

15 March 2006

The Secretary,
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
And the Arts References Committee,
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SUBMISSION

SENATE INQUIRY

RESOURCING OF NATIONAL PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS

The National Parks Australia Council, formerly the Australian National Parks council, is constituted of Member Groups across Australia with a prime interest in national parks and nature conservation.

Most of our Member Groups are making individual submissions with a prime focus on their State/Territory.

This submission is to reinforce the importance of robust national leadership in the conservation and management of protected areas (PAs) as a cornerstone in the conservation of Australia's globally significant natural heritage.

The Council considers that best practice policy and management, implemented nationally with respect to national responsibilities and international obligations, needs improved resourcing and ongoing constructive cooperation with all states and territories that is appropriate to their differing situations.

This submission also highlights a number of common key concerns that are relevant to the conservation of the varied and special plant and animal species and communities across the Australian continent.

The Inquiry Terms of Reference are addressed on the following pages.

A The values and objectives of Australia's National Parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas

- 1 The unique landscapes, ecosystems and plant and animal life characteristic of Australia and surrounding seas are the outcome of their particular evolutionary history, rightly celebrated in countless publications and promotions.

The submissions from NPAC members outline their concerns regarding both values and objectives relevant to their state or territory.

NPAC emphasises the importance of a secure Protected Area (PA) system for the benefit of present and future generations in the conservation of our heritage including through the strategic provision of

- tracts of natural/near natural habitat;
- a range of ecosystem services;
- refuge and breeding areas for many species including migratory species, such as many birds and aquatic (freshwater and marine) species;
- educational and recreational opportunities for Australians and overseas visitors;
- benchmarks for research;
- carbon sequestration;
- the capture, holding and provision of high quality water.

- 2 The purpose and definitions of PAs, as defined by IUCN, are accepted and supported by the NPAC.
- 3 Key common elements in Member Group submissions make clear the important need to:
 - acknowledge and celebrate the values of PAs;
 - address the gaps in the so far established protection network.
- 4 The advancement of a nationally more strategic approach is made possible through implementation of an Interim Bioregional framework that links to subregional ecological communities. It is in this regard that particular attention is drawn to the need to address deficiencies in under-represented bioregions, and to integrate fresh and salt water habitats fully into the protected area system as a matter of increasing urgency.
- 5 NPAC also highlights the importance, reflected in the policy objectives of the National Reserve Program, of the need for a mosaic and interconnected pattern of secure protected natural areas.

In addition to PAs held and managed by public agencies in accordance with overarching IUCN categories and objectives, lands held by the crown at all government levels should, as far as is compatible with their prime purpose, be managed in accordance with broad conservation objectives.

Measures to encourage the conservation of fauna and flora across the landscape by the private sector through convenances, agreements with landowners and managers - especially in co-operation with Indigenous peoples- and by other means, is further acknowledged as making a significant

contribution to conservation. It is noted that legislation and policy in support of such programmes have been developed to a varying extent by the states/territories.

- 6 Protected areas are becoming increasingly precious assets in a surrounding environment of change, and the values they represent are accordingly vulnerable to adverse impact from external activities. However there are many opportunities for natural and cultural conservation objectives to be incorporated at local and regional levels to enhance and reinforce beneficial environmental outcomes and the resilience of the PAs In the long term.
- 7 The Federal Government has an important national leadership role on behalf of Australia to deliver on its obligations as a responsible global citizen consistent with its commitments as a signatory to the Convention for Biodiversity Conservation. The focus and support from governments has fluctuated over the years, which has put at risk some excellent initiatives and advances as a result of a lack of consistent attention and resource allocation. It is poor public investment strategy not to support an ongoing commitment to good management once in place.
- 8 The non-government environment groups, especially those with a core concern for protection of nature and natural areas, continue to make substantial contributions that complement the work of public agencies in promoting and in managing a comprehensive and representative (CAR) park system.

The main focus of the NPA NSW which was established in 1957 was on the need for a professional state government agency to hold and manage national parks, ultimately realised with the establishment of the National Parks & Wildlife Service ten years later.

The Nature Conservation Society of SA has each year since 1966 conducted multidisciplinary surveys of the biological values of a selected location. This has provided scientifically grounded information on which to base recommendations for the protection and management of environmental values. More recently the NPA NSW has developed a substantial Community Biodiversity Survey Manual in partnership with the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service.

B Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements

- 1 The role of the Federal government is critical to both setting the policy framework and to providing policy leadership coupled with the provision of resources to deliver a nationally consistent best practice protected area programme for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem conservation.
- 2 Funding under the National Reserve Programme has undoubtedly enhanced the capacity of the states, territories and private bodies to secure the protection of important parcels of land. However, as pointed out in the submission from the National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ), the mid-term review of the National Reserve System found that *the current level of funding is inadequate to achieve the goals of the Program*. Furthermore, the National Parks Association NSW (NPANSW) commends the initial 2:1 funding formula

but notes that this has more recently been reduced to a 1:1 basis. Furthermore, the sum allocated for the National Reserve Programme has declined in recent years.

- 3 Overall, funding under the NHT has been skewed towards repair and engineering activities rather than pre-emptive protective actions, despite evidence that these are more ecologically and economically cost effective in meeting biodiversity conservation targets. In some instances strategic investment in critical locations also delivers long term management cost gains, such as, for example, through the acquisition of inholdings and improved boundary configuration of parks and reserves (cf, submission from the National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ)).

The former National Estate programme included grant funding for research projects which enabled NPAC member groups to engage in a number of projects that enhanced understanding of natural values. As an example, the Nature Conservation Society of SA conducted a series of studies of the extant native vegetation of Kangaroo Island, Murraylands and South-East, which enabled constructive input into development of regional plans for the respective areas. Commonwealth funding grants towards administration costs of recipient non-government environment groups were introduced in acknowledgement of their role in public interest conservation work. Most recently entitled the Federal Grants for Voluntary Environment & Heritage Organisations (GVEHO) programme, these modest grants have significantly helped such groups to contribute to the education and information base on environmental issues. Reductions in such allocations in recent years, and an emphasis on 'on-ground' restoration work, has significantly constrained these groups. The complete withdrawal of funding for this Council (NPAC) has severely hampered our capacity to effectively coordinate the views of state and territory based groups, and to fully enter the national debate.

- 4 Protection of marine, estuary and fresh aquatic systems has generally lagged in comparison with terrestrial systems. While welcoming the greater attention now being given to marine conservation, it should be noted that marine park terminology may also mislead, in that only a small proportion of the declared area is usually a 'no-take' equivalent to Australian terrestrial national parks and nature reserves. Furthermore, in most jurisdictions aquatic flora and fauna come under the administration of the respective Fisheries departments, which also have responsibility for commercial and recreational fishing. This creates at least the appearance of a conflict of interest with the philosophy applied by terrestrial national park agencies.

While recognising the ecological differences inherent in aquatic as compared to terrestrial systems, we suggest the terminology should broadly line up with IUCN categorisation, with the capacity to take on a wider 'managed area' approach where there is active and ecologically sustainable commercial exploitation of renewable resources along the lines of a marine equivalent to the UNESCO MAB Biosphere programme. We are specifically concerned that at present even within marine parks, the impact of commercial activities on non-target species and benthic damage from such activities plus pollution from through traffic and from external sources may not be adequately considered.

- 5 Appreciation and understanding of the natural world is an important element in natural area management. In his recent visit to Australia, Professor Norman Myers touched on the problem of 'ecological illiteracy'. Protected Area interpretation and on-ground activities, which engage the wider community, together with formal and informal education programmes such as "Discovery Ranger" programmes, contribute to delivering a secure PA system. An informed public is better placed to express pride in and support for PA establishment and management needs, with consequent lessening of hostility and calls for access that are incompatible with PA objectives.
- 6 Reduced acknowledgement and support by governments for public benefit works and research which once characterised CSIRO, Universities and public institutions such as Botanic Gardens, has contributed to reduced ability of governments to address many issues, including for example, the paucity of taxonomic expertise to address invasive exotic (not all are imported) species on natural systems, in addition to their impact on primary production.
- 7 NPAC supports consistency across jurisdictions of categorisation and implementation, in line with the broad IUCN categories of purpose, to minimise mis-interpretation and ongoing anomalies that compromise the overarching objectives with consequent public confusion and antagonism.
- 8 The capacity of state and territory governments to meet their responsibilities is variable. There have been number of forward moves towards policy that is nationally consistent, recognising that administrative boundaries do not coincide with natural features, including through the Coalition of Australian Governments (CoAG), the National Water Initiative (NWI) and the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC). However, buck passing between federal and state and territory governments has also at times been counterproductive, undermining delivery of good environmental outcomes.

