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**A SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF BAKERS VERTEBRATE PEST
CONTROL FOR THE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL
PARKS, CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE
PROTECTED AREAS**

Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control welcomes the opportunity to present a submission as part of the inquiry into Australia's National Park, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas. This company represents the concerns and experiences of the manager who has worked as a volunteer in National Parks in South Australia for the last 15 years and as a contract worker for the last 6 years. The aim of this submission is to encourage informed debate into the long term management and direction of Australia's National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas. Throughout this document 'conservation areas' is used as a general term to cover parks, reserves and marine protected areas. Should there be any questions or if any further information is required in relation to this submission we would be most pleased to respond.

Yours Sincerely

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Comments Specific Terms of Reference of this Inquiry

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;*

Australia is a unique continent and has evolved in isolation from other land masses over some 100 million years. Approximately 8% of the continent is protected as conservation areas in an attempt to preserve the flora and fauna of this historical separation for future generations and research. Under the Australian Constitution the acquisition and management of National Parks and other Conservation Areas is predominantly the responsibility of the States, although the Federal Government does have responsibility for some areas.

Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control believes that there are multiple values and objectives for national parks, conservation areas and marine protected areas and at times these multiple uses come into perceived conflict with each other. Not only should conservation areas aim to conserve what is unique about Australia, but they are also areas of research, education and recreation. The majority of these areas are available for public access, although some high priority locations have restricted access or use, which can cause concern with the general public who have an interest in such locations. The education and research role of National Parks also provides a resource for the international as well as the Australian community.

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

Conservation areas are, for the most part, island communities in an urban or agricultural landscape. This division of landscape use causes a myriad of problems. In general terms, those responsible for conservation areas are not only facing the biodiversity problems resulting from being island communities (i.e. natural animal migration, limited resources and habitat for indigenous species within the park), but are also responsible for maintaining good relationships with their surrounding neighbours. Given there have been accusations that national parks are reserves for weeds and overabundant indigenous animals which move into pastoral regions to kill stock or damage crops funding for ongoing management is always a priority and often seems insufficient in many areas.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes community opposition to specific types of research into particular species. For example, in the Royal National Park of NSW there was and is a refusal by a small minority of the community to accept the need for destructive sampling in order to understand the impacts of the animal. Yet destructive sampling of a few animals often supplies the data for scientists to determine the impacts of exotic species and determine priorities for control. We must recognise that some exotic species are iconic to the Australian psyche and while requiring careful

management in line with ecosystem sustainability can actually be utilised as a resource e.g. as a game animal. However, there certainly is a need to fund community education about why and how research initiatives are undertaken as well what the outcomes mean.

It appears that there has been a policy, certainly within some States, to purchase land without consideration for long term goals for that area. This decision is based on the hope that conservation areas will eventually be linked by corridors that will overcome the pressures brought about by island isolation and under the premise that 'when we get the money we'll do something'. While Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control supports the concept of corridors linking major conservation areas we are wary of a mentality which commits to land acquisition when the funding to return such areas to anything remotely resembling an indigenous natural environment is not available.

Purchase of land or the creation of marine or estuarine parks for conservation is merely the first step in a long process of integrated management. This management may involve the reduction or removal of feral animals and weeds, the management of indigenous species at levels that can be supported by the habitat and the revegetation of denuded areas with local species. There are some examples of management that can both inspire (e.g. Operation Bounceback in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia and the control of feral goats, foxes, cats and rabbits) or depress (e.g. Osborne Reserve, Koonamore, South Australia and the demonstrated slow recovery of vegetation over a hundred years period) those committed to the conservation of our native ecosystems. These examples highlight the need for clearly defined long term programs, which, in the initial stages, may require intensive investment of resources and money, but will always require maintenance funding.

