22 March 2006

Parliament of Australia
The Senate
Senate Environment Communications Information Technology and the Arts
    Reference Committee

Our ref: 23/09016/75/36984
Your ref:

Attn: The Secretary

Dear Committee Members,

Senate Inquiry in Australia's National Parks
Protected Area Estate Expansion and Funding Through Time

GHD thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on this vital issue, and especially for the extension of time that we were awarded. It is timely that these issues are receiving their due attention.

We have undertaken a brief study of, what we believe, are some key issues surrounding the terms of reference of the Committee. In short:

▶ We compared the Agency operational budgets and conservation estate areas for the appropriate conservation management agencies in QLD, NSW, VIC and WA. These states were selected because their data was readily available.

▶ Our aim was to assess whether expansions in the conservation estate were being matched by funding increases, in real terms, for their ongoing management.

▶ Over the reporting period for which data was readily available, the conservation estate has expanded in each state.

▶ The NSW estate has expanded the most, by 30% in seven years, with QLD, VIC and WA's conservation estates expanding by 9%, 4.8% and 3%, respectively.

▶ Expansion in NSW was matched by an overall 35% budget increase in real terms, despite a recent sharp decline.

▶ Area expansions in the other states were not as closely matched to budget changes, with VIC and WA experiencing 4% and 38% resource increases, whilst QLD experienced a 16% reduction.

▶ The level of resourcing per unit area reserved was then examined for each state, with resourcing levels in NSW and VIC at least double those in WA and QLD.

▶ The reasons for such discrepancies in the investment requirements between States is not immediately apparent, and can be related to an array of factors such as differing biophysical conditions, management objectives, departmental structures and efficiency levels.

◗ Recommendations regarding improved national reporting guidelines are made such that benchmarks can be developed and improvements monitored through time, between states, and in comparison to international best practice.

The following pages detail this study. We hope that this information is of use to the Committee in addressing the issues identified in the terms of reference.

If you have any questions regarding this submission, or would like further information on this topic, please do not hesitate to contact either James Earle or Jason Cummings on 02 6253 1999.

Yours faithfully
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1   Introduction

Most Australian agencies responsible for the management of national parks have adopted a form of the internationally recognised International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN 1994) definition of a national park. The IUCN (1994) definition of a national park is as follows:

'A national park is a natural area of land and/or sea, designated to:

1. Protect the ecological integrity of one or more ecosystems for present and future generations;

2. Exclude exploitation or occupation inimical to the purposes of designation of the area, and

3. Provide a foundation for spiritual, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities, all of which must be environmentally compatible.'

The present Senate Inquiry into Australia's national parks provides a unique opportunity to consider and review Australia's performance in the management of the protected areas estate. Two terms of reference of the Inquiry are to examine;

◗ Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet [the] objectives of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas; and

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

Key difficulties in addressing these questions are that the State agencies responsible (primarily) for managing 'national parks', (a) in practice adopt different objectives for management of their protected area estate and, (b) have different reporting mechanisms. Therefore, the establishment of industry wide performance benchmarks, against which individual agencies can be measured, has not occurred. Without comparing State agencies with each other, and international best practice, it is difficult to objectively comment on whether the agencies responsible are meeting national and international resource management standards.

Environmental concerns can gain political attention during election campaigns, and this has recently resulted in the expansion of the protected area estate in several Australian States (Worboys et al. 2005). Whilst to many this may appear as a 'win' for the environment, it is only useful in meeting the objectives of national park management when; (1) additions are properly planned and add value to the protected area estate, and (2) sufficient resources are provided to manage the additional resource effectively in the long-term. For example, in QLD and NSW, expansion of the reserve estate has captured areas degraded by previous land uses, which require significant resources to manage them towards a condition appropriate for the objectives of national parks (e.g. Cummings et al. 2005). The resources required to manage these areas will be needed over a period of time much longer the usual political terms in Australia.

To begin to address the Inquiry terms of reference outlined above, and to initiate discussion regarding industry benchmarking for protected area estate management, a comparison of the recent performance of several States in establishing and subsequently investing resources in national parks is provided in this submission. The specific aims of this submission are to:

1. Document and compare reserve expansion rates across four States;

2. Examine whether funding for reserve estate management has increased accordingly (in real terms);

3. Consider reasons for the differences in resource allocation between States; and

4. Recommend actions to improve reporting and benchmarking in this industry.

2   Methodology

Annual expenditure ($) on people and services from the operations section of each department/agency responsible for managing protected areas was sourced from annual reports published on the World Wide Web. The departments responsible have different management structures, objectives and responsibilities, but this was the best indicator that we could identify to compare States. Therefore, the operational budgets include not only land management activities (e.g. weed control, burning, trail management), but also other responsibilities associated with national park management (e.g. research, education, facilitation). For each agency, the budget figures do not include operational expenses commonly associated with environmental protection (e.g. pollution licensing and management), except for the final NSW expenditure figure (which could not be separated).

