

Wednesday 12 April, 2006

The Secretary
Senate Environment
Communications Information Technology and the Arts References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas

Please accept the following late submission from the Colong Foundation for Wilderness.

The Foundation believes that the most cost effective means to protect the heritage values of parks is through wilderness reservation and management. Wilderness areas are the only surviving substantial remnants of the natural environment. None of these areas are unaffected by some form of development, but they are the best and least environmentally disturbed lands we have left. As such they are often offer the last refuge of endangered species, permitting unimpeded movement of native fauna in response to hazards, such as fire or climate changes.

Wilderness areas are generally more resistant to weed invasion as these lands are usually less disturbed and require less management resources relative to other types of reserve. Their protection is of enormous significance in this arid continent because they are the source of many permanent streams.

Government Record on wilderness

All states, except for Tasmania, have passed legislation for the protection of wilderness areas. Yet only the most populous and developed states of Victoria and New South Wales have had active wilderness programs, although South Australia is now addressing this issue.

There is no formally protected wilderness in area the Northern Territory (except for Kakadu) and Queensland, and, incredibly, only one wilderness in Tasmania.

In Queensland wilderness is protected 'de facto' in national parks, such as Mount Barney, Hinchinbrook Island, Currawinya and Carnarvon. The Shelburne Bay

Wilderness was saved from mining in 2003 when existing mining leases over its pure white dunes lapsed on expiry but the area is not reserved as wilderness. In Western Australia some longer established national parks, four have wilderness zones within them, totalling about 225,000 hectares but these are not afforded the statutory protection available under the Conservation and Land Management Act, 1984. But less than 25,000 hectares of wilderness were flagged for protection following the 342,000 hectares of forests reserved in national parks in the south-west of Western Australia in 2003.

The New South Wales Government has protected almost two million hectares of wilderness under the Wilderness Act, 1987. The Australian Capital Territory protects a 28,900 hectare wilderness under the Nature Conservation Act, 1980 and this area adjoins a similar sized wilderness in NSW, but unfortunately is separated from it by a series of recently established fences to exclude feral horses. The wilderness estate of Victoria is 842,050 hectares and further 268,900 hectares considered too small are in a lower category of wilderness protection called remote and natural areas.

The World Heritage Convention has played a critical part in ensuring wilderness protection in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area was inscribed on the World Heritage list of properties in 1982 and was greatly extended in 1989. As a consequence of the listing, a one million hectare wilderness zone was established under the plan of management in 1992.

South Australia passed the Wilderness Protection Act in 1992 and it provides for the creation of wilderness protection areas and wilderness zones. The Act allows mining activities in the wilderness zones. Eight wilderness areas have been protected totalling 184,419 ha and most of this area was reserved only last year. In addition, three large informal wilderness zones have been established under plans of management but these areas lack the security of being reserved under the Act and are open to mineral exploration.

Wilderness is, in administrative reality, a park management system that best defends nature from the spoiling forces of our modern technology. We need wilderness to protect the integrity of our protected areas and the wilderness needs us to protect and manage it; yet too little is being done to protect this important value. Many of the great national parks in Australia were established to protect wilderness values, and we stand to lose these important wilderness areas through reserve development in a very short time unless reserve management plans act identify and manage wilderness.

The ridiculous attitude of some park managers and politicians to ignore wilderness in protected areas also ignores the reality that the public wants wilderness protected. The Australian Heritage Commission found that 99 per cent of Australians believe that wilderness should be conserved. Wilderness is not just a cultural concept, but a distinct intrinsic, scientific and recreational value of land. It can be readily mapped just like estuaries, mountains, forests, lakes and cities. Just because people have different definitions for all the above land categories does not make any of them any less real.

It is very disappointing that the Department of Environment and Heritage has abolished its wilderness branch, has no wilderness expertise and as I understand

things officers of that department are not even allowed to speak about wilderness. A similar situation occurs in Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Even the Department of Environment and Conservation in New South Wales has abolished its wilderness unit.

Of all protected area attributes in peril, only wilderness is being actively eradicated within national parks, as the case of Kakadu National Park reveals (see below). Of all the things that your Inquiry could do, it could bring attention to this issue and encourage further wilderness protection in our protected areas. The easiest means to achieve this end would be to recommend that the protection of wilderness values be considered when protected areas management plans are reviewed.

