



BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

A submission

on the

2006-2007 Queensland state budget for the protected estate

by the

Protected Estate Coordinating Committee:

Australian Workers Union
GECKO - Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Council
National Parks Association of Queensland (secretariat)
Queensland Conservation Council
Queensland Public Sector Union
Queensland Rangers Association
The Wilderness Society
Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland
WWF

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Develop an environmental infrastructure category for capital outlays, distinct from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) budget and appoint a specialist advisory committee on non-market values of parks to guide infrastructure investment priorities.*
- *Increase baseline funding for whole of EPA in a balanced way to ensure all support systems for parks management are maintained in line with growth of the parks system, and prioritise recurrent parks management funding in remote regions such as Cape York Peninsula.*
- *50 new park rangers throughout the state in addition to the 50 positions provided last budget, and increase the operating budget to support their work.*
- *Examine feasibility of building a Parks Trust through mechanisms such "green lotteries" and levies on motor vehicle registrations, new suburban development applications, land rents, sales of state land, tax equivalents, mining royalties and mortgage duty on dwellings in new suburban developments.*
- *Lift the acquisition fund for building Queensland's contribution to the National Reserve System to \$60M over three years (2007-2009) to celebrate the 2008 Centenary of National Parks, with matching increases in baseline funding for management, balanced equitably between Parks division and support divisions of EPA.*
- *Establish a special fund to make sure valuable opportunities for boundary rationalisation acquisitions are not lost.*
- *Establish a dedicated, trained and fully funded planning unit within EPA by 2008 including a publicly available 5 year rolling work program to complete management plans.*

PARKS AN INVESTMENT IN HEALTH

Parks (including national parks and other protected areas) are vital to mental and physical health and wellbeing.

The Victorian government's "Healthy Parks: Healthy People" study (2002) states:

"Parks are a fundamental health resource, particularly in terms of disease prevention. The initial evidence documenting the positive effects of nature on blood pressure, cholesterol, outlook on life and stress-reduction is sufficient to warrant its incorporation into strategies for the Australian National Health Priority Areas of 'Mental Health' and 'Cardiovascular Disease'"¹

Outside of the large areas of aboriginal land on Cape York, national parks are the main areas left where traditional owners can enjoy their native title rights free of competing title interests: a significant benefit for indigenous cultural revival, mental and physical health.

Ecosystem services (clean air, clean water, flood control, climate control) of protected areas in Queensland are estimated to be worth about \$7,000M per annum with substantial flow-on effects to human health.²

PARKS A SECURE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In addition to health, the parks system generates large economic returns. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates park visitors spend \$1,260M per annum in the local economy (desktop update from a 1999 survey).

The economies of communities along the coast are strongly dependent on tourism in national parks like the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island.

Parks offer a massive return on investment of \$40-50 for each \$1 invested, even before considering health benefits, which have yet to be estimated in dollar terms.

PARKS ARE CORE ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

There is growing recognition of parks and protected areas as the core of "environmental infrastructure" delivering biodiversity and natural heritage protection, climate control, clean water and air, economic and public health benefits.

Environmental infrastructure, like bricks and mortar infrastructure of freeways, railways, dams and power stations, is of vital importance to our economy and quality of life.

As a gift of nature, however, environmental infrastructure is taken for granted and not accorded the investment needed to protect and maintain it.

Just 7km of freeway, the Tugun bypass, will cost \$548 million, over three times the annual \$154 million budget of EPA Parks division. The Tugun bypass will actually diminish environmental infrastructure and facilitate the suburban sprawl and motor-car dependence that is fuelling climate change.

Budget priorities are still skewed away from protecting and maintaining environmental infrastructure. Part of the problem is the lack of confidence in non-market economic valuations of parks and protected areas.

SOLUTIONS: Develop an environmental infrastructure category for capital outlays, distinct from the EPA budget and appoint a specialist advisory committee on non-market values of parks to guide infrastructure investment priorities.

¹ http://www.deakin.edu.au/hbs/hsd/research/niche/current_projects.php

² Asafu-Adjaye, J., Brown R., Straton A. 2005. On measuring wealth: a case study on the state of Queensland. *Journal of Environmental Management* 75, 145-155.