The size of the protected area estate (ha) was also recorded, and usually included a combination of tenures related to the objectives of national parks (e.g. 'scientific reserves', 'conservation reserves', 'national parks'). Only States where several annual reports were available were used (Table 1).

Table 1   Agencies and reports used for comparisons

| State	Agencies Used	Reports Available
New South Wales	National Parks and Wildlife Service Department of Environment and Conservation	1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004
Queensland	Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service	1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005
Victoria	Parks Victoria	2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005
Western Australia	Parks and Visitor Services Nature Conservation	2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005

Reported annual expenditures were indexed back to the first available reporting year, using the average national consumer price index from 2001-2005 of 3.7%. Therefore, real changes in the investment in the park estate versus changes in the area responsible for management could be tracked.

3   Findings

The size of the protected area estate has increased in each State sampled, across the reporting period. In seven years, the NSW estate has increased by 30%, from 4.5 million ha to 5.9 million ha and the QLD estate has increased by 9%, from 6.9 million ha to 7.6 million ha. The reserve estates in VIC and WA have expanded at a rate less than NSW and QLD, by 4.8% and 3.8%, respectively (Figure 1). The 3.8% expansion in WA equates to 680 000 ha over five years, second only to NSW's 1.4 million ha.

Figure 1   Conservation reserve estate changes over the available reporting periods.
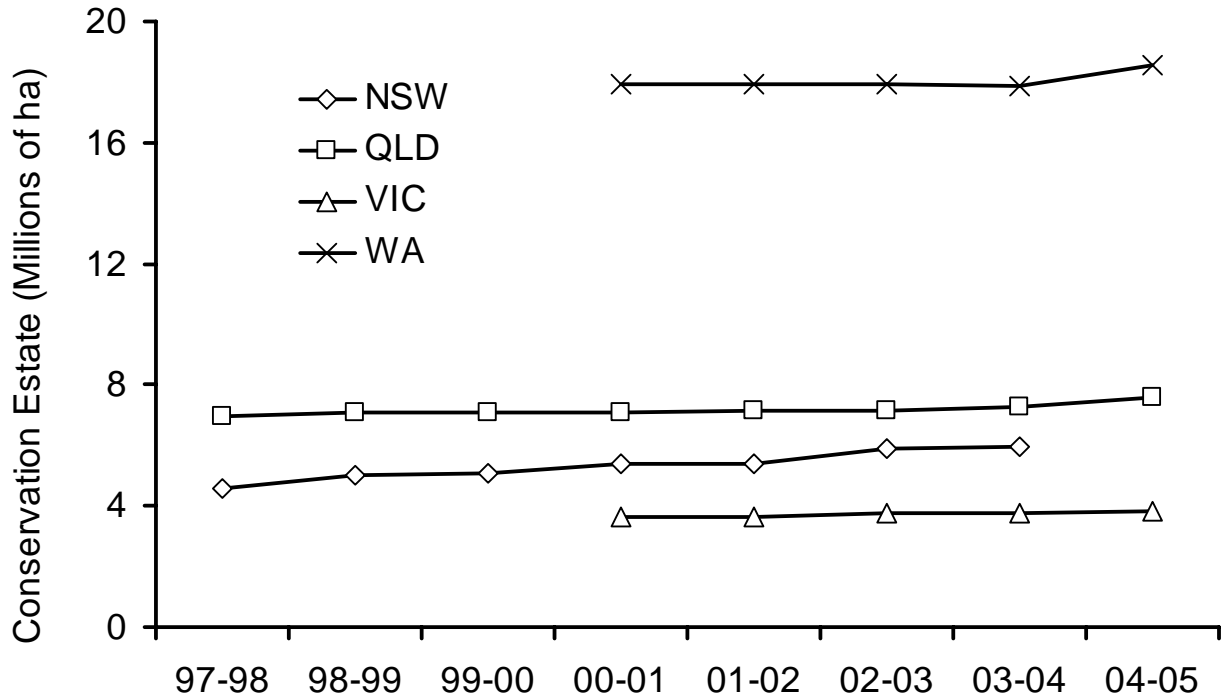
The operating budget, in real terms, for each agency responsible in NSW, VIC and WA increased during the periods of reserve expansion (Figure 2). The 30% reserve expansion in NSW was matched by a real increase in operations budget of 35%, whilst the smaller expansions in VIC and WA were accommodated by real-term increases of 4% and 38%, respectively. Across the reporting period, the real-terms operational budget declined by 16% in QLD, despite a reserve estate expansion of 9%.