Kakadu National Park

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness is concerned that the current draft plan of management for Kakadu National Park will, if adopted, remove the wilderness zone in that park. The draft plan does not flag for public comment and review the proposed removal of all zones from the park, including zone 4 - the wilderness zone. The draft plan of management just omits reference to zones in the park and to the land use table with it without can comment whatsoever.

If approved as it stands, the fifth draft plan of management for Kakadu would seriously weaken the protection of Australia's largest National Park. Approving the draft would remove the place based planning controls that regulate use and development and define what can and can't be done in Kakadu through reference to maps and tables. This new plan would continue to refer all decision making through a governing Board and the Director of National Parks but without reference to use limits and particular areas of the park as is typically done by a plan of management.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness has never before seen a plan of management that allows the Park's Board wide discretionary powers and removes management certainty.

Our submission on the draft Kakadu plan of management is attached as **Annexure A** and is relevant to this inquiry, in regard to reference 'd' in particular.

World Heritage management

The Federal Government should provide adequate funding for world heritage areas to augment management in areas of identified need.

In regard to the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, the Federal Government has failed to provide any adequate top up funding to acquire private lands within the Area or to assist with pest species management. Only a very small amount of funds have been provided for the promotion of the area; money spent on signage and designs for the yet-to-be-built visitors centre.

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society has produced, at some expense, a detailed program for the acquisition of private lands that are surrounded by the World Heritage Area. These properties pose a threat to the integrity of Area as they could become

exclusive hideaways or even be used for raising goats and deer that then become feral pests.

While the World Heritage Area in the Warragamba Special Area Catchment does receive significant funds for pest species control, the rest of the World Heritage Area does not receive the same level of pest management funding. The Federal Government could provide parity funding for the other parts of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

Buffer areas

The efforts to control the spoiling forces of modern technological society upon national parks and reserves should wherever possible operate within buffer areas around them. In the case of bush regeneration, effective weed and feral control in the buffer will assist in keeping a reserve free of weeds and pest species. In the Blue Mountains volunteers provided many millions of dollars of voluntary work weeding bushland in the buffer areas around the World Heritage Area. I can attest to the success of this work, having recently walked the entire length of the Grose River that receives most of the urban runoff from the Blue Mountains towns. The Grose River is a wild river with less weeds than any other stream of equivalent size in the World Heritage Area, with the exception of the Wollangambe River. The Federal and state governments should encourage and financially support these voluntary efforts and assist in their augmentation through funding professional pest control staff.

The recent approval by the state government of a major sand quarry directly adjoining the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and the identified Wollemi Wilderness at Newnes Junction indicates the need to establish criteria for World Heritage buffer areas; to be applied through the EPBC Act for controlled actions and through state government development control. Failure to establish appropriate buffers for damaging land uses will see protected areas degraded and the voluntary efforts in bush regeneration in the long run defeated. The result of failing to control the spoiling impacts of inappropriate adjoining uses will be a loss of voluntary support and an increased ambivalent attitude amongst the community toward protected areas.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to make this late submission.

Yours sincerely

Keith Muir
Director
The Colong Foundation for Wilderness Ltd

APPENDIX A

Friday March 17, 2006

The Park Manager
Kakadu National Park
P O Box 71
JABIRU NT 0886

SUBMISSION ON THE FIFTH DRAFT PLAN OF MANAGEMENT FOR KAKADU NATIONAL PARK

Introduction – the impact of removing zones

The Foundation objects to the omission of the wilderness zone that was relegated to the pseudonym of 'Zone 4' in the fourth Kakadu Plan. All the other zones have been omitted from the fifth draft plan without explanation. The draft plan should state the reasons for abandoning place based planning while allowing continued park development through a discretionary and generic approvals process and a foreshadowed Tourism Master Plan. There is no case presented in the plan for such an increase in the discretionary decision making power of the Board and the Director of National Parks in regard to the location of developments in particular.

The concerns raised by Colong Foundation for Wilderness in 1996 in regard to the fourth draft plan of management being ineffectual are still relevant to the fifth draft plan of management. The flexibility generated through the further removal of planning prescriptions under this draft plan will benefit those interested in further development of the park but will hinder those concerned with the protection of park values.

The Foundation has argued that national parks are areas set aside from development, as permanently protected areas. The Colong Foundation has been a strong critic of park zoning in NSW because park zones identify target sites for development. In NSW national parks are set aside from development, and so zoning would weaken park protection in that state.

