

Committee Secretary
Submission from Australian Bush Heritage Fund to
Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and
marine protected areas

Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Phone: +61 2 6277 3526

Email: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

Australian Bush Heritage Fund

The Australian Bush Heritage Fund is a national, independent non-profit organisation that acquires and manages land and water of outstanding conservation significance to preserve as the nation's heritage. Bush Heritage strives to protect Australia's abundant natural diversity forever. Bush Heritage currently protects over 670,000 ha of land in twenty-four reserves throughout Australia and aims to provide a non-confrontational and practical solution to conservation needs.

Please refer to Attachment 1 for an illustrated summary of Bush Heritage's approach and achievements to date, and to Attachment 2 for responses to Frequently Asked Questions.

Contact

Doug Humann
CEO
Australian Bush Heritage Fund
PO Box 329 Flinders Lane
Melbourne 8009
03 8610 9100

dhumann@bushheritage.asn.au

Summary Statements

- Australia has exceptional levels of plant and animal diversity and is one of the world's 17 megadiverse nations.
- Australia's protected areas are of global conservation significance, and have immense importance to both indigenous and non indigenous peoples for their cultural heritage values. However, it is widely recognised there are many important areas that remain unprotected or are poorly reserved.

- Australia's national parks, conservation areas, reserves, marine protected areas and private protected areas are the core of Australia's biodiversity conservation effort and are the most effective means of protecting areas of high conservation value. However, the inadequacy of the existing reserve system to protect biodiversity across all tenures and land systems is widely acknowledged.
- As a developed nation with a high level of material prosperity and globally-recognised leadership in conservation science, we are well placed to meet our own responsibilities for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development as well as contribute to global goals.
- The Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) has provided a substantial boost to the level of funding available to the National Reserve System Programme (NRSP), nevertheless, the current level of funding is inadequate to achieve the goals of the Programme.
- The Prime Ministers Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) report *Setting Biodiversity Priorities*, (Possingham 2002) argued that an investment of \$300-400M would achieve 80% protection of the full range of ecosystems, save 14,700 native species and result in collateral benefits of \$2,000m.
- The report went on to state that to get 80% of ecosystems represented we need to protect another 22 million hectares, or a further three percent of the Australian landmass. Bush Heritage's 2025 goal is to contribute through acquisition or management to the protection of 1% of Australia.
- Australia's protected areas will prove essential in building landscape resilience to climate change and are economically important at both the regional and national scale.
- Areas acquired through the NRSP have generally been in IBRA regions of "high priority" and have included many properties of outstanding conservation significance.
- The cost efficiency in supporting acquisition of high conservation lands through the NRSP underscores its value for money in protecting the nation's biodiversity.
- Consolidation of the National Reserve System, particularly through support of the non-government sector's acquisition initiatives - is one of the most cost effective investments that governments can make to secure the nation's biodiversity.
- The private land conservation sector in Australia is blossoming with unprecedented levels of support, activity and success. Witness the growth of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund and the Australian Wildlife

Conservancy, the plethora of smaller and emerging land trusts and the arrival of the USA-based Nature Conservancy to support private land conservation in Australia.

- A key benefit of using funds from the NRSP to acquire and protect privately owned high conservation land is that they can be used to effectively leverage significant philanthropic funds and community involvement in a way not possible with public protected areas. Through The Nature Conservancy and other means, international funding and support for private land nature conservation in Australia has now commenced.
- The Indigenous Protected Areas program is providing opportunities for innovative new partnerships between Indigenous groups and conservation organisations, such as the Partnership between the Indigenous Land Council and the Australian Bush Heritage Trust with “Beyond the Boundaries/ Conservation on Country” programs.
- The NRSP to date funds the acquisition of new properties in the private land conservation sector but it would be highly appropriate for the Commonwealth to also fund or substantially contribute to the funding of the management costs of areas of international significance.

Preamble

Bush Heritage endorses the comprehensive and authoritative submission prepared for this inquiry by Australian Members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. The Commission is the world's leading global network of protected area specialists and its Australian members include representatives from every part of the sector. As such their submission covers a wider subject range than does this submission.

Bush Heritage's primary focus is on identification, assessment, acquisition and management of private land. Bush Heritage acts where others, including governments, can't or won't act. Often tenure conditions or landholder preference will dictate that a private buyer - such as Bush Heritage - is preferred over government.

Like the WCPA, we acknowledge that considerable investment has been made by all governments into the protected areas estate. However, the current funding at both state and Federal levels simply does not match the needs for completing a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) protected area system, particularly in the face of the myriad threats to Australia's biodiversity. The 2001 *State of the Environment Report* comprehensively covers these threats and there is a need for a major increase in both political commitment and funding dollars at all levels of government.