C Threats to the objectives and management

- 1 Fragmentation and increasingly rapid change as the ecological footprint of human activities grows threaten the long term viability of our natural heritage.
 - Terrestrially, loss of natural habitat has long been recognised as a key concern driving the need for reserves as a cornerstone in conservation strategy. Extinction debt considerations, as species decline with reduced breeding under changed environmental conditions are exacerbated by the effects of global warming on the viability of ecosystems and species world wide.
- 2 A major threat to the establishment and good management of a comprehensive and adequate protected systems can be sheeted home to lack of ecological understanding and thus the ecological implications of many development actions driven by relatively short term socio-economic considerations and incomplete understanding of the tradeoffs incurred. This Inquiry provides an invaluable opportunity to make recommendations that can assist decision makers at both administrative and political levels to address this need for long term consistency in achieving improved ecological outcomes.

The challenge inherent in meeting short term needs without compromising the long term integrity of natural systems is not unique to Australia, as was clear at the IUCN's World Parks Congress, Durban 2003, and subsequently at the IUCN World Congress, Bangkok 2004. It is interesting that China, following an era of huge and rapid economic development in the coastal regions, with serious adverse environmental consequences, is now wrestling with how to factor in protection of natural values while alleviating poverty in its more remote and less developed areas. (Beijing Review Vol 49, 27/4/06)

- 3 Invasive species are one of the major threats to the biota of both terrestrial and marine environments, and likely to be exacerbated by disturbances to established systems through climate change. Note that the term invasive can include species that are indigenous to a location where changes in urbanisation and farming practices is to the advantage of one species over another [eg., currawongs and magpies, which predate small bird species] and to non indigenous species introduced from elsewhere in Aust.). Australian terrestrial and coastal waters, long isolated through geological times, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of introduced species on established fauna and flora, facilitated by disturbances, which accompany development for agriculture, settlement and resource extraction.
- 4 Extraction and regulation of water for human use and safety adds a further threat particularly to wetland and aquatic ecosystems.
 - The documented decline of the internationally significant inland Macquarie Marshes, (the Nature Reserve and more recently some private property is listed under the Ramsar Agreement) provides a clear case study of the adverse impacts of unsustainable upstream development. Moves to improve management including the most recent Water Sharing Plan for the Regulated Cudgegong and Macquarie Rivers, upstream of the Macquarie Marshes highlight the inadequacies of model driven management based on averages in a system of natural fluctuation (the flood/drought extremes of climate variability natural to much of the continent). Such policy failure from the inadequate inclusion of climatic variation will worsen with the expected increase in *el Niño* events.
 - Less widely recognised are the impacts of water extraction, for settlement, rural and mining activities on groundwater dependent ecosystems.
 - The Coorong system at the mouth of the Murray Darling is another example of change to the natural environment due to changed volumes and patterns of water flow because of catchment drainage (especially of SE and S. Australia) and regulation (barrages near the Murray River mouth; upstream weirs, reduced and modified flows; consequential reduction of tidal flow, flooding and increased salinity).
 - The Snowy Hydro Scheme demonstrates the water catchment benefits of a managed protected area (Kosciuszko National Park): it has also brought a legacy of impacts including proliferation of weeds and changed downstream water flows, particularly evident in the Snowy River. Its proposed sale to the private sector has seriously alarmed NPAC Member groups in the

absence of adequate public commitment to a thorough environmental management plan, following a full public consultation process, that includes:

- delivery of environmental flows for the Snowy River is guaranteed;
- environmental flow requirements for the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers affected by the operations of Snowy Hydro are provided for;
- the full environmental legacy of the Snow Hydro development is addressed including its past, present and ongoing impact within Kosciuszko National Park;
- all aspects of climate change have been addressed;
- misleading reporting on the cloud seeding experiments are corrected and made public;
- Rigorous public establishment, monitoring and enforcement of environmental performance standards are put in place;
- permanent protection and enhancement of environment values on the areas occupied by and impacted by Snowy Hydro activities

- 5 Not surprisingly, the most productive and easily accessible lands have experienced the most dramatic impacts of modern settlement, with native vegetation and the wildlife it supports largely replaced by agriculture. The remaining areas of naturally vegetated alluvial lands together with more remote and most intact natural areas constitute some of the most important remaining areas for addition to the natural reserve system, yet are amongst those areas under greatest threat of modification. Even within Sydney, NSW, where considerable investment has been made into study of the now much fragmented Cumberland Plain woodlands, there are insufficient measures to protect important ecological communities threatened by development to meet an ever-growing population.
- 6 Natural disturbance events such as flood, drought and bushfire have helped to shape the landscape and distribution of ecological communities across the continent. The disturbance effects on a now more restricted pattern of remaining natural areas, whether in the PA system or not, places greater strains on natural resiliency and the capacity of fauna and flora to recover. The future effects under climate change are likely to intensify these adverse effects, compounding the pressures from invasive species, hydrological changes and pollution. It is important that governments help dispel inappropriate myths, such as those referred to in the submission from the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA).
- 7 High impact activities by some users of protected areas are causing great concern to NPAC Member Groups. A key and supported element in protected area philosophy is to encourage appreciation and enjoyment providing it is compatible with the overall objectives for the protected area. For example, the definition of National Park under IUCN and reflected in the objectives of most Australian national park agencies incorporates this objective in management but, again reflecting IUCN categorisation, takes a different line for Nature Reserves.