The Foundation believes that each particular development and use proposal within a national park should be indicated on a map and in the text of the park's management plan. If a development or use activity were desired in the park that was not specified by a plan of management, then an amended plan would be necessary. This is how park management planning proceeds in an orderly fashion in NSW, and in most cases with no surprises.

In the case of Kakadu, political pressures for inappropriate development in national parks are much greater than in NSW. Park management in the Northern Territory

may be an exception where zones can limit the damage and abuse to the national park ethic caused by the ambitions and political influence of development interests.

The purpose of zoning in Kakadu was to prevent the most intact natural areas, and environmentally sensitive areas, from becoming degraded by development and inappropriate use. Without zones, the Board of Kakadu National Park would not be restricted in its consideration of various locations for park development that may benefit of the local community. The Board could, for example, permit commercial 4WD tours in the wilderness and perhaps even that oxymoron the wilderness lodge.

Removing zones concentrates more power in the hands of the Board by making the fifth draft plan less prescriptive. The Colong Foundation for Wilderness can not support a plan of management for any national park that is based on trusting decisions made by a board. 'Trust us decision making' is a bad model for park management. The National Parks Association of NSW was established in the early 1950s to remove park management trusts and replace them with a professional park management service.

A further concern with the Kakadu Board is the overlapping of conflicting interests regarding development and use. The majority of Board members, who may support further on-park development and use, are also accountable to a community that live on-park and which could directly benefit from such decisions. The fifth plan of management makes matters worse by requiring Board members as a matter of policy to consider the needs of these communities. This arrangement must surely erode the protection of World Heritage and park values where there is a direct conflict with community interests, such as over the approval for establishment and expansion of resort development and residential areas in the park. These regulatory blunders are not questioned because of the shibboleth that nature conservation and social justice and mutually reinforcing objectives.

Environmental Reform (Consequential Provisions) Act 1999, states that Kakadu National Park was declared for the *preservation of the area in its natural condition*; and the encouragement and regulation of the appropriate use, appreciation and enjoyment of the area by the public (my emphasis). The draft Plan fails to ensure the preservation of the area in its natural condition as both wilderness (Zone 4) and Zone 3 are proposed to be removed from the plan, leaving these areas open to inappropriate use (as defined by the use table and zoning map of the fourth Kakadu Plan on pages 42 and 43).

Recommendations: Reissue the draft plan with all existing park developments indicated on a map and any proposed developments on a separate map and summarised in the text. The Board can only approve development specified by location and type in an approved plan of management.

The plan of management should be amended to permit public comment and review of all development proposals, not just the ones deemed to be significant.

Reporting back on Planning Areas and Tracking Development

The location of Planning Areas where development was to be considered was specified in Figure 5 of the fourth Plan Figure 5 of the fourth Plan. The draft fifth plan does not report back on the extent of development that has taken place in relation to the planning areas in the fourth Plan.

There is no statement explaining visitor levels or analysis as to what is needed for the expected levels of use, where and whether visitor facilities should be provided, if anywhere or if use levels should be capped. The consideration of sustainable use levels and sustainability is totally absent as is the ultimate desirable use levels for various sites. It appears that the draft plan will operate on the assumption that tourism development can continue in the park forever without limit.

The concerns that the Colong Foundation raised in regard to the fourth plan have intensified through the removal of zoning. Management is less focussed, except in regard to running the park as a business. The actual management decisions for the park are hidden in subordinate processes.

The draft plan poorly describes the status of current and future park facilities. For example, the draft plan does not explain the location of the recently installed communication facilities, were any located in the zone 4 compromising wilderness values, or otherwise by developing virgin peaks and escarpment promontories? How many more virgin areas will be developed by proposals under this draft plan is also not explained. The plan is silent on such matters, being focussed entirely on process rather than substance. Clearly the draft plan is an artefact of post-modern nonsense ideology (it can't be called philosophy).

Decision-making will be politicised

The removal of management plan prescriptions (there is virtually none, except for fishing prescriptions) from the decision-making framework will further politicise the Director of National Parks in some cases, and the Board. The Board and Director are made more vulnerable to unreasonable political pressure and demands of the day. The draft plan of management will make park management operations more controversial, not less, and places unreasonable expectations on the Director. The Plan should be the shield that both the Board and Director use to defend the park, but it has been thrown on the ground.