BUILD ON STRENGTHS, KEEP UP MOMENTUM

Existing initiatives to build the parks system:

- Cape York
- Daintree
- Wet Tropics forest transfers
- SEQ forest transfers
- Western Hardwoods forest transfers
- Great Barrier Reef rezoning

represent vital investments in biodiversity protection, counteracting and adapting to climate change, human and ecosystem health, flood control, clean air and water, eco-tourism potential and indigenous development.

These investments must not be allowed to falter through slackening of previous commitments, static funding levels or unbalanced funding distributions.

Although baseline funding increased in the last budget for Parks division of EPA primarily to service Cape York and Western Hardwoods commitments, EPA funding as a whole did not and now remains seriously unbalanced.

In regard to Cape York, independent research by The Wilderness Society in 2005, the *Parks in Crisis Report*, indicates that despite a significant increase in park management funding announced in the 2005-6 Budget, parks management funding still needs to be significantly increased and made consistent with comparable management standards elsewhere in tropical Australia, such as in Kakadu National Park.

Effective parks management requires contributions from all EPA divisions, not Parks division alone: Policy and Planning, Conservation Services, the Herbarium all play vital roles in building and managing the parks system. Any growth in funding to Parks division to manage new parks should be matched by equivalent capacity building in other divisions of EPA that also help manage parks.

SOLUTION: Increase baseline funding for whole of EPA in a balanced way to ensure all support systems for parks management are maintained in line with growth of the parks system, and prioritise recurrent parks management funding to remote regions such as Cape York Peninsula.

The EPA has made significant progress in the way it does business:

- Accountability and professionalism
- Business planning
- Strategic asset management (SAMS)
- Rapid Assessment systems to rank Parks by management demands.
- Staff safety through the *Not One Not Ever* program (NONE)
- Fire and pest management programs
- Engagement with traditional owners
- Balancing Park level discretionary funding with regional and program funding
- Remote staff housing

These investments must not be allowed to falter through slackening of previous commitments, static funding levels or unbalanced funding distributions.

It is essential that the network communication systems continue to be developed to allow the new reporting and administrative systems to function properly. At present the existing network does not allow all the new programs to be efficiently supported and utilised by staff in regional and remote areas.

The new reporting framework also comes at a cost in staff effort at the park-level. Many rangers formerly active in on-the-ground management have become “desk-bound”. This is by no means undesirable, rather it is a result of improved administration.

However, there has been no growth in the park ranger workforce to compensate for growth in this administrative load.

SOLUTION: 50 new park rangers throughout the state in addition to the 50 positions provided last budget, and increase the operating budget to support their work.

TOWARD A PARKS TRUST

The reliance of parks acquisition and management on general funds is not conducive to long term planning. Parks management requires secured “life-of-program” funding to be effective.

The solution to parks funding is not “user pays.” Vehicle entry and camping fees are already being collected by EPA where feasible.

Visitors are not the principal users of national parks. Parks protect biodiversity and provide ecosystem services that benefit the whole community, not just visitors. Over-reliance on “visitor fees” diverts EPA’s mission toward boosting visitor numbers, at odds with their core business of protection.

The Queensland government recognised the importance of endowed trust funds for protected areas by seeding the Queensland Trust for Nature with \$5M, which is focused on the important complementary strategy of buying, covenanting and reselling private lands of high conservation value.

Many local governments now charge an environmental levy on property rates that is used to fund acquisition and covenanting programs to protect natural areas at the local level. These valuable programs complement our state-level parks system, but are also highly variable in meeting national standards and still lack effective coordination.

More importantly, they provide a valuable model for building a state-level Parks Trust.

Untried concepts for new sources of revenue for building a Parks Trust include “green lotteries” and levies on state revenue points like motor vehicle registrations, new suburban development applications, land rents, sales of state land, tax equivalents, mining royalties and mortgage duty on dwellings in new suburban developments.

Such levies would be derived from activities that substantially contribute to greenhouse problems and loss of natural areas: suburban growth, livestock production, power production, mining and motor vehicles. Levies would help offset or compensate for negative effects by building the protected estate, counteracting greenhouse pollution and protecting important natural areas for ever.

Putting it in perspective, revenue from these sources in the present financial year include:

- \$793M from motor vehicle registrations
- \$431M from land tax
- \$71M from sale of state land
- \$313M in tax equivalents from energy and transport sectors
- \$299M mortgage duty (but due to phase out by 2009)
- \$1396M from royalties and land rents

As little as a 0.5% levy on these revenue streams would provide about \$16 million annually to a Parks Trust.

