

Submission for the Senate Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas

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Introduction

The Northern Territory occupies 1.35 million square kilometres of land, 71 839 square kilometres of territorial sea (from the coast to 3 nautical miles offshore), and is home to around 200 000 people. Parks bring significant environmental, economic and social benefits to the Northern Territory and are a vital investment in the Territory's future. They play a crucial role in protecting lands and seas, natural features and wildlife and associated cultural values, for the enjoyment and appreciation of present and future generations.

Parks also lie at the heart of the tourism industry, making a major contribution to the Northern Territory's national and international appeal. Tourism is the Territory's largest employer and second-highest income generator. Investment in a comprehensive park system discharges a key responsibility to future generations and at the same time brings substantial ecological, economic and societal benefits.

The Territory parks and conservation reserve system has grown substantially since its inception in the 1950s. It now comprises about 90 individual parks¹, with a total area of about 50 000 km² (around 3.7% of the Northern Territory's land surface). The draft Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Masterplan (Attachment A) reaffirms the commitment of the NT Government to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) system of terrestrial and marine protected areas based on a solid scientific foundation and transparent process for incorporating social, cultural and economic interests.

Objectives of the parks and reserves system

Specific objectives of the Territory's system and the array of values that they should protect are not set out formally in legislation, but in individual plans of management. However, the *Parks and Reserves (Framework for the Future) Act* 2003 defines a comprehensive system of parks and reserves as "one that –

- (a) is developed in partnership between the Territory and the traditional Aboriginal owners of the parks and reserves;
- (b) benefits those traditional Aboriginal owners by recognising, valuing and incorporating indigenous culture, knowledge and decision making processes;
- (c) protects biological diversity;
- (d) serves the educational and recreational needs of Territorians and visitors to the Territory; and
- (e) enjoys widespread community support."

¹ We include here Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Parks, both managed by the Australian Government's Department of Environment and Heritage (Parks Australia). The remainder are managed by the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory, a Division of the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts.

The present system includes sites that are managed to protect Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural values as well as biodiversity and other aspects of natural heritage, and that provide recreational opportunities. Figures on park use by both locals and visitors and surveys of visitor satisfaction indicate that recreational needs are being met, and that the system is valued highly by the Territory community. However, it has been recognised by successive Territory governments that the system is presently inadequate and requires improvement, especially to ensure that it captures the full range of biodiversity values.

Improving comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness through the Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Masterplan

In recent years, the Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage has been working with the states and territories to establish a CAR system of reserves throughout Australia, known as the National Reserve System and National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas. The Northern Territory Government is supportive of these initiatives and seeks to be an active participant. A CAR reserve system is one that includes representation of all environments (bioregions), at a level sufficient to capture the variety within those environments and of sufficient area to provide for their long-term conservation security. It is now widely recognised throughout Australia and the world that this is an essential ingredient in the conservation of biodiversity.

The draft Northern Territory Parks and Conservation Masterplan provides a broad strategic framework for the future conservation of the Territory's biodiversity based on building a CAR reserve system. The Masterplan acknowledges the shortfall in representation of a number of bioregions within the protected area system and provides strategies for closing the gaps.

The Masterplan highlights twenty areas of international conservation significance and forty eight areas of national conservation significance which could provide the basis for selection of new reserves. A major task of the Masterplan is to ensure that these sites and other sites of conservation significance are protected for present and future generations. In addition, through its programs of inventory and research the Territory has built the capability to provide rapid yet comprehensive assessments of the contribution of additional sites that may be proposed for addition to the reserve network.

It is intended that the park system will form the core of the conservation network in the Territory, but parks on their own can not conserve the full range of biodiversity. It is evident that off-reserve conservation must play an increasing role in conserving biodiversity if the full array of pressures on Territory conservation values are to be met. To this end the Masterplan recommends a number of conservation strategies that assist land managers and other stakeholders to participate in biodiversity conservation, including the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas and conservation agreements.

Given the relatively undeveloped state of many Territory lands, a focus on off-reserve conservation may seem redundant. However, it appears that widespread declines in many mammals and birds may be due to diffuse changes associated with difficulties in actively managing processes like wildfire, feral animals and weeds across sparsely peopled landscapes. Such diffuse degradation is affecting the status of wildlife inside as well as outside reserves. The Territory needs strategies to engage a large

proportion of its residents, especially in remote regions, in conservation management work.

