of a new forested national park.

This negative approach is augmented by the creation of ‘wilderness areas’.

A system of well designed and well maintained roads is essential in forested national parks. They provide access for firefighters, boundaries for prescribed burns, places for stopping a fire, access for pest and feral animal control, and a platform for monitoring studies. They also provide driving and walking tracks for forest visitors.

It is true that badly designed roads, or uncontrolled use in areas where disease can be spread, are undesirable, but as has been demonstrated in State forests for decades, these issues can be managed.

**Recommendation 11:** The IFA calls for a uniform approach to access provision and management in Australian forested national parks, to meet an objective of providing a basic road network to meet management and visitor requirements.

## 5. Resource generation in forested national parks

The current attitude to forested national parks in Australia is that they should not generate revenue. This means that all funding for management must come from government, and therefore must compete with demands for other government services.

Minor exceptions are made for tourism and recreation projects in some national parks. These involve charging a fee for entry to the park, for camping, or the issue of commercial licenses to tourism operators, plus some scheme of profit sharing. Economic analysis of the schemes is not available to the IFA, but the indications are that they do not represent real revenue-generation because of the high costs involved in administration and fee collection.

There are indirect benefits to local communities from ecotourism development in areas within or adjacent to forested national parks. Again this does not translate back into funds for the parks.

Antagonism to commercial use of national parks, other than for tourism, is rife within national park agencies in Australia. The IFA can cite many examples of ludicrous policies, for example banning seed collection, poisoning exotic trees rather than harvesting them and rejection of opportunities to salvage timber from areas killed by wildfire.

The IFA does not suggest “open slather” on natural resources within forested national parks. But there is an alternative approach which could be applied. This would involve:

1. A scheme of harvest and regeneration to be applied to old growth forests once they had reached senescence, in other word at ages of about 400-600 years. Very small patches could be so-treated, and the patches scattered so as to minimise short-term ecological and visual impacts. The revenue generated from the sale of logs would be applied to the cost of regeneration, and to protection of regrowth areas. This would ensure forests are sustained, at no cost.
2. Regrowth forests within national parks could be thinned, so as to leave selected trees (including those with habitat potential) and enhance their development into old growth and make the protection of these forests easier and more effective. The revenue would be applied to forest protection, including ecological burning, as no new regeneration would be needed.

3. Dead trees could be salvaged from forests killed by high intensity fire, or windfall trees along roads. This would need to be managed to ensure retention of ‘habitat’ trees in fire areas, and to minimise visual impacts, but neither would be difficult.
4. Exotic trees within national parks, established for various reasons in the past, should be harvested and the logs sold, with revenue returned to the park to enable clean-up and subsequent control of any regrowth.
5. As well as timber, there is the question of seeds. Many Australian national parks agencies now have policies which prohibit seed collection in forested national parks. This includes the seed of high-value cabinet timber trees which could be grown in plantations on private land. The provision of seed of specialty timber trees for plantation projects in Australia would benefit everyone, and would have no impact on ecosystems if carefully managed.

All of these schemes would need to be set up in such a way that revenue generated did not just disappear into agency or Treasury funds, but was quarantined for use in the parks.

If these policies were carefully designed and implemented, as is possible, we would end up with four excellent outcomes: (i) the generation of ‘new’ revenue to be applied to park management and protection; (ii) a more diverse set of habitats and better conditions for maximizing biodiversity; (iii) a demonstration of the capability of Australian foresters and land managers to truly practice self-funding ecologically sustainable management; and (iv) the presence in the parks of field staff supervising these operations and available for other work, e.g. ecological burning.

**Recommendation 12:** The IFA calls for a complete re-appraisal of the philosophy concerning revenue generation from forested national parks. We do not want “open slather” but carefully managed schemes to provide funds for park management in sustainable operations.

## 6. Institutional issues

Forested national parks in Australia are not being managed sustainably. This calls into question the competence of the institutions responsible for park management.

