

# **Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

## **Submission from the Burnett Mary Regional Group for NRM Inc.**

### **Introduction**

The funding and resources available to manage and meet the objectives of the Natural Reserve System have long been considered to be insufficient by community and NRM professionals. In Queensland approx 4.1% of the State is covered by the formal reservation network far below the recommended 15% (SOE Qld 2003). There is widespread opinion that the existing national parks and reserves are not managed effectively. Regular complaints to Regional Bodies include lack of weed management and associated infestation of neighbouring properties, lack of sufficient resources for fire management and inability to enforce and implement management requirements of Protected Areas.

The spread of responsibility across Commonwealth and State jurisdictions and pressures on Non Government Organisations to add to the National Reserve System (NRS), has meant there has been a piecemeal approach to the development of a Comprehensive Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve network with insufficient investment from all levels of Government.

The inclusion of private land is held as essential under the "Directions for the NRS" (NRMMC 2005) report but typically other than initial payments made to landholders no steady source of funding, as with national parks and reserves is made available for management.

### **In response to the Terms of Reference:**

#### **a. the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas:**

##### **CAR (Comprehensive, Adequate, Representative) values**

National Parks and Protected Areas were historically conserved due to landscape context and public use. As a consequence many of the existing Protected Areas and Reserves provided a base for the development of the CAR system, but do not represent an adequate reserve system. In addition the integrity of a remnant area has not always been considered in the gazettal of reserves and many isolated remnants are now national parks. A review of the CAR System and identification of areas suitable under the CAR criteria is required at a National level. This National level identification is necessary to assist States and Regions to actively adopt and support the CAR principles as stipulated by Environment Australia (1999). It is appropriate that this is completed at a National Level due to the National Approach of the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation of Australia.

It would be useful to consider the said aims in ***Developing National Reserve System Priorities which are:***

- Assessment of gaps or shortfalls in the current system of reserves
- The level of protection for all major ecosystems in each IBRA region will be assessed with special attention to comprehensiveness and conservation status. The Commonwealth with input from the States and Territories will facilitate a national gap analysis using IBRA regions, the Collaborative Protected Areas Database, and information provided by the jurisdictions.
- Assessment of threatening processes
- At the national scale there is a need to identify threatening processes (such as coastal development and its impacts on adjacent marine reserves) and risks of ecosystem loss which may foreclose future options for the conservation of biodiversity within each IBRA region.

### **Implications of class/designation**

The designation of Protected Areas and the level of protection offered by the type of reservation must also be considered if a secure reserve network is to be established. For example the management regime will vary significantly between a National Park (scientific) and Conservation Park as designated under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (Qld). A National Park permits only nature based activities whilst a Conservation Park allows for activities such as grazing and fishing providing they are deemed sustainable. A uniform approach to designation and status as per the 6 IUCN categories used by the Commonwealth would help to ensure a better understanding and implications for long term viability. A graded system which allocated a value according to the level of protection provided within the CAR system would help to create a more comprehensive NRS.

- Category Ia Strict Nature Reserve: Protected Area managed mainly for science
- Category Ib Wilderness Area: Protected Area managed mainly for wilderness protection
- Category II National Park: Protected Area managed mainly for ecosystem conservation and recreation
- Category III Natural Monument: Protected Area managed for conservation of specific natural features
- Category IV Habitat/Species Management Area: Protected Area managed mainly for conservation through management intervention
- Category V Protected Landscape/Seascape: Protected Area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation
- Category VI Managed Resource Protected Areas: Protected Area managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems

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

**Public Reserve Network**

Queensland current lacks a CAR system, as mentioned in the introduction of this submission only 4.1% on the State is reserved despite the recommendation of 15% and CAR values are not being met. Furthermore there appears to be a lack of resources with State personnel and community expressing concern about environmental management for the values of national and marine parks and their surrounding areas. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the submission received by Bruce Thomson who expressed concern about staffing levels at both on-ground works and higher level research and planning levels. This is a widespread and commonly held view.