Figure 2. **Operations expenditures on staff and services for agencies charged with managing the reserve estate across the reporting periods.**
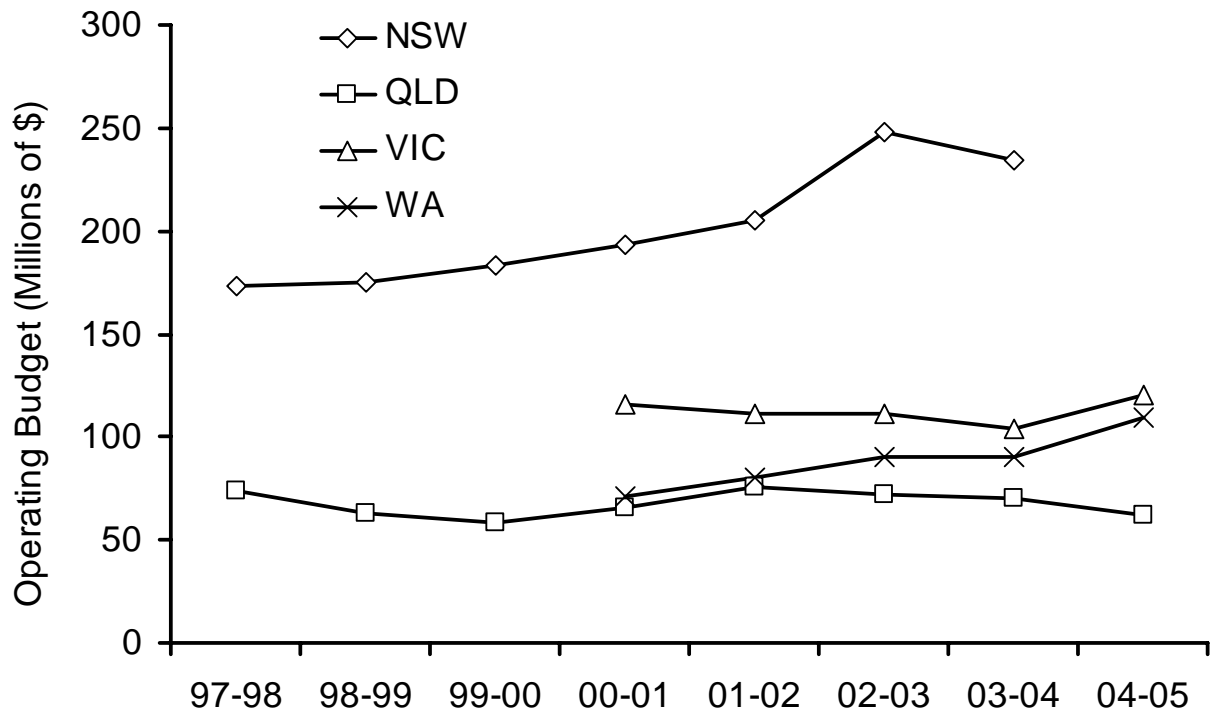
The operational expenditure per reserve area is greatest in NSW and VIC, which more than doubled QLD and WA (Figure 3). Only in WA has the operational expenditure per unit reserve area increased continuously. In QLD the expenditure per unit area has consistently declined in real terms, whilst in NSW there has been a steep recent decline. In VIC a recent increase in funding per unit area reinstated investment levels to those apparent in the 2000-2001 reporting year.