It would seem that there will never be enough resources to commit to conserving large parts of Australia, but it is clear that government must commit to long term (decades if not hundreds of years) programs that support integrated management. These programs should combine short and long term goals, but should address the joint issues of feral animal and weed control, revegetation with local species and the management of indigenous species at sustainable levels. The control of feral and indigenous species is often compromised by pressure from animal rights extremists and other single issue groups. It is important that such ideologies do not prevent the control and management of animal species where there is scientific evidence to support such control.

Volunteers are a resource that is both currently exploited while often marginalised. In South Australia 'Friends of the Parks' and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Hunting and Conservation Branch contribute an enormous amount of time and effort in restoration, revegetation and feral animal control. Many States still exclude groups like the Hunting and Conservation Branch, yet these volunteers are committed to the control of feral pests under the direction of parks staff. It is our contention that, as long as the objectives of volunteer programs are clearly defined and agreed upon by the stakeholders, volunteer participation should be encouraged. However, their role is not to provide free staffing to maintain parks.

It is also evident that research and benefits from other areas can be applied to conservation areas. Biological control (e.g. calici virus, cactoblastus) may be initiated

by agricultural pressures, but many of these agents may provide potential benefits for National Parks. Thus we cannot ignore the fact that resources committed in other areas can indirectly benefit parks and conservation. These benefits are often unrecognised when discussing resources.

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

Setting aside the threats posed by weeds and feral animals, there are many threats to the objectives and management of conservation areas. Some of these consist of the well recognised scientific problems of small island communities compounded by issues associated with multiple uses and public access. Public access often results in the introduction of new weeds, the erosion of roads and tracks or even damage to the native environment. However, we believe that conservation should always retain as a core value the principles of wise and sustainable use and that multiple uses of conservation areas are one of these. These beliefs are founded in the international principles advocated by RAMSAR and we feel they are the best way to engage the community and conserve natural environments.

While we, and the majority of the Australian public, would accept there are occasions when public access should be carefully monitored in sensitive areas it is important that any decision to restrict access be made on the best scientific evidence available and not on any ideological grounds or minority lobby group claims. The focus should be on sustainable use. It is necessary that the public retain a sense of ownership of conservation areas if support for long term projects is to continue. It is also necessary that any limits placed on access or use be accompanied by community education programs that encourage the understanding and participation of the general public in such programs.

Overcoming the issues associated with island communities by purchasing land to form corridors does mean that governments have absolute control over that land. This is often perceived to be an advantage, but does require ongoing financial commitment to the maintenance and staffing of such areas. It may be prudent to investigate the potential of programs that offer pastoralists, farmers and land-holders substantial tax breaks to contract in assisting in the creation and maintenance of corridors, including the revegetation of such areas with local species. Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control feel it is important to emphasise that such areas could still be utilised for grazing, although perhaps at reduced levels, or utilised in other ways e.g. carefully managed woodlots, to encourage participation in such programs.

Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control feels that feral pests, weeds, and unmanaged native species remain the biggest threats to the objectives and management of conservation areas in the short term. Given that these factors require defined short term programs and goals as well as ongoing commitment it becomes evident that only with the same ongoing commitment and funding to long term programs and maintenance can governments adequately preserve the future of our conservation areas.

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

It is a key responsibility of governments, when considering the creation or acquisition of new conservation areas, that any new conservation area will add benefits to existing areas. Scientific evidence and knowledge can assist in the identification of unique habitat not already protected, the most pristine habitat or areas that will contribute to the linking of small isolated conservation areas. It is also a responsibility that there be the will to commit to long term funding that supports staff and ongoing programs, which may need to be tailored for each park and specific management problems in that region. Like our varied landscape, parks also face varied management problems and a blanket approach may be detrimental to conservation.

The long term management of conservation areas requires the collation and practical interpretation of current best practice and scientific knowledge in addition to the long term commitment to funding. Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control believes governments have a responsibility to provide an overview and direction for sustainable conservation, whilst recognising that plans must be flexible enough to allow each location to address specific issues. Whilst weighting must be given to science based policy, localised knowledge can also be valuable and should not be discounted.