The politicisation of decision-making is exacerbated by the fifth draft plan proposing to review all policy areas during the life of the plan. This creates further uncertainty when it should be ensuring outcomes that secure park values. Again this review procedure increases the power of the Board at the expense of nature conservation.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness does not support the Plan's park management processes that allow for open ended park development, even when subject to EPBC Act processes. National Parks are supposed to be places set aside from development. Permanent protection is not accepted as a fundamental principle in the fifth draft plan. Limits to development are not articulated in terms of critical factors, such as bed

numbers and tour operator permit numbers. No such development limits are proposed, while bushwalkers are heavily restricted because bushwalkers could cause more damage to values of concern to Bininj. While there should be respect and scope for cultural differences, the draft plan fails to appropriately limit the Board's power over development and use.

Bushwalking heavily regulated

Low impact off track bushwalkers are heavily restricted by the draft plan. The opportunities for bushwalking should be specified and this element of the Plan kept under regular review.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness believes that restrictions should be particular and that walkers should be allowed to walk off track, except where access is not permitted. Off track walking by permit would be acceptable provided permits were granted in a reasonable manner to allow the well-prepared visitor to obtain permits without too much difficulty or delay.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness does not support the prohibition of walking off track under the EPBC regulations in Commonwealth reserves (clause 12.55 of the regulation).

SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON THE PLAN

Customary use of resources

Section 4.3.1 Use of firearms requires buffer areas to protect the public from injury, sterilising large areas of the park if hunting is allowed on-park. In regulating the use of firearms, the Board should take into account that off road vehicle use in relation to Bininj hunting and gathering would also cause significant damage to the park. The park should prohibit the use of vehicles off roads. As it is unrealistic to prevent hunting and gathering without the use of vehicles, the only appropriate solution is to provide for hunting and gathering areas off park.

Living on country

Section 44: Living on a national park has adverse impacts related to the population size and level of technology of its resident population. Both size and technology tends in increase through time so that a large number of increasingly sophisticated villages develop, along with a growing number of roads and more infrastructure.

There should be no further settlements established in the national park. If the Board is to consider a proposed settlement it should be subject to an environmental impact statement, public comment and review. The development of a residential area in a national park must surely cause significant environmental impacts. The proliferation of living areas in Kakadu National Park should not be just a matter for consideration by the Board and the Director. The public has a right to know how many living areas there are and how many more living areas there are going to be under the life of the plan. These matters should be clearly stated in the plan of management.

The draft plan facilitates inappropriate the expansion of the human footprint on the park, and does not suggest one measure to limit this growth. The draft plan does not proposed minimum standards of the regulation for waste, sewage, facilities that accompany the growing number of living areas. The proliferation of camps will impact on the natural environment and further limit public use of settlement areas. The draft plan does not acknowledge these problems or consider any resolution of the living area issue.

Rock art and historic sites

Sections 5.3 and 5.4: The draft plan should provide a schedule of known historic sites in an appendix. The publicly accessible historic sites and art sites should be indicated on a map in the plan of management (eg. The Nanguluwurr site is not shown on a map).

Coastal management

Section 5.5: The increase in commercial fishing operations off the coast of Kakadu suggests that the threatened species of shark and turtles may become locally extinct unless a complementary marine reserve is created extending beyond Gardangari (Field Island). The Plan should investigate means of establishing a complementary marine reserve in the Northern Territory.

Landscapes, soil and water

Section 5.6: No new roads, sealed or unsealed, should be developed in the park.

The shortage of gravel for roads may be eliminated through an audit of existing roads in the park and closure of unnecessary roads. As part of the rehabilitation program for the many kilometres of unnecessary secondary roads, the gravel from the closed roads may be used to maintain the retained roads.

Fire management

Section 5.7: The fire management should, apart from protecting public safety and key assets within the park, be directed toward maintaining plant and native wildlife diversity. A strategic fire management plan should be drafted and subjected to public comment and review to ensure wildlife and soils are conserved. The application of traditional methods should not make fire management free from public comment and review. The current practice of overburning should be subject to scientific assessment to examine ways improve wildlife diversity and soil conservation outcomes. Loss of nutrients from the soil and loss of soil organic matter through overburning damages soil structure and productivity. The fire management plan processes should be incorporated into the plan of management during the life of the fifth Plan.