**Private Reserve Network**

Private land conservation is a rapidly expanding field in natural resource management and the development of philanthropic sponsored organisations such as the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, has led to a broader uptake of conservation on freehold land.

The main issue with title binding agreements aimed at conservation outcomes is their enforcement and management. Management is almost entirely left in the hands of the landholder with no or very little support forth coming from government at either the Local, State or Commonwealth government levels (varies dependant on State allocations). There is no enforcement in most cases of covenant conditions or any guarantee that the landholder will be able to manage the land in accordance with the stipulated conditions.

The landholder may be liable due to terms and conditions of the agreement but without support and provision of information in updates in the field of environmental management, best practice management is unlikely. This type of hands off approach is comparable to what is seen with weed management where weeds may be listed as prohibited plants but control is not feasible by landholders and is strategically ignored by government officials.

## **Fire Management**

Fire Management is also crucial to maintaining biodiversity and lack of management often results in a decline of biodiversity (SOE 2003). The need for fire management for ecological purposes is widely accepted and most states have prepared broad ecological prescriptions for burning of different vegetation communities. However ecological burns are often postponed due to the availability of resources, gaps in information, perceived conflicts between land uses, the need for clear objectives and a process to implement ecological burning (Friend *et al.* 1999). Even on the Department of Environment and Heritage Web site the following reasons are given as the main human constraints:

- ***Funding and Resources*** - this was the principal constraint identified, preventing optimal conservation management. By hampering the critical step of collecting, collating and interpreting biological information it impairs the quality of decisions and actions. Funding and resource levels also impact on staff competency by restricting training and developmental opportunities. Restricted funding can also affect prevention and suppression capabilities.
- ***Surrounding Landuse*** - often dictates that the protection of pasture, timber, crops or built assets is of paramount importance and cannot be ignored.
- ***Protection of Life and Property*** - while it may be possible to marry life and property protection with ecological management a more likely scenario is conflict between these two objectives. Risk management and litigation threats dictate that ecological objectives are generally secondary to life and property protection. This does not mean, however, that ecological objectives should always be ignored in such areas. Due consideration should still be given to reaching a compromise between ecological and protection objectives. If protection becomes the primary objective then the rationale behind the decision should be documented and the environmental impact assessed with a view to minimising any adverse impacts.

### **C. any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

Threats to the management objectives of protected areas are variable and dependant on the designation and management plan. In general however the following threats are seen as common issues:

#### **Ability to revoke protected areas**

Within all legislation lies the ability to revoke protected areas, this largely lies within the realms of State Government jurisdiction and can be influenced by development and economic imperatives, as has been seen in the past with the development of resorts within national park boundaries. As pressure mounts on our environment and the availability of resources the status and maintenance of Protected Areas will continue to come under fire. This needs to be addressed at the national level to ensure that protected areas can not be revoked except where CAR requirements are exceeded.

#### **Fire**

The management of fire as mentioned above is a constant issue and resources must be allocated to ongoing maintenance and upkeep. If ecological burns are not completed or fire regimes are too regular for fuel reduction purposes then the values of the protected areas can be severely threatened.

#### **Climate change**

Climate change and the ability of species and ecosystems to respond is very poorly understood. The precautionary principle should be applied to ensure that we have a full suite of ecosystems to maximize the ability of our natural systems to respond. Connectivity in the landscape is also essential to allow for changes along ecotones and the movement of those ecotones with climate variation.

Observations have been made amongst the scientific community that forest and mangrove structures are changing as a result of climate change and records by the Bureau of Meteorology indicate that most of the Eastern Seaboard is becoming drier receiving significantly less rainfall (Commonwealth of Australia 2006). Changes in distribution of species have already been recorded with poleward and altitudinal shifts of plants and animals and an increase in coral bleaching due to increased water temperature (CSIRO 2005). It is also thought that these impacts are likely to have a cumulative affect but as yet the overall impacts are not understood. Some predictions for environmental impacts on Australian ecosystems are:

- The wet tropical forests of North Queensland appear to be in great peril. The researchers in north Queensland are predicting indeed a catastrophic collapse of that forest for a warming of only a few degrees.
- The alpine flora and alpine ecosystems of south eastern Australia appear to be highly vulnerable for a one to two degree warming.