The IFA draws the attention of Senators to the failure by national park agencies responsible for forested national parks to manage fire, feral animals and weeds, to poor economic management and in many cases to an isolationist attitude which antagonizes neighbours.

There is a need for a new culture in the institutions responsible for forested national parks. The IFA makes no recommendations to the Senate on this issue, as it is not within their power to make changes to the corporate culture of State agencies.

## 7. The need for independent audit and public reporting

The management of forested national parks needs to be subjected to regular, independent and professional audit, looking at:

- The degree to which objectives have been set which reflect the purpose of the national park;
- The degree to which effective management policies have been developed and adopted;
- Management targets;
- Outcomes of management in relation to objectives and targets;
- Staffing and funding;
- Management of events, such as fires, or of damaging agencies such as feral animals, weeds and disease.
- Access management;
- Visitor management;

- Research;
- Relationships with neighbours.
- Overall management against a Best Practice template.

The results of these audits should be published.

At present national park managers in Australia monitor their own performance and prepare their own reports. In some cases this is well done, but in all cases it lacks independence. Until there is a truly independent system of audit and public reporting, the Australian public will not know what is really going on in our forested national parks behind the picnic spots and scenic drives.

**Recommendation 13:** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth and State governments develop a national system of monitoring and reporting on the standard of management of forested national parks.

## 8. A brief comment on rangeland issues

This submission focuses on forested national parks in the higher rainfall zones of Australia. These are the areas where the IFA has the greatest experience, and also where our concerns about the standards of management, and the future of the forests, are most grave.

Nevertheless, we wish briefly to comment on the two most serious issues with respect to the management and conservation of national parks in the more arid rangeland regions of Australia, i.e. those parks where the main vegetation types are Acacia woodlands, spinifex and native grasses or sub-tropical Eucalypt woodlands. All of these areas are severely threatened by lack of management from Australia's national park agencies. This is exemplified by:

- *Prevalence of feral and pest animals, especially rabbits, cats, foxes, camels, pigs and (most notoriously in the north) the cane toad.* In addition to predation, feral and pest animals are causing environmental degradation and loss of habitat for native wildlife. The problem requires a massive injection of funds for research and day-to-day operations. The cane toad issue has never been effectively tackled, and the efforts currently being mounted by a handful of volunteers to stop this animal moving into the Kimberley region are pathetic and typical of lack of government support.
- *Feral fire.* Rangelands were once regularly burned by Aboriginal people and lightning, maintaining generally low fuels and a mosaic of burnt and unburnt bush. In recent times, especially in northern Australia and in the more arid centre where aboriginal people are no longer present, or no longer able to burn, this regime has been replaced by one of huge uncontrolled fires which take out whole landscapes. This problem can only be overcome by increasing the number of staff in the rangeland national parks and providing them with the policy support and the resources to re-introduce regular mild patchy burning.

National park management throughout Australia is under-resourced, but the situation is worst in remote parks and reserves in the rangelands, where it is difficult to get staff to live, and infrastructure is extremely expensive. This is uniquely an Australian problem, and requires unique solutions, but it is a problem which has not yet been faced up to by this nation.

This is a huge problem, deserving of a separate inquiry in its own right.

**Recommendation 14:** The IFA believes that the issue of conservation and protection of arid-lands national parks should be subjected to a separate detailed inquiry aimed at identifying management and resourcing issues and solutions.

## 9. A role for the Commonwealth

A theme running through this submission is the need for greater uniformity, as well as for better standards of management of forested national parks in Australia. There are two ways the Commonwealth government can bring this about – through fostering of research, and through financial policy.

Research is needed in many areas, but most notably fire and feral animal control. The Commonwealth should be pushing through its involvement with CRCs and Universities to increase the level of and effectiveness of research in these fields.

At present the Commonwealth plays only a small part in the management of national parks vested with State agencies, with the exception of areas with World Heritage status. This should change, as the Commonwealth pursues the noble objective of having in Australia a really excellent “national” system of national parks. To encourage this, the Commonwealth government must be prepared to provide a lot of money to the States earmarked for work in national parks. However, it is essential that a proper funding mechanism be adopted.