Commercial use of wildlife

Section 5.10: The conduct of commercial hunting is bitterly opposed within a national park. Commercial use of wildlife is an anathema to national parks and an unnecessary money making exercise that places pressure on wildlife populations. Making artefacts, such as didgeridoos for tourists, means a loss of wildlife habitat in the park and motor vehicles trawling through woodlands in search of suitable tree limbs. Such commercial use lacks respect for the national park concept.

Feral and domestic animals

Section 5.12: The Director of National Parks would be unwise to allow the establishment of more fenced buffalo farms within the national park for meat as farming degrades national park values. The buffalo farm run by promoters of on-park feral animal hunting should be closed down and the site rehabilitated. It is ludicrous that 170 square kilometres (17,000 hectares) of fenced park in the middle of Kakadu National Park are used to provide fresh meat that could be bought in a supermarket. It is also not acceptable that the plan of management does not describe the size and nature of the buffalo farm and how it is going to be phased out as soon as possible (proposed management action 5.12.17 is too weak).

The suggested cost recovery for the buffalo control program (page 69) would also damage conservation values, as the motive of commercial operations is to make money while tearing through the scrub in high-powered cut down off road vehicles. Such behaviour is very damaging the park values and totally inconsistent with the high levels of regulation regarding park visitors. Feral animals should be eradicated; there should be no commercial harvesting of feral animals as this will perpetuate the problems associated with maintenance of buffalo populations. These include disturbance to wetlands, spread of weeds, loss of native pasture, soil compaction and erosion, disturbance to water purity through sedimentation and nutrification, trampling of bogs, destruction of ecosystems such as upland bogs, waste generated by hunters, off-road vehicle use and shooting disturbing native fauna.

Section 5.12.1 The Feral Animal Management Strategy should be part of the plan of management and be subjected to public comment and review. The idea of small populations of feral animals being maintained for Bininj would defeat feral animal control, particularly if every living area has its own population of buffalo and pigs. The public has a right to know about this Strategy and how it controls pest species. The plan needs to make these matters open to public comment and review by incorporating the Feral Animal Management Strategy into the plan of management process.

Dogs

Section 5.12.4: The draft plan of management makes the point that dingoes interbreed with dogs but does not state that dingoes are becoming extinct. The Plan proposes no measures to ensure that dingoes do not interbreed with domestic dogs. All dogs in the park should be desexed and no dogs should be allowed in the park without a permit to ensure the dogs are desexed. There should be systematic and humane programs to control feral dogs, in addition to control for health and safety reasons. Dingo populations should be maintained in the park and monitored regarding genetic condition with the aim of preserving the dingo in Kakadu National Park.

Harvesting of feral animals

Section 5.12.17: It is disappointing that the draft plan contains proposals for commercial and tourist operations involving the 'harvest' of feral animals. Feral animals should be subjected to eradication programs and not be harvested. The term 'harvest' indicates a point of departure from appropriate management for a national park. Feral animal populations should be suppressed to protect wildlife diversity, as is befitting a national park. What next? The controlled release of sambar deer into the park for hunting, eating and for tourists to watch? While this may seem a sarcastic

remark to most readers, I believe that some hunters would seriously consider the suggestion and while others would introduce sambar deer if they could get a hold of them. The use of harvest suggests that the Feral Animal Management Strategy would make interesting reading and should be subject to peer review by scientists and pest managers in other states, as well as public comment are review.

Recreational opportunities and tourism directions

Shared Vision Principles

Section 6.1: The Colong Foundation for Wilderness does not agree that the shared vision principles as a guide to balance the primary importance of Kakadu's cultural values with the development of a strategic approach to tourism (page 74). Natural values are being downplayed and balancing values means that park values become degraded for the benefit of commercial tourism as more areas are developed. The natural values are of at least equal value to any cultural value and the Principles should be nature and culturally focused, with tourism being a secondary consideration. The principles should recognise first and foremost that the natural and cultural values are permanently protected by the national park designation.

The Tourism Master Plan

Section 6.1.2: The Colong Foundation for Wilderness strongly objects to the deferral of park planning matters to a subordinate process, such as the preparation of a Tourism Master Plan. The Master Plan should be integrated into the plan of management, as it is part of regulating the use of the park. The Master Plan is yet another controversial aspect of the plan of management that should not escape public scrutiny.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness is disappointed that the management planning for Australia's premier park is so hidden in piles of subordinate documentation. The Master Plan suggests new facilities and infrastructure, including luxury camps and lodges, and new all weather roads that would be very detrimental to the protection of park values. Apart from the futile and speculative exercise of suggesting what a proposed Master Plan should contain, there is little that can be said except restating the position of our previous submissions to earlier draft plans of management: that **Kakadu National Park is developed enough already and should have no more than 200,000 visitors a year.**

Access and site management

Section 6.2: The fifth plan of management does not adequately specify access and site management but inappropriately defers these matters to a subordinate process. These matters should be for decision through the plan of management process, not another process that will be not subjected to adequate public scrutiny. The Board and the Director are frustrating public interest in Kakadu National Park by hiding management behind subordinate planning processes.