- The Dryandra Forest of south western Australia, and other vegetation systems in that state in the south west appear to be also highly vulnerable for quite low levels of warming. (Hare 2005)
- The Great Barrier Reef and other coral habitats are experiencing bleaching events with an ever increasing frequency from the impacts of a destabilised climate and global warming. Aside from reducing reproductive ability and ultimately causing coral death, the loss of the reef would be catastrophic to those industries that it supports (including tourism and fishing).

With these types of dire predictions it becomes even more pressing that governments respond as quickly to redress the gaps and issues of protected area management and creation of a CAR network.

**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**

**Managing recreation**

A major issue has arisen in regards to the management of visitor impacts on Protected Areas, in Queensland this equates to over 16 million people visiting Queensland national parks and reserves. A strategic management plan for recreational impacts including a permitting system and assessment of carrying capacity needs to be instigated to maintain the natural values of the reserve system network in Queensland and indeed across Australia in both terrestrial and marine environments. This should also be related to the designation/status of national parks and the level of protection they offer in terms of the NRS. There is concern amongst the conservation sector that Parks have often been seen by State Governments in terms of tourism potential rather than conservation values.

**Managing Extractive Industries**

The use of national parks and marine reserves for extractive industries has long been a contentious issue. In Queensland's State waters, there is a current push for marine aquaculture (including fish cage and oyster farming) resulting in the granting of exclusive permits for seabed use (including areas that are marine reserves). This use is granted with little regard to conflicting ecological needs or a precautionary approach to ESD assessment for any new use of activity.

**Provision of resources into the long term to maintain viability and to consider adjacent land use implications**

Long-term plans have not yet incorporated an estimated costing of reserve management and a way of ensuring that reserves can be self-sustaining in the future. Permits and fees for visitation go along way to redress this however the funds generated should be returned to the individual park and not into consolidated revenue. Remote reserves and reserves with low or no visitation need to have funds allocated at gazettal to ensure management principles can be applied.

The adjoining landuses and the potential for impacts on both reserves and private land should also be factored into management costs as this is recurring issue in the community. A common problem is that adjoining land is being infested by weeds from reserves and vice versa. The costs of maintaining boundaries is typically an additional expense due to edge effects common around remnants, however this not often costed into planning and represents a major management expense.

**Condition considerations and implications of management**

Condition is also rarely recorded in gazettal and regular monitoring of condition is not given a high priority in most reserves. This should be a crucial consideration to evaluate the effectiveness of adopted management principles and their applications. It is also important that there is a record of health for our natural Reserve System Network to allow for changes over time and to adapt as required within the principles of a CAR system. An evaluation system should consider both outcomes and management inputs (Hocking et al. 2002)



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

### **Management**

Community perception is poor overall of the management of reserves, with many people believing that Protected Areas are locked up and forgotten. This is entirely inappropriate for most natural systems in Australia and whilst this is recognised by Governments the resources allocated do not always allow for sufficient management of Protected Areas.

State marine parks are often multiple use areas with less emphasis on conservation with harvesting in protected areas permissible. There is a lack of a whole of government approach to marine management in Queensland, with at least three main agencies involved Departments of State Development and Innovation, Environment Protection Area and Primary Industries of Fisheries. These agencies often have different driving forces and a conflict in direction and aims. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is an example of how one governing board can eliminate this problem and how management by the Australian Government can benefit Protected Areas.

### **Creation**

The creation of reserves has in the past often lacked a strategic approach and has been based on opportunity. This is gradually being rectified however it is important that reserves consider natural boundaries where ever possible and not be based solely on tenure and availability. There are many examples where reserves exist and the boundaries between the reserve and other land tenures are undistinguishable on ecological grounds.

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