SOLUTION: examine feasibility of building a Parks Trust through mechanisms such “green lotteries” and levies on motor vehicle registrations, new suburban development applications, land rents, sales of state land, tax equivalents, mining royalties and mortgage duty on dwellings in new suburban developments.

PREPARE FOR OPPORTUNITIES, CELEBRATE THE CENTENARY

2006-7 will see an increase in total GST revenue grants from the Commonwealth from \$7.7B to \$8B.

The Natural Heritage Trust has only put about \$1.3 million a year since inception into building Queensland's National Reserve. Commonwealth funding for the National Reserve System may increase following the recent review of the National Reserve System and the Senate Inquiry into national parks.

Queensland has had a good history for developing a parks system that is representative of our biodiversity, and this places Queensland in good standing to secure NRS funds. The National Land and Water Resources Audit's Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment showed that the majority of Queensland's bioregions were high priority for National Reserve consolidation.

However at present, Queensland has only about \$2.5M to build Queensland's slice of the National Reserve System and to meet our biodiversity protection obligations under the *Convention on Biological Diversity*. A separate fund of \$12.5M is devoted to Cape York and Daintree acquisitions. Queensland will not be ready to take advantage of any rise in federal NRS funding if it does not make a budget commitment now.

\$60M over three years would enable the EPA to buy its top acquisitions, to meet the obligations of the parks *Master Plan 2001* and to build the National Reserve in line with international and national commitments.

Priority acquisitions for meeting biodiversity commitments and to stimulate the eco-tourist economy through the Heritage Trails network were identified by WWF in the *Treasures for Humanity* initiative of December 2003.

With the Centenary of National Parks coming in 2008, public acceptance of an enhanced acquisition program will be high.

SOLUTION: Lift the acquisition fund for building Queensland's contribution to the National Reserve System to \$60M over three years (2007-2009) to celebrate the 2008 Centenary of National Parks, with matching increases in baseline funding for management, balanced equitably between Parks division and support divisions of EPA.

PARK ACQUISITIONS TO REDUCE FUTURE COSTS

Boundary rationalisation, especially buying up parcels of land inside existing parks, can actually help reduce future management and acquisition costs on a per-hectare basis:

- EPA was recently unable to afford a \$230,000 acquisition of a vacant inholding surrounded on 3 sides by National Park on the Capricorn Coast. The new owner may now build a dwelling and place substantial new management costs onto the EPA for fire management and access. Many such examples exist.
- The cost of the Daintree buyback scheme could have been avoided if the land was acquired into the parks system decades earlier.

SOLUTION: Establish a special fund to make sure valuable opportunities for boundary rationalisation acquisitions are not lost.

MANAGEMENT PLANNING TO REDUCE FUTURE COSTS

Only 23% or 96 of 417 EPA managed protected areas have site-specific management plans.

Management is already happening and costing money. Management plans can reduce per hectare operating costs rather than increase them, by allowing the agency to move beyond *ad hoc* approaches to approaches based on rationalisation, efficiency, systematic monitoring and forward planning.

One fruitful approach to help clear the backlog of management plans is to rethink omnibus park by park plans and perhaps split management into resource areas with scope adjusted to the appropriate scale of resource management. For example fire and pest management plans are already operating throughout the state, already completing part of the job. Visitor management planning may also be done at a district level rather than park by park. Cultural heritage planning will likely best be done at a park level.

Another useful approach is to prioritise plans by management need using the Rapid Assessment concept.

However resolving the backlog and realising the cost savings of having management plans, does demand an initial investment toward completion of the management planning processes.

SOLUTION: Establish a dedicated, trained and fully-funded planning unit within EPA by 2008 including a publicly available 5 year rolling work program to complete management plans.

The Protected Estate Coordinating Committee was established in 2005 following a groundbreaking workshop in April called "*Growing Pains: managing a larger protected estate.*"

Agency and government representatives, park rangers' unions, conservation NGOs, and scientific and policy experts came together at the workshop to develop a series of key recommendations for improving the parks system in Queensland.

The workshop report is posted online at:

http://www.npaq.org.au/Growing_pains_report.pdf