



Senate Enquiry into Protected Areas

Submission from the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers Union

Introduction:

The Australian Workers Union is the organisation that industrially represents wages ranger positions in Queensland. The current Queensland Parks ranger workforce includes approximately 620 permanent fulltime positions. All park based ranger positions in Queensland are wages staff.

As our members are at the coal face of conserving and managing the natural and cultural values of the protected areas in Queensland, they are uniquely positioned to comment on the state of the current protected area system and its effectiveness. The ranger workforce in Queensland are also the primary interface between park visitors, neighbours, tourist and commercial operators and the EPA.

Whilst the AWU members also have strong concerns about the extent of the protected area estate, its current under representation of the bioregions of Queensland and other broader issues such as climate change, this submission will concentrate on the challenges facing the ranger work force in undertaking their key functions and duties.

Technology and the great leap forward:

Over the past several years the QPWS (Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service) have developed and introduced a series of new operating systems to assist in the management of the conservation values and assets across the protected area system in Queensland.

These systems include new mapping systems (Park Info), asset management (SAMS) and fire and pest management systems.

The QPWS has also put significant resources into establishing computer links to all the staffed parks and management units across the state.

The AWU supports the initiatives that have been undertaken and members recognise that the new systems, especially Park Info, are major advances in

being able to more professionally manage our park estate. It is also recognised that some of the new systems will continue to evolve and be even more beneficial as they are further fine-tuned.

There is however much more work and resources required ensuring that the current computer network can adequately support the new systems that are being introduced. As there is now nearly a complete dependence on computer based networks for all administrative and reporting duties, it is a significant issue when the connectivity of the network either fails to support the systems outright or is so slow that the reporting and communication process is unreliable and inefficient.

The AWU recognises that the EPA/QPWS is working on these issues, however the current situation has led to significant levels of frustration for staff across the state. Other changes such as the centralisation of financial and other administrative services (ie. Corporate Solutions) has further complicated the issue by imposing inappropriate and arguably unnecessary new reporting procedures.

This frustration leads to unnecessary stress on staff, especially in remote areas where their sense of isolation is further exacerbated by such limitations. The irony is that the stated reason why administrative services are being centralised is to create efficiencies, however the exact opposite is often the result when staff waste significant time trying to fulfill reporting and other administrative duties on inadequate networks.

Recommendations:

- *Continue to develop and further refine existing operating systems*
- *Improve network and communication reliability and usability (speed)*
- *Only introduce new reporting procedures that are both necessary and able to be supported by current networks*
- *Continue training and support for staff to further develop skills, confidence and abilities in utilising new systems*

Resourcing:

The AWU acknowledges that the QPWS has increased its resourcing of Queensland's protected area estate over the past several years. These increases have been both in labour and management funding. Despite these increases, there is still a significant shortfall in the levels of funding required to adequately meet our most basic conservation objectives across the state. The existing resources have been further strained by significant increases in park estate through acquisition programs such as the regional forest agreements.

At present there is very limited federal funding being directed at Queensland's protected estate systems to assist in the management of its conservation values. As the current level of overall funding is inadequate there is obviously an argument for better state/federal cooperation. The direct lack of Federal assistance and resources impacts severely on the ability to manage our park estate areas with national and international conservation values. This particularly applies to World Heritage Areas such as Fraser Island and CERRA whose conservation values are directly threatened by pressures brought about from high levels visitation and incompatible surrounding land use.

Increased assistance and direct funding from the Federal government for declared World Heritage Areas will demonstrate that Australia does have a national commitment to these internationally recognised sites. This would alleviate the current state funding levels and allow for the existing funds allocated for these areas to be redirected to assist in the management of other park estate in Queensland.

Infrastructure management

One area of increased resourcing has been in the management of the QPWS built assets. The new asset management system (SAMS - strategic asset management system) has identified for the first time the existing built assets on Queensland's protected estate. This exercise has also highlighted the past shortfalls in managing the services' built assets. As a result there has been a priority focus by the agency on directing available resources into managing and maintaining its built assets.

The AWU recognises the importance of these programmes but wish to point out that this current departmental focus is leaving other crucial areas short of staff and resources.

The initial benefits gained by the increase in ranger numbers on parks has been affected by the relocation of staff and redirection of duties to manage the new

asset systems. This has led to less staff being available for broader duties including natural resource management, park enforcement, and interpretation and education. The natural and cultural values of the park estate are currently being under managed as resources and staff time is concentrated on asset management.

It is crucial that the agencies infrastructure and other built assets continue to be maintained and professionally managed, but the issue highlights that the current level of funding overall is inadequate to appropriately manage all aspects of our protected estate's conservation values.

