

Submission from Arts Heritage and Environment, ACT Chief Minister's Department,
ACT Government

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS, CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

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

a) *the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;*

The ACT has a well-established nature conservation program. More than 54% of the ACT is designated as Public Land with a primary objective of Nature Conservation. This public land includes Wilderness Areas, National Park and Nature Reserve.

The ACT's nature conservation estate is an important part of the Territory's landscape, and is highly valued by the ACT community. The management objectives and policies of the estate are embodied in the Nation Capital Plan (a Commonwealth statutory plan), the *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991*, the Territory Plan, the ACT's *Nature Conservation Act 1980*, the Nature Conservation Strategy and reserve management plans.

The ACT has developed conservation strategies for threatened species and ecological communities covering natural temperate grassland, lowland woodlands and riparian areas. Other important regional ecosystems, such as those in our alpine areas, are located wholly within Namadgi National Park. An important consideration for the ACT is its regional context: as part of the Murray-Darling Basin, the southern tablelands, and two bioregions (IBRA) (South Eastern Highlands and the Australian Alps). The ACT Government is an active participant in forums relating to regional conservation matters.

The ACT has recently added 1055 hectares of Yellow Box-Red Gum Grassy woodland to its conservation estate, and in the process is foregoing significant revenue from the potential for development of these areas.

b) *whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;*

Significant ACT resources are directed towards meeting the objectives of the ACT's nature conservation estate and its management. The ACT Government allocates approximately \$19 million annually to the management of Namadgi National Park, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, Canberra Nature Park and Googong Foreshores Reserve.

In addition, the ACT has put a considerable effort into developing land management agreements and conservation leases that ensure private landholders manage areas of their land with conservation values appropriately.

The Australian Government's National Reserve System (NRS) Programme has a focus on providing resources for the acquisition of land for reserves, with less consideration given to the resources required for appropriate management of the reserve networks and enhancement of their ecological condition.

Achieving the management objectives of reserves requires on-going and adequate commitment of resources, particularly as land management agencies move from acquisition of the nature conservation estate to improving its management and enhancing its ecological condition. There is a likelihood that more resources will be required to deal with the effects of climate change, particularly in terms of maintaining the diversity and range of habitats required for threatened species survival.

In the case of national funding programs such as the Natural Heritage Trust, consideration needs to be given to the balance between the financial support allocated to nature conservation *within reserves* compared to *off-reserves*. While acknowledging that the two types of land tenure are complementary in terms of nature conservation, in the ACT the large area of land that is within a nature reserve justifies a greater proportion of funding for its management.

In addition, the criteria for funding under the current programs is too limited. For example, there is an emphasis on the degree of endangerment for a particular species rather than giving consideration to whole of ecosystem health/recovery.

c) ***any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;***

From the ACT's perspective, there are a number of threats to Australia's reserve systems:

- **Loss of habitat and decline in ecosystem function** – from:
 - climate change;
 - land-use leading to degradation;
 - impacts of urban developments, particularly at the interface with reserves;
 - reductions in connectivity
 - pest plants and animals (weeds and ferals); and
 - the potential for genetically modified organisms to become environmental pests.
- **Lack of knowledge** - There is a need for coordinated biodiversity research programs, which address our lack of knowledge on how to solve the problems of ongoing decline and how to restore landscapes and ecological communities. Partnerships between Universities and other research institutions and land management agencies are appropriate models for such focused research
- **Competing and conflicting uses** of national parks and reserve areas, for example recreation and biodiversity conservation. Balancing recreation/tourism and conservation can be difficult given increased pressures from community expectations.
- **Bushfire** - Fire has had a significant impact on the ACT's nature conservation estate in recent years, not only in terms of fire affected natural areas, but also in terms of protecting urban areas from fire in nature conservation areas. There is still insufficient knowledge about recovery of ecosystems after fire and the effects of fire management regimes.

In addition, the objectives of reserve management are narrowly focused on the effects of current management and management change. There needs to be greater recognition that for a wide range of Australia's ecosystems, much of the damage has already been done, and the ongoing decline is a result of past management. A significantly greater emphasis needs to be placed on the need for restoration and revegetation in reserves to ameliorate past damage.

Enhancing the resistance and resilience of Australia's ecosystems is a key defence against climate change and other disturbances. The general goals of increasing the area conserved for each ecological community, increasing ecological linkages, restoration of ecosystem and landscape function, and encouraging more sustainable land uses are also an important approach to providing resilience against disturbances.

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*

The ACT has completed an assessment of the extent and condition of the most endangered ecological communities in order to identify areas that would be best protected in conservation reserves, with a view to completing the ACT's nature conservation estate.

The focus for the Territory is now on consolidation of areas already included in the conservation estate and on research, monitoring and management activities aimed at improving the ecological condition of reserves and protection of habitat for listed threatened flora and fauna.

All ACT reserves have management plans in place or in the process of development. In addition, the ACT has invested significant effort in understanding and improving the condition of the ACT's reserves, particularly in relation to our woodland and grassland ecosystems. The need for and development of conservation strategies for threatened ecological communities and other key habitats has come from this improved understanding. These strategies could be used as a framework for the development of similar strategies in the region and to support the Commonwealth in managing natural assets on land in the ACT for which it has responsibility. Also, appropriate partnership agreements for the management of these areas are essential if the ACT is to be able to ensure the maintenance and connectivity of its nature conservation estate.

There is potential for programs such as the National Reserve System (NRS) to play a significant role in setting priorities for developing our understanding of our reserves system and improving its ecological condition. These priorities could also be applied to off-reserve conservation. Additional roles for the NRS could usefully include identifying appropriate use of reserves (ie. recreation) and understanding the community health benefits associated with reserves.

Through the current national programs, there is a lack of recognition of the importance of government held land (and its management) for conservation.

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

The ACT Government directs significant resources towards meeting the objectives of the ACT's nature conservation estate and its management with around \$19 million spent annually on the management of key reserves.

The ACT has recently added 1055 hectares of Yellow Box-Red Gum Grassy woodland to its conservation estate. Other areas of woodland and grassland, approximately 900 hectares in total, are currently being considered for protection in reserves. As a result of these additions to the conservation estate, the ACT is foregoing significant revenue from the potential for development of these areas.

The ACT is involved in a number of national forums, including those involved in park management (such as Heads of Parks Agencies forum) and natural resource management (such as NRM Ministerial Council). The ACT has an excellent record in relation to reserve management and works cooperatively with NSW and Victoria through the Australian Alps program, the Upper Murrumbidgee Coordinating Committee and ecological research at a regional level.

The ACT is focussed on completing the nature conservation estate and the protection of significant remnant vegetation existing on leasehold land or within National Land. The priority is on managing our estate to improve ecological condition and recovery of threatened species.

The ACT has successfully implemented many of the NRS's objectives despite not receiving any assistance from this program.