Additionally, the Masterplan acknowledges that achieving conservation benefits at local, regional, national and international scales will, to a substantial degree, depend on success in redressing the chronic disadvantage suffered by the Aboriginal owners and managers of some of the Territory's most bio-diverse lands. Communities seeking to reduce dependence on welfare and find meaningful employment, have few options that can be productively linked to conservation outcomes. It is intended, therefore, that the Masterplan be implemented in ways that achieve economic and social benefits for Aboriginal land owners and managers. It will do this by linking expansion of the protected lands network to regional development plans, facilitating direct employment in delivering conservation and tourism services both on and off-reserve, encouraging development of associated Aboriginal enterprises, and offering opportunities for training.

The Masterplan has been prepared at a point of major change in the management of parks and conservation in the Northern Territory, and is itself part of that transformation. It is an essential ingredient in a forward-looking new parks and conservation agenda for the Northern Territory, which aims to:

- provide for the full engagement of Aboriginal people in all aspects of parks and conservation management
- resolve a number of land claims and native title issues
- significantly advance cooperative park planning and management
- dramatically improve the comprehensiveness of the Territory's park system
- achieve enhanced biodiversity protection on all other land and marine tenures
- establish and build upon the Territory's marine biodiversity capacity to better conserve the marine and coastal environment
- present the public with a much wider range of recreational/tourism opportunities both within parks and reserves and beyond.

Resources

Although comprehensive comparisons have not been done, expenditures by the Territory Government on maintaining its parks and reserves (and by the Commonwealth Government on its reserves within the Territory) appear broadly comparable with other Australian jurisdictions. As in the States, expenditure could undoubtedly be increased to benefit both the security of assets under protection and to enhance visitor experiences. The Territory is acutely conscious of the importance of its parks and reserves system as a critical contributor to the well-being of its people. There have been substantial increases in funding to facilitate greater involvement of Aboriginal interests in reserved lands, and a modest increase in funding to support enhanced management more generally.

The Northern Territory now has in place the framework for a world class comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system, one which acknowledges and incorporates the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal traditional owners, whilst employing best practice management practices. However, there are challenges in implementing such a vision.

- The Northern Territory comprises 1.35 million square kilometres, approximately one sixth of Australia. Its population is thinly spread across the landscape (on average one person per seven square kilometres).
- The costs associated with the provision of government services and infrastructure across the Territory is considerably higher than in most other Australian states. Likewise, although costs of land acquisition may be low compared with other jurisdictions, costs of managing assets appropriately are much higher than in the more developed parts of Australia.
- Funding in the important areas of essential services, Aboriginal housing, health and education often take priority over biodiversity conservation.
- The Territory is in a position to make a major contribution to both national and international conservation effort. But the potential will be limited unless resources are made available by the Australian Government as a national priority rather than linked to per capita.

What is needed?

Biodiversity conservation in the Northern Territory is primarily a Territory responsibility, but obligations and benefits extend beyond Territory borders. As has been comprehensively demonstrated in the preparation of the Parks and Conservation Masterplan, the conservation values contained within the Northern Territory are of national and international significance and as such demand funding at both Territory and national levels.

The National Reserve System program is a crucial element of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), but receives only 6% of the total annual NHT allocation (approximately \$6M), which is manifestly insufficient for the establishment of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system across the Australian continent. Smearing the \$6M NRS funding across the eight Australian jurisdictions leaves only \$0.75M per state/territory pa.

The requirement that the Territory Government provide matching funds in order to receive funding from the NRS is unrealistic. Especially in northern Australia, costs of infrastructure development and operational costs of parks and reserves far exceed the initial costs of land acquisition. A preferable model for the expenditure of NRS funds would be for the NRS to provide 100% of land acquisition costs within agreed programs and for States and Territories to then take responsibility for infrastructure, maintenance and associated on-going management costs.

Conclusion

Since self-government in 1978, the Territory has done much to build a substantial reserve system to improve protection of natural and cultural values and to provide recreation opportunities for residents and visitors. Government has acted to increase the area under protection in advance of acute need, and seeks to maintain that proactive stance so that both conservation and economic benefits can be optimised.

The Territory would welcome the opportunity for more active collaboration with the Australian Government to secure a comprehensive, adequate and representative system that is well managed with the active cooperation of its people, in ways that contribute to improvement in the well-being of regional communities. Such collaboration will necessarily recognise the modest financial resources available to the Territory and the special opportunities that accrue from an orderly, timely and appropriately resourced program of acquisition of new sites.