Natural Resource Project Funding

Another challenge for staff and managers is how to design conservation projects around the availability of funding and resources. Most nature conservation projects have funding and resourcing requirements, which stretch far beyond the existing 12-month budget cycles or even the three-year election cycles. Pest minimisation and eradication and revegetation projects require long-term commitments to ensure that the work undertaken reaches its final objectives.

Conservation project funding needs to be guaranteed beyond the usual year or three year cycles. Unless the funding is guaranteed there is a real chance that the investment of resources into the works will be lost. There is a need for rethinking how projects are planned and how funding can be guaranteed for approved projects.

One possibility for achieving long-term objectives is to organise and monitor natural resource projects in a similar manner to how built assets are now managed. Approved natural resource projects could be recognised as funded natural assets. These projects could then have planned maintenance and monitoring registered which will ensure that basic funding is available and that the work will be carried out to ensure that the initial investment in the project is not lost.

For example a major revegetation project might have the initial works carried out over a two-year period. The project would state the basic objectives, parameters for successful outcomes and a time frame for ongoing maintenance work (beyond the two years) to ensure that the areas revegetated are not lost again to invasive weeds or some other potential threat. Like SAMS the works required could then be scheduled into the annual works program for the management unit.

Management Planning

The Parks Master Plan was developed several years ago and should be utilised as the primary benchmark for the management of our park estate. The Parks Master Plan was developed at significant cost to the Agency and its objective was to provide long-term direction and objectives for managing our estate. A review should be undertaken as a matter of priority to assess how much progress has been achieved utilising the objectives set out in the Master Plan. This should be undertaken at least every 5 years.

At present it appears as if most of the QPWS planning resources have focused on the delivery of the new management systems previously discussed. As stated earlier the AWU supports the implementation of systems such as parkinfo and the fire management system but this has also exposed the significant lack of management plans for protected estate areas across Queensland.

The AWU is aware that the QPWS is working to address these problems but the lack of appropriate planning significantly limits the QPWS's ability to adequately manage its estate. One of the major challenges is to deliver meaningful plans in a reasonable time period, whilst at the same time allowing for real consultation with the public and other interest groups. The current process is failing on these points and the very low number of approved management plans delivered in the past 10 years is proof of this.

Apart from the need to redesign the existing process and format, one of the other reasons for this failure is the relatively low number of support planning staff available for compiling such plans. There is also a strong argument for delegating a greater proportion of the planning staff directly to the district level. This would allow for better on ground support for the park units and the delivery of park management plans.

Marine Park management

There are a number of broad concerns regarding the management of marine parks outside the Great Barrier Reef region. Ranger staff are concerned that marine parks lack adequate objectives and resources to more fully determine the biodiversity and conservation values of the areas that they are managing. Thus clear informed decisions are difficult to make. More long term monitoring and research is required to be able to understand the marine systems and thus be able to manage their conservation values more effectively in the future.

There also needs to be greater cooperation and integration with local authorities and other land management agencies that control adjacent catchment areas, which often are the source of threats to the marine systems. At present there is no statutory basis for local councils to consult or seek input from marine park managers about land management decisions that will ultimately affect the marine

parks.

Public education in heavily visited marine areas such as Moreton Bay needs to attract greater resourcing to minimise impacts from recreational users and to allow for a more effective public debate in regards to the use and management of these areas.

Recommendations

- *Federal funding assistance to be directed at World Heritage Areas*
- *New major park declarations to always include increases in staff and resource funding to manage the new estate*
- *No major capital works without attached maintenance funding included*
- *Increase of 50 fulltime ranger positions across the state to offset the loss of field staff to asset management*
- *Increase in base level funding to undertake basic natural and cultural resource management*
- *Approved natural resource projects to be managed as invested natural assets*
- *Deployment of more planners and conservation officers to the District level*
- *Development of management plans for all park estate across Queensland*
- *Review QPWS achievements and progress against the Park Master Plan*

Staff sustainability

The existing ranger workforce are currently experiencing significant challenges in a number of areas. These challenges include restructuring of work and management units, poor communication networks, lack of affordable housing in regional and remote areas, and higher levels of work stress.

Rangers have long had a reputation as being highly dedicated and hard working individuals. The nature and diversity of their work has also required them to be multi-skilled in a manner, which has few parallels in the broader workforce. A combination of low levels of available resources and often remote work locations

have also led them in the past to be highly innovative and resourceful in achieving significant conservation outcomes on the areas that they manage.