We consider it imperative that there is a national approach to biodiversity conservation and a strong and vibrant public and private conservation sector

which embraces all tenures and land uses. Often Bush Heritage's acquisitions are located next to existing government protected areas which, as with the Carnarvon Ranges in Queensland provides important synergies and opportunities for cooperative management.

Properties are always chosen with a broad regional context in mind that will help deliver landscape scale outcomes which extend beyond the boundaries of our reserves. This can lead to valuable parallel management strategies - eg one of Australia's largest pastoral companies - the North Australian Pastoral Company - recently placed a conservation covenant over more than 200 000 ha of their Glenormiston and Marion Downs cattle stations next door to Bush Heritage's 214 000 ha Ethabuka Reserve – see <http://www.napco.com.au/default.asp?PageID=43>. This opens the door for increased collaboration between the conservation and pastoral sectors - sectors often perceived to be at odds.

As the WCPA submission notes "the responsibility of Australian governments to pursue conservation will not be fulfilled by a narrow interpretation of 'protected area'. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, government and non government conservation policy makers are now aware that traditional protected areas alone will not achieve the formidable task of biodiversity conservation on a continental scale. Therefore, there is a need for major continuing effort to find innovative ways to protect biodiversity across all land tenures."

Bush Heritage particularly values the Australian Government's National Reserve System Programme (NRSP) which operates to establish a representative national network of protected areas by – amongst other things - providing funds to assist in the purchase of suitable land.

The NRSP provides a framework for the efficient establishment of a representative network of protected areas. Through the provision of funds to assist in the purchase of land many successes have been registered, notably in the private land conservation sector.

Funding for the Programme should be increased and the private land conservation sector particularly encouraged, as tremendous leverage is obtained through this funding support.

The extent of the leverage is reflected by philanthropic financial support, supportive *pro bono* arrangements with business, and extensive community and volunteer support. These factors combined with the initial NRSP funding build national awareness and drive demonstrable conservation gains in line with Government policy and national and international objectives for biodiversity conservation.

As Bush Heritage demonstrates, significant benefits have already been derived from the NRSP and these will escalate over time. An expanded National Reserve System contributes to more resilient ecosystems, assists local, regional and the national economies, builds national pride by sustaining

our unique Australian landscape and the creatures that thrive there, and affirms both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

Resourcing Australia's protected areas

The report prepared for the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) *Setting Biodiversity Priorities* found that efforts to consolidate Australia's National Reserve System is one of the most cost-effective investments that governments can make to secure the nation's biodiversity.

They held that an investment of \$300-400M would achieve 80% protection of the full range of regional ecosystems, save 14,700 native species and result in collateral benefits of \$2,000M (Possingham 2002). This report stated that: "It is far cheaper to maintain ... natural systems than it is to allow them inadvertently to be damaged and, subsequently, to inherit a costly repair bill."

The National Reserve System Directions Statement 2005 said "It is seven times more cost-effective to conserve intact ecosystems rather than attempting to re-establish them after they have been cleared or significantly degraded".

Despite the importance of the NRSP in contributing to the efficiencies and goals outlined above, the programme's budget has fallen from a modest level to a very low level. The figures sourced from the Department are

2001-2002 - \$20.6m

2002-2003 - \$11.45m

2003-2004 - \$3.67m

2004-2005 - \$4.4m (\$6m budget)

2005-2006 - \$6m (with \$283k carry-over from 04-05).

Such a low figure for the program makes many acquisitions impossible. Just one highly significant property in the Gulf Country for example recently sold for \$15M.

As is noted in the NRS Directions Paper, it is much more financially responsible to protect ecosystems rather than repair them. This provides the rationale for ongoing jurisdictional support of a developing network of protected areas in tandem with the repair of already degraded systems.

Further, the efficient allocation of resources for effective conservation is improved through a coordinated approach to conservation priorities across the continent, based on bioregional needs and priorities. The NRSP performs a critical, indeed perhaps the only, national coordinating role in this and is vital to the development of effective biodiversity conservation on public and private land.

Despite the relatively small sum allocated, significant gains have been made. This is demonstrated by a review of the properties acquired by the

programme, their conservation significance and their scale: all of which is on the public record.

A summary of Bush Heritage's contribution reveals that for the NRSP investment in land acquisition undertaken by Bush Heritage there has been tremendous leverage of additional investment and support and very significant flow-on effects, many of which remain in their infancy. Bear in mind the first acquisition by a private land nature conservation organisation under the NRSP was only in 1999.

