

John Brandis

20th February 2006.

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, IT, and the Arts Reference Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

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

Would you please accept the following brief personal submission, to the inquiry.

I am a professional forester with over forty years experience in the active management of native forests, both public and privately owned, and I am well versed in the environmental issues that have been raised against forestry use. While forestry may be my specialty, I also have a keen interest, for the much wider issue of natural resource management, be it farmland or forest and I have come to appreciate, almost passionately, that we need a quantum change in attitudes to the way we manage our land.

May I start with some basic premises.

- It is vital for the future of our community, that our natural resources should be used sustainably so that our land can be passed on to future generations in as good or better condition than we received it. The whole of the community must carry that responsibility, by recognising the environmental costs that are involved in production from the land, and in turn landholders must accept a duty of care on how they manage their land. Public land managers should also be accountable.
- Conservation measures (as in wise use) need to be adopted across the whole landscape, and not just limited to isolated patches of parks or reserves. As a community we need to better understand the way in which the land was managed for thousands of years before Europeans arrived, especially the role of fire, and understand the unpalatable reality that some environmental disturbance (be that fire or otherwise) is essential in maintaining the diversity and health of the landscape. The ecology of our land is dynamic, and is ever changing. It is not realistic to “lock up” large areas large areas of land to “preserve” its ecology, while excluding all forms of disturbance.
- Forests are an integral part of most rural landscapes, and on a regional scale, are key features in maintaining biological and hydrological cycles – both above and below ground. Irreversible climate change inevitably follows deforestation. My instinct suggests that about one third of our land should be retained under tree cover, spread throughout our productive farmland. There is no reason why that forest cannot be managed sustainably, in many situations, to supply a renewable timber resource that is needed in the community, as well as farm income, while simultaneously, providing a wide range of environmental values.

- Under current conditions, much of the privately owned land that is used for intensive farming and grazing is being used beyond its long term land capability, with consequent loss or degradation to soil and biodiversity resources. The natural processes of regeneration that have sustained native vegetation for millennia cannot operate any longer on this land. At present, there is no incentive for owners to manage for values other than straightforward economic ones. In an earlier enquiry, a Senate Committee has recognised the existence of “public good” values on private land, and the need to give landowners some incentive to manage for these values.
- The pathway to better natural resource management is through a well thought out planning process, which looks at the unique factors applying to each individual landholding, and the targets set at the catchment level, to provide property plans that have balanced outcomes. The Catchment Management Authorities should drive this process, and provide incentive.
- Recognising nature conservation values on private land, and applying management that is ecologically appropriate, may be a more efficient and effective strategy to achieve nature conservation and sustainability across the landscape, than funding an ever increasing government bureaucracy to “manage” isolated parks and reserves.
- Imposing a restrictive legislative and regulatory environment on landholders only results on hostility. Most owners in my experience do little to alter their present management practices, leading to continued biodiversity declines. “Existing use” is a strong principle in planning legislation, and further militates against land use change.

May I suggest that the Committee look at the overall objective of management of National Parks and Conservation reserves in the wider context of good natural resource management (soil, water, cultural values and biodiversity) and the need to manage all our land as good resource managers. This will require a much more sophisticated level of planning than we have had before. Planning that recognises fragile lands and the concepts of land capability and suitability.

The basic unit for planning must be the individual landholding and the owners must have an integral role in the development of Farm Plans that meet minimum environmental standards. State agencies and their staff must change from being regulators to facilitators in this process.

There are unpalatable sides to good forest management – many trees in overstocked stands need to be culled and thinned – slash and undergrowth needs to be burnt – and the worse condition the forest is in – the more drastic the treatment that is needed. Many of the forests that I have seen on private lands on the northern tablelands are in very degraded conditions – with declining economic and environmental values that need active management – not simply fenced out and left unmanaged, as has been promoted in the past.

The task of funding environmental service payments to landholders is a huge one but the logics and ethics of the whole community sharing the burden must be compelling.

I hope that you will consider these suggestions.

Yours sincerely

John Brandis.