Wage structures and classifications

In Queensland all the park based rangers are wages employees. As a result their wages are modest for the responsibilities they undertake. There is also a broader perception amongst the workforce that classification levels are being downgraded as a gradual process as managers attempt to save wages expenses. There is also little or no faith amongst the ranger workforce in the Job Evaluation Management System (JEMS - based on the Cullen Egan Mercer and Dell system) which is the primary tool managers utilise to determine classification levels. Apart from the limitations of the system in applying it to ranger positions, the 1/3 rule needs to be abolished. (note: this is where a position needs to be in the upper 2/3rds of the points bracket for the position to be established at that level) This is obviously a design mechanism to minimise classifications and wages and cannot be justified in any interpretation of the JEMS process.

Housing and accommodation

The relatively low wage structure for most rangers is now having an impact on an individual's ability to live and work in many areas across the state. This is particularly the case where rangers are competing for accommodation in regional areas where rental and housing prices are increasing sharply due to the resources boom. The QPWS has also had an ongoing program of rationalising assets across the state. This and a program of de-staffing parks and amalgamating bases has led to the further restriction of available housing for staff.

On the other hand the QPWS has also invested heavily in providing new houses for rangers on some remote parks. The AWU recognises that this has been of significant benefit for staff in these areas, however retains major concerns for the viability of staff where departmental housing isn't provided. If the current trend continues the QPWS will find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain quality and experienced personnel across the state.

Addressing these issues will require financial incentives that could be delivered in a number of ways. Tax breaks for low income wage earners in remote areas, a broadening of areas that are defined as remote and a significant increase in regional allowances are some of the options.

It should be pointed out that the vast majority of park staff are not in their occupation for the financial remuneration that is offered, but they obviously need to be able to provide reasonable housing and opportunities for their families for their situations to be viable.

Base amalgamations and de-staffing of parks

The AWU is also concerned that the current trend to amalgamate bases and work units is being primarily driven by economic factors rather than what is best practice for the management of the particular park. Actions from the AWU in the past has seen some of these decisions overturned but rangers are concerned that the loss of presence on many of the parks will lead to a greater incidence of vandalism, arson and other threats to both park infrastructure and the natural and cultural values of the area. More proactive consultation with both the local ranger staff and the AWU is required in the earliest possible stages of any future proposed amalgamation or de-staffing of park bases. All aspects and impacts of the proposal need to be considered, especially the loss of further housing opportunities for staff.

Safety and workloads

The EPA/QPWS has also introduced significant new programs to deal with improving safety for its employees. The AWU supports these new programs but is concerned that the new systems have not yet addressed the primary issue of work stress from high workloads. The EPA has provided training and support for individuals to recognise and deal with the symptoms of stress, but have not addressed the root causes of demands created by limited staff resources and high workloads.

Adding to this are the pressures created by the introduction of new systems, programs and policies and the new technical expertise that is required to be rapidly learnt. There are limited support positions available to provide ongoing assistance for staff in running these new programs. In addition to this there appears to be no overall assessment of the cumulative impacts upon individuals of the introduction of new systems, programs and procedures on top of their usual responsibilities and project work.

Other pressures such as dealing with remote locations, high levels of enforcement issues, exposure to critical incidents, dealing with difficult clientele are common in many areas of the state. The riot reported in the campground at Inskip Point on New Years Eve is an example of how difficult situations can become for park rangers attempting to ensure safe and rewarding experiences for the vast majority of decent park visitors and campers.

There has been improved access to other emergency services such as the police and ambulance services over the past 3 years in some of our more difficult areas (such as Fraser and Moreton Islands), but staff across the state are still faced with very challenging situations on a regular basis. The agency has run specialist course (ex verbal judo), which have been highly beneficial for park staff. The QPWS need to ensure that such programs are run on a regular basis to refresh

individual skills and capture new staff appointed to the agency.

There are many factors that contribute to increasing stress on ranger staff. There are also good support systems in place and dedicated individuals to assist staff who have been affected. The AWU is aware that records are kept of such cases and respect that there is a need for confidentiality to be exercised. However the AWU is of the opinion that not all work time lost to stress related cases is captured due to a reluctance of many people to record their sick leave in such a manner. This would indicate that the problem is far larger than what is recorded.

This is yet another indicator of the need for more resourcing and an increase in park based ranger numbers across the state.

Recommendations

- *Revision of the JEMS system to more accurately reflect rangers roles and responsibilities*
- *Increase in financial incentives for staff in remote areas (ex tax breaks)*
- *Provision of GEHS accommodation for wages staff in regional areas*
- *Improved consultation with the AWU and rangers regarding any future de-staffing of parks or amalgamating bases*
- *Further cooperation and interaction with other emergency services to deal with critical incidents more effectively*
- *More specialist training provided especially for enforcement duties; better designed training courses for team behaviour and relationships in remote locations*
- *More accurate capture of data regarding stress related lost time injuries*
- *Ongoing investigation to better explore support mechanisms for staff and families living and working in remote areas*