It appears that there is a definite move for governments to employ University graduates, with land management of natural resources degrees. Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control believes there is a dichotomy in staffing that is not solved by employing only university graduates. Whilst it is important to employ staff who have an understanding of current research and its implications it should also be noted that on ground staff are more often than not dealing with tourists, cleaning toilets, emptying bins, and undertaking road repairs, weed management or feral animal control. It is unnecessary to employ highly qualified staff in these roles and it is often more appropriate to employ enthusiastic, interested staff, irrespective of requirements for formal qualifications. Many people who do not hold tertiary qualifications have practical skills and commitment that complement theoretical knowledge and both are required to achieve best practice management. University trained personnel can and should communicate scientific knowledge to these staff as part of their role in overseeing the direction and management of conservation areas.

In line with the above comments, we also believe that it is the role of the government to ensure that there is an overall direction and continuity to community education programs. Likewise, we believe that there is much valuable research and practical management undertaken on conservation areas that is not published in scientific journals. It is imperative that such knowledge and program outcomes be made available for debate by researchers and land managers, nationally and internationally. Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control feel it is the role of governments to encourage the dissemination of such knowledge, yet conservation staff often do not have the time to undertake the writing of scientific literature because it is not a priority among the other time consuming management tasks they are already committed to.

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

The government should be commended on its commitment to the conservation of Australia's unique habitats, wildlife and aboriginal historic sites, although in some cases the criteria for the selection and creation of conservation areas does not appear

to have been based on clear scientific priorities. There is still a need to address the linking of parks and reserves by corridors to minimise the issues of isolation and, in some cases, to link small parks that cannot sustain growing indigenous plant or animal populations. However, there have been a multitude of complaints from the community that parks regard themselves above the law in respect to the management of weeds, feral animal and overabundant native species.

This perception is often based on misunderstanding or is hyped up by single issue groups. The government record of community consultation, education and inclusion is poor and requires addressing. Unfortunately, some of these accusations are valid, particularly in regard to weed and feral issues. Agricultural landscapes are highly managed and even they can struggle with weed and feral pest control. It is therefore much more difficult for conservation areas, which are managed without recourse to expensive herbicides and intensive management regimes because of the need to protect indigenous species, but if an area is to be true to the principles of conservation some active management is required. This requires funding and staffing support and in the case of weed control can be more expensive than merely the spraying of herbicides because native species must be protected from off-target damage from herbicides.

Summary

In conclusion, Bakers Vertebrate Pest Control believes that there are several key points that require commitment from governments. These include:

1. Collating best practice management programs based on up to date scientific knowledge,
2. Acknowledging that short term programs must form part of longer term programs and that such programs will take decades, if not generations, to achieve results,
 - a. Operation Bounceback provides an example of a long term program that began with the reduction of total grazing pressure, and will, if funding remains available, move to maintenance of programs to control overabundant pests (feral and indigenous) and revegetation. It may be that in a decade or so reintroductions of species once endemic to the area may occur and be successful,
3. Because programs may take generations it is essential that the general community be engaged and committed to the support of such programs through community education programs,
4. The linking or addition of conservation areas by new purchases must be undertaken with the recognition that funding be available to support and maintain newly created conservation areas,
5. Investigation of 'contracts' to create corridors and conservation reserves should be undertaken to ensure conservation areas remain sustainable into the future,
6. The role of volunteers should not be exploited but there is the potential for this role to be expanded provided the stakeholders agree on the outcomes for volunteer programs,

7. The current approach to staffing requires addressing. Tertiary qualified staff is important, but their role and understanding of theory should be complemented by practical on-the-ground knowledge.

Finally, we believe it cannot be stressed enough that long term management plans for land conservation areas require short term plans that address invasive species (plant or animal), encourage revegetation and finally, when refuge and resources are restored, it may be possible to consider the reintroduction of once endemic species. Thus, it is imperative that funding be available not only for the initial control programs, but long term maintenance because it is impossible to return Australia to a time before colonisation and the possible reinvasion of restored landscapes by weeds or feral pests is an ongoing issue.