No new tourism development should take place within the park. All existing tourism areas should be relocated toward the western edge of the park. The fifth draft plan should specify proposed permits and booking systems.

The extent of the national park open to living areas should be significantly restricted and the planning processes for these areas should be subject to public scrutiny.

Apparently the traditional owners through lawyers representing the interests have defined what is meant by reasonable restrictions to access to Kakadu in the lease arrangements. Reasonable restrictions should not extend to permitting exclusive access to unspecified commercial operations in the park, perhaps stocking the national park with buffalo and other feral animals or to restrict visitors so that 'Bininj' can hunt wildlife or have large areas of the national park restricted from general public access for unspecified numbers of living areas and other purposes. The Board is operating on a double standard if large areas of Kakadu National Park are closed to the public to allow exclusive uses that are damaging to the purposes of the national park. Permanent occupation, and commercial hunting of feral and native animals are uses that potentially damage park values. Particularly if in some circumstances motor vehicles are driven off roads for hunting purposes and living areas are poorly planned and managed in regard to location, access, breeding of pet dogs, and disposal garbage wastes and sewage effluent.

Vehicle Access

Section 6.3: The access management arrangements should be presented in the draft plan and not deferred to a subordinate strategy development process. The existing classification of roads as major, secondary and minor roads, outstation roads and lessee roads should be shown on a map. The fifth draft plan should specify proposed road closures. The majority of secondary roads in the park should be closed and allowed to rehabilitate to restore the natural condition of the park.

Section 6.3.3: All secondary roads should be closed during the wet season.

Section 6.3.5: There should be no new sealed or unsealed roads constructed in the national park. No sealed or unsealed roads should be upgraded, unless it can be demonstrated that the upgrade is essential management for park management purposes. In particular there should not be any new roads in zones 3 and 4.

Joy Flights

Section 6.4.2: The Director should not issue permits for joy flights operations because these activities are detrimental to the quiet enjoyment of the park. No aircraft should fly over the current wilderness zone.

The Fly Neighbourly Agreement should be an annexure to the plan of management.

Section 6.4.4: Authorised 'Bininj' activities should not extend to joy flight operations because these activities are very detrimental to the quiet enjoyment of the park.

Camping

Section 6.6: There are already enough camping areas developed in Kakadu National Park. No camping areas should be established, especially in remote areas - the current zone 3 and zone 4 areas.

The foreshadowed outcomes of future camping areas to be developed in the Tourism Master Planning process should be in the fifth draft plan of management. There

should not be an endless proliferation of camping areas and new areas should not be established except through definite proposals indicated in the draft plan.

All changes regarding use of the park should be specified in the draft plan.

Camping permit forms should be included as an annexure to the plan of management for public comment and review.

Section 6.6.5: The schedule of camping fees should be specified by the plan of management and the mechanism for price regulation specified in the plan of management.

Day walks and overnight bushwalking

Section 6.7: Restrictions to low impact walkers should apply to particular locations, not generally. The scale of impacts caused by walkers compared to other users is not commensurate with the level of regulation applied to these users.

Aboriginal people walked off track for millennia. Low frequencies of parties undertaking remote bushwalking do little harm in the vast majority of circumstances and the broad restriction on walkers is unreasonable. There is some sense in restricting people to tracks where there are tracks but in many areas there are no tracks. In effect the regulation prevents the bush walkers from visiting the vast majority of park areas, except where there are specialised tracks. Experienced wilderness bushwalkers find walking on tracks boring. These restrictions are very regrettable and will cause a lot of good caring people to become hostile toward park management in commonwealth parks.