The IFA believes that the correct approach is for the Best Practice template referred to above in this submission be used as a basis for grants, in conjunction with independent audit system. In other words, State national park agencies that are found, as a result of independent audit to have in place a system of management which conforms to Best Practice, will get the money. Those who don’t won’t.

**Recommendation 15:** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth adopts a new financial policy relating to funding of national park management by State agencies, whereby conformity with Best Practice is rewarded.

## 10. Conclusion and recommendations

This submission focuses on forested national parks in the higher rainfall areas of Australia.

The Institute of Foresters is deeply concerned about the standard of management of these areas. Management, as currently being practiced, does not address the main threats to the forests, or their needs in order to sustain them ecologically in the long term.

In our view management is substandard, and reflects the facts that new parks have been created without an appreciation of the need to care for them. Forested national parks are suffering from a lack of physical resources, but also from the negative cultural and philosophical positions adopted by institutions which are frequently in the hands of people without appropriate professional training or experience.

We have made 15 recommendations, dealing with the most important issues as follows:

**Recommendation 1:** The IFA recommends that the Senate establish a new formal mechanism for the States and Commonwealth to meet, thrash out and agree on a standard definition of a national park for incorporation in legislation across the country with a view to bringing about a truly “national” national park system

**Recommendation 2:** The IFA recommends that national parks should be so defined as not to inhibit their potential use for the generation of revenue, provided this is done in a sustainable way.

**Recommendation 3:** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth and the States formally recognise that State Forests are ‘conservation reserves’ in the true meaning of the term.

**Recommendation 4:** The IFA recommends that the principles of ecologically sustainable management as set out in the National Forest Policy be applied to forests in national parks, and that it must be a requirement of park managers to implement these principles. The long term aim is to have all forested national parks in Australia conforming to the highest possible standards of management.

**Recommendation 5:** The IFA recommends that the Precautionary Principle be properly defined and the new definition adopted uniformly by national park managers across Australia.

- Recommendation 6:*** The IFA recommends that the Senate puts in place a mechanism by which the Commonwealth and the States can develop and agree upon a set of principles to underpin management of forested national parks in Australia, with a view to ensuring forested national parks across the nation conform to high and uniform standard of management.
- Recommendation 7:*** The IFA recommends that these principles be elaborated upon into a “best practice template” which can be used to assess management performance and outcomes and as a basis for funding.
- Recommendation 8:*** The IFA calls for a complete review of the fire management policies and practices applying in Australia’s forested national parks. Policies must be judged on their capacity to meet basic requirements of effectiveness and practicality.
- Recommendation 9:*** The IFA calls for a new emphasis on practical fire research in forests in national parks, aimed at developing burning guides based on sound fire behaviour information.
- Recommendation 10:*** The IFA calls for an independent review of the resources available for fire management in forested national parks across the country.
- Recommendation 11:*** The IFA calls for a uniform approach to access provision and management in Australian forested national parks, to meet an objective of providing a basic road network to meet management and visitor requirements.
- Recommendation 12:*** The IFA calls for a complete re-appraisal of the philosophy concerning revenue generation from forested national parks. We do not want “open slather” but carefully managed schemes to provide funds for park management in sustainable operations.
- Recommendation 13:*** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth and State governments develop a national system of monitoring and reporting on the standard of management of forested national parks.
- Recommendation 14:*** The IFA believes that the issue of conservation and protection of arid-lands national parks should be subjected to a separate detailed inquiry aimed at identifying management and resourcing issues and solutions.
- Recommendation 15:*** The IFA recommends that the Commonwealth adopts a new financial policy relating to funding of national park management by State agencies, whereby conformity with Best Practice is rewarded.

The Institute of Foresters of Australia appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry.

Dr Peter Volker  
National President  
14 March, 2006