Bush Heritage's contribution – one example of the contribution of the private land conservation groups

Following funding support from the NRSP:

- 576,223 ha of high conservation value land has been acquired and is being managed for conservation
- \$4.2 M has been raised from the public and spent on acquisition (matching \$4.6 M funded by the NRSP - to end 2005)
- \$3.1 M has been raised from the public and spent on management of NRSP supported reserves since 1999
- On reserve volunteer support has provided more than 5 000 people days work on the NRSP supported reserves, equating to in excess of an additional \$750 000 of in-kind on-ground conservation support in the last 5 years.
- Multiple partnerships are developing

Bush Heritage's model has been applauded by business leaders as effective and sustainable (see Attachment 3 - *The Age* 1 March 2006). The model includes not only strategic acquisition but considered and long term investment in management. Bush Heritage has its own professional staff who live and work on reserves, provide support from a Conservation Support Centre and who engage other professionals to provide additional in-kind and contracted support. Management objectives are defined through comprehensive natural resource management and fire plans. These are prepared with local community involvement and reviewed at least every five years. Bush Heritage's ecological management team is refining the means of testing management effectiveness and ensuring that management is appropriately targeted. Key threats which are addressed in any planning and which are targeted for initial resourcing are: fire management; pest plant and animal control; and, boundary issues.

With support from the NRSP Bush Heritage now has a very significant footprint:

- 24 properties are owned and managed by Bush Heritage, with a total area of almost 700,000 ha across all states.
- Other properties benefit from an association with Bush Heritage's activities such as the Mareeba Wetlands with whom there is a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Over 40 staff are employed in all states.

- Hundreds of volunteers are drawn from every state and territory
- Formal and informal partnerships which assist on-ground management exist, or are developing, across local, state and national government, with business, education and scientific institutions, and with Australian and international bodies representing Indigenous, pastoral, mining, conservation and other interests.
- Bush Heritage reserves are also supporting a range of research projects from a variety of institutions. On reserves like Carnarvon Station, Ethabuka and Cravens Peak several large scale overlapping projects will enable the reserves to become a “research hub”. This creates an opportunity for cross fertilization between the investigators involved and, with the application of research findings through adaptive management, creates the potential for the emergence of a new private research model complimentary to the public approach.

Put simply, this is a huge "bang for the buck" for the NRSP and should be encouraged in the same way that support for the public protected areas must be maintained and increased.

In funding terms and staffing, NRSP inputs have been minimal but outputs have been maximised for achieving the outcomes of the programme.

As a tool for biodiversity conservation the NRSP compares very favourably with other NHT measures with regard to transaction costs and cost efficiency. The results are tangible and the transaction costs minimised, particularly as administration and long term management and responsibilities falls on recipients of the funds.

We are unaware of any other NHT measure which better leverages funds for biodiversity conservation.

Recommendations

- Maintain and expand the NRSP program over at least a three year funding cycles, thus allowing flexibility for the time-consuming process of property assessment and acquisition.
- Increase the amount of money allocated by all levels of government for strategically targeted acquisition/management. Bush Heritage supports the view that funding for the NRSP should be set around at least \$300 million over 6 years.
- Maintain the 2:1 support for private land conservation organisations through the NRSP: this provides tremendous encouragement for others to invest.
- Make the NRSP more strategic by targeting high priority regions and do this in conjunction with major stakeholders such as Bush Heritage and others in the private land nature conservation sector.
- Continue the Indigenous Protected Areas component of the NRSP.
- Provide associated institutional reforms through taxation incentives to encourage private land conservation and the contribution of the NRSP.

- Work with the states to reform pastoral lease conditions to reflect conservation as a legitimate principle land use: pastoral leases cover more than 60% of Australia and contain vital species and communities not currently well protected or reserved.

Invitation to visit

Bush Heritage invites the Committee to visit one of its larger scale reserves, Carnarvon Station Reserve (Qld). This 59 000 ha reserve has been acquired with the support of the Australian Government through funding from the Natural Heritage Trust's National Reserve System Programme. Completion of the acquisition and long term management is made possible only by donations from the public, through extensive volunteering efforts and by multiple partnerships. The Reserve lies in the heart of a region that has suffered intense land clearing activities over the last decade and abuts the Carnarvon Gorge National Park - together they protect 3500 square kilometres of intact and diverse habitats.

A field visit will enable the Committee to view first hand the context, scale and performance of private land conservation in Australia and, observe the relationships between the private and public protected areas' estate. This visit can be conducted comfortably on an overnight fly in – fly out direct to the property from Brisbane. Alternatively, other Bush Heritage properties can be visited in every state.