Figure 3. The investment in agency operational budgets per unit area for which they are responsible.
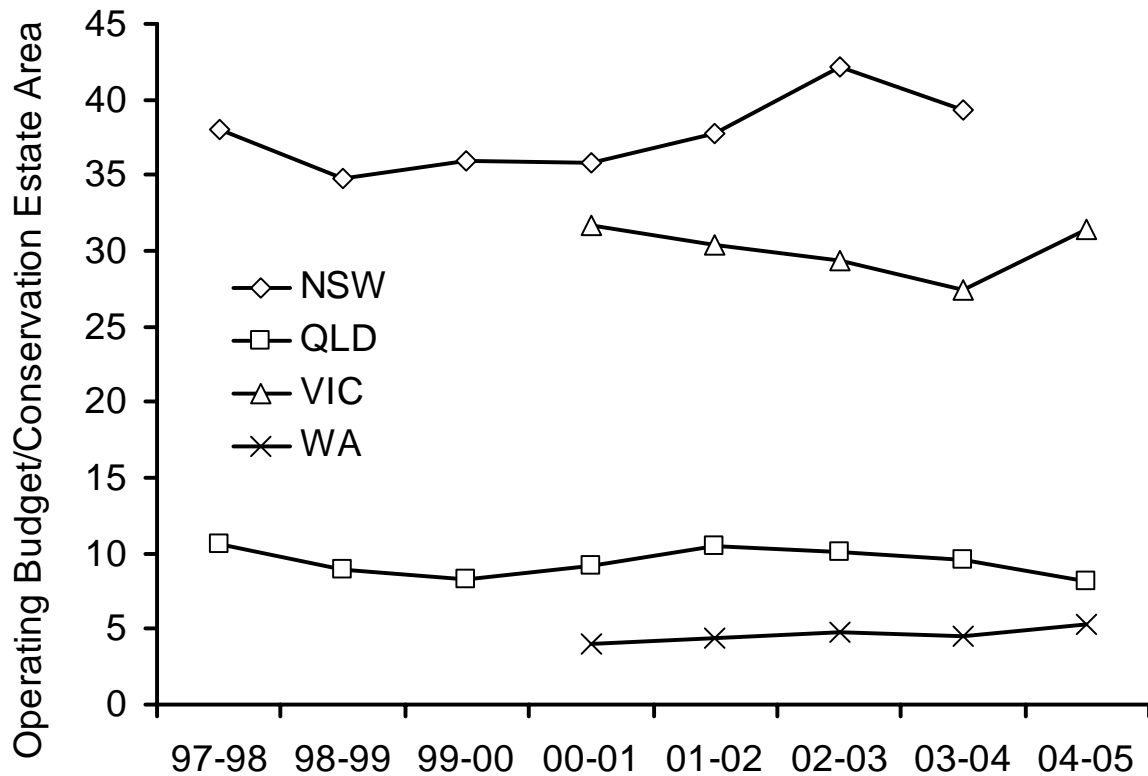
4   Discussion

In recent years the protected areas estate has increased in each of the States sampled, with the most dramatic relative increase occurring in NSW. These increases have largely resulted from political decisions, with some strategic planning support (Worboys et al. 2005). As mentioned, areas disturbed by previous land uses have been captured in the reserve estate through this expansion process (e.g. Cummings et al. 2005, Cummings et al. in press). This process of reserves expanding and capturing areas that will require intensive management due to historic land uses was predicted previously (Young 2000). Therefore, paramount in maintaining a reserve estate that is expanding, is the allocation of additional resources to undertake not only traditional requirements, but additional requirements associated with repair of degraded lands. Without additional resources, lands not appropriate for meeting the IUCN objectives of national parks (e.g. degraded by exotic species) will comprise part of the protected area estate.

The operations budget of NSW, VIC and WA has increased in real terms, to initially accommodate the new reserve allocations. Management of the extra land however, is an ongoing requirement. The present and future operations allocations will need to be monitored closely to ensure all lands captured in the

reserve estate are managed to a level that ensures they are contributing to meeting the objectives of national parks. The continued decline in the operating budget in QLD is a concern, given that State's wealth of biological diversity, and its growing economic dependence on eco-tourism.

Vast differences were recorded in the amount of money each State is investing in its protected area estate on a per unit area basis. However, comparisons between States are difficult, given different operating structures, biophysical conditions, reserve sizes and levels of efficiency. In the absence of any other information, the investment levels from NSW could be considered a national indicator for best practice. The relatively low levels invested by WA can partly be explained by its reserve area size being double that of the other States, and the different biophysical conditions requiring different levels of input compared to those on the eastern sea-board. In contrast, the apparently low levels of investment in QLD are not easily explained, given similar reserve areas and biophysical conditions to the two other eastern States.

The recent reduction of financial investment per unit area in NSW is warrants concern, since the 2003-2004 figure also includes the operating expenditure associated with pollution control, and that State has been responsible for the largest expansion in reserve area over the period considered. Ongoing monitoring of investment in park estate, once the area captured has stabilised, will allow a better comment regarding the whether the recent additions have been appropriately resourced.

Several limitations need to be re-iterated regarding this study. It is very difficult to compare operations across State governments based solely on annual report inclusions. To account for this we have focussed on broad trends through time, which can be monitored, and limited our conclusions accordingly. A set of indicators could be used to test whether the objectives of national parks are being met with the expansion of the reserve estate (e.g. maintenance of threatened species populations, reductions in weed species populations, visitation rates), however, consistent and comparable reporting across States has not occurred.

Based on this study, the following comments are submitted for consideration:

◗ A detailed report, which collates data from all relevant State and Commonwealth agencies across the country, could be commissioned that examines investments by bioregion (since the national park objectives transcend borders);

◗ As part of the 'State of the Parks' reporting process being undertaken by some States, a universal set of indicators could be developed to benchmark and monitor performance and efficiency in this sector; and

◗ A comparison should be made with regard to Australia's performance versus international best practice, utilising a combination of the previous two recommendations.

5 References[1]

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Document Status

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1	J Cummings	J Earle	JE	J Earle	JE	22/03/06