Unfortunately lack of public understanding, compounded sometimes by political interests and limited resources, is leading to ongoing pressure of high impact activities that conflict with conservation of natural values as well as the enjoyment by non-high impact visitors. The consequences of high impact

activities, such as surface damage, erosion, sedimentation and noise, air, and light pollution, directly affect the long-term resilience of the area including native fauna and flora.

It is important to cater for appreciation and study of nature at all community levels. However, as the Field Studies Council of UK has demonstrated since its establishment in the late 1940s, this does not require establishment of Field Centres in fragile PAs.

High impact recreation should be provided for outside of the PA system.

While it is encouraging that the importance of well financed responsible management is increasingly being recognised within leading tourism circles there is the problem that cash strapped national park agencies whether or not under additional government and private sector pressures, fail to meet the best practice management objectives they aspire to. This is an issue particularly highlighted in the submission from the Tasmanian National Parks Association.

- 8 In summary, perhaps the greatest threat of all has been the reluctance to face up to the challenges as outlined above, at community, administrative and the political levels.

D Responsibilities of governments concerning reserve creation and management

- 1 The important role of the federal government in providing leadership, and in funding resources has been referred to above. The NPAC submission on the National Reserve Programme, through which critical direction and a core funding for reserve creation is delivered nationally, is attached.
- 2 The urgency of redressing the decline in the NRS programme support to meet agreed targets is emphasised.
- 3 Governments need to use the opportunities provided by CoAG, NWI, MDB and similar arrangements to cooperatively advance a robust CAR PA system, with complementary arrangements according to jurisdictional need.
- 4 The Federal government plays a crucial role through its responsibility for delivering on international obligations such as the World Heritage Convention, Ramsar, ICOMOS, and as a member of IUCN
- 5 This extends to ensuring adequate resources are in place for management of listed areas. A matter that has been of considerable concern under new arrangements is the administration of funds under NRM processes given their focus on primary production.
- 6 Governments can and should work constructively with the private sector, and particularly acknowledge the contribution made by public interest conservation bodies in building up a robust well managed public PA system complemented by a range of off-park measures aimed at enhancing biodiversity conservation. At the same time, Governments should recognise that market forces are not the solution to delivering good environmental outcomes, and while they may have a

place, they may be counter-productive. Under C 4 above this submission highlighted a number of issues where this applies. In the case of the Snowy Hydro, furthermore, it is questionable whether Governments have the will to hold commercially driven private enterprise to delivering in the long-term public environmental interest, on the assumption that sufficiently robust requirements are a condition of sale in the first place. A NSW Government commissioned report on water trading made it clear that appropriate 'fences' need to be in place to protect the health of the affected water sources: the eventual outcomes of the Water Sharing Plans do not adequately reflect this advice.

- 7 Governments can and should collectively re-affirm their commitments to protection and conservation of our natural heritage, and to implement this through rigorous constraints on land and at sea together with allocation of funds to build a robust PA system nation wide. It is ridiculous to be spending significant sums on restoration and rehabilitation – a poor substitute at best for what is still there and still healthy - while failing to protect what remains.

IN CONCLUSION

NPAC submits that while the Australian government has taken a number of important steps in meeting its duty of care responsibilities to invest in nature conservation for the long-term benefit and wellbeing of all Australians, current conditions require urgent and ongoing enhancement, noting specifically that:

- Time is running out in many of the areas most desired for 'development' which in many instances are also those least represented in the present reserve system;
- It is a government responsibility to protect a sustainable core comprehensive and representative system of public protected areas;
- Opportunities to complement an established and sustainable PA system exist by managing public lands held for other purposes, such as defence, recreation sport, and water catchment, for their natural values in as far as compatible with other purposes, complemented through robust planning and incentives that encourage private conservation; and
- There is need to recognise and support the positive contribution made through research and education in terrestrial and marine protection by the private and not-for-profit sector.

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Attachment:
NPAC Submission on National Reserve System 2006