Commercial Tour Operations

Section 6.14: There is a case for limiting commercial operations to exclusive Bininj operations so that the park's owners can benefit but this is a different issue to limiting access to a particular location for exclusive commercial use. The latter case should only be considered in rare circumstances and only if there is a direct benefit in protecting park values.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness is concerned that exclusive permits may be issued for bushwalking tours to areas such as Jarrangbarnmi (Koolpin Gorge). Commercial arrangements should not deny general public access to Koolpin Gorge as the sandstone gorge is generally resistant to heavy use. Allowing financial benefits to be realised from park values through restricting access for commercial purposes limits the public's benefit it could enjoy from appropriate use of the national park. Limitations should not be a mechanism generating funds from park visitors, rather such limitations should protect park values and public safety. Restrictions should apply to general visitors and guided visitors so that public access is not disadvantaged for commercial gain. Treating Kakadu as if it were a private park for commercial gain would be a very bad precedent in national park management.

Section 6.14.10: The proposed review of commercial operations should be an open and transparent public process, and not just limited to Bininj and the tourism industry.

Commercial Accommodation

Section 6.15: Commercial accommodation should be located at the western margin of the national park. Existing bed numbers should be stated in the plan of management. Bed numbers should not increase. The only acceptable development would be one which relocated existing facilities to the western margin of the park and rehabilitated the former site.

Jabiru

Section 7.1: The recommendations of the Fox Inquiry regarding the closure and removal of the temporary town should stand. Development of towns does not sit well within a world heritage listed national park. The problems of such towns are evidenced by the extensive list of proposed policies and actions in the draft plan. The town will drain resources from the national park. Policy writing, especially the plan within a plan exercise of the fifth draft plan, can not prevent the considerable impact that the town has on the surrounding area.

Jabiru should not become a bargaining chip in the uranium debate where the towns accommodation is traded to Bininj in exchange for development of uranium deposits. This extreme example of the politicisation of park management indicates the depths to which Kakadu has sunk.

Capital Works and Infrastructure

Section 8.1: Each proposal for capital works and infrastructure should go through plan of management processes, including being described in the text and located on a map.

No new facilities should be established in virgin areas of the park, and particularly in areas currently zoned 3 and 4 in the fourth plan of management.

Assessment of proposals

Section 8.3: Kakadu National Park is already developed enough. Only works proposed and listed for public comment and review through a plan of management should be available for consideration by the Director of National Parks and the Board through the processes outlined in Section 4.1: Making decisions and working together.

No proposals should be located in zone 4. No development proposals should be lodged for areas above the escarpment or in other environmentally sensitive area of the park.

Description of development control processes, such as the Park's impact assessment procedures, should be included in the fifth draft plan of management. Burial of development control within Board and Director of National Park processes denies the public interest to the protection and management of the national park.

Leases, licences and associated occupancy issues

Section 8.5: All leases and licences should be placed on an internet accessible public register. Alien uses should be eliminated through good park management and occupancy rights provided where they benefit the protection and management of park values.

A moratorium should be established on the issue of new occupancy entitlements, leases and licences until a review of these concessions identifies those that are consistent with national park ethics. All tenure and occupancy permits should be subject to an environmental auditing to ensure park values are preserved. All tenure and occupancy permits should lapse on expiry and only those consistent with national park values should be re-issued through a competitive public tender process.

Plan implementation and evaluation

Section 8.9: Only one of the five priorities for implementation of actions in the draft plan seeks the protection of park values. The protection of park values should be the primary consideration of the Plan and other priorities should be secondary. The actions statements under implementation and evaluation are inappropriately focussed on business planning and development.

Section 8.9.8: The proposed technical audit of the plan will achieve very little because many of the draft plan's proposed policy and actions refer to subordinate processes that are not detailed in the plan. The audit exercise has no performance bench-marks and is likely to be a 'smoke and mirrors' exercise of little or no consequence.

This is the worst plan of management I have had the misfortune to review in the last twenty years. Kakadu National Park is not a bucket into which all sorts of activities can be dumped. There appears to be a huge disconnect between the guiding national park management philosophy and the actions in the draft plan of management. Use and development of Kakadu will head in all sorts of undesirable directions under this draft plan, which offers no certainty.

While the Director for National Parks will struggle to hold the conservation line for perhaps years, inevitably the reality that this park is less protected than publicly owned park will be very apparent even to its most loyal supporters. This leaseback model of park management is a failure and must be rethought to provide more security for park values. The lesson of parks being mismanaged by governing trusts was learnt in the 1950's and must be learnt again, and quickly.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

Keith Muir
Director
The Colong Foundation for Wilderness