

27 February 2006.

Mr Peter Taylor,
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Dear Peter Taylor,

National Reserve System Programme Evaluation 2006

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to your Department's evaluation of the National Reserve System Programme.

1 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. NPAC was contracted over a period in the late 1990s under a Community Liaison Project to facilitate understanding and appreciation of the National Reserve System. The NPAC The Council is thus aware of the importance of the NRS programme in progressing establishment of a secure protected area system as a cornerstone element in the conservation of Australia's natural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations.

2 We have noted the Departmental Review of the NRS Programme, leading up to the 2005 publication *Directions for the National Reserve System – A Partnership Approach* based on work by the National Reserve System Taskforce of the NRM Ministerial Council Land, Water and Biodiversity Committee.

This publication in Section 1.7 highlighted five main areas requiring attention, namely:

- (a) need for clear, agreed and measurable national targets;
- (b) need for clear and agreed national guidelines;
- (c) inadequacy of consistent ecosystem-scale mapping;
- (d) need for an agreed national plan of action; and
- (e) need for funding for both acquisition and management.

3 NPAC is concerned that funding and commitment to adequately address all of the above has not kept pace with the rate of ongoing change across Australia, both in NRM institutional arrangements and in terms of loss of habitat and species decline.

4 The ongoing modification of natural habitat is of particular concern as understanding of the implications of predicted climate change increases, bringing better recognition of what this may mean for species and habitat survival across the landscape.

5 NPAC acknowledges the important potential for complementary action through strategic integrated land management that incorporates the principles of ecological sustainability, noting this is reflected in the Partnership Approach aspects of the 2005 Report. A number of NPAC Member Group members, as individuals, participate directly or through donation to organizations that work to acquire and manage land for conservation purposes under a variety of heritage agreements under State jurisdiction.

6 NPAC is concerned over the separation of marine and terrestrial reserve considerations, which leads to anomalies over degree of protection and of expectations, and notes that there is currently no equivalent to the NRS for aquatic (inland or marine) waters.

Given the accepted need to increase attention to freshwater/inland waters the inconsistency of messages coming from Fisheries and from Environment Agencies is of particular concern.

7 NPAC welcomes acknowledgement of the important role of Aboriginal peoples in caring for country, and thus the NRS attention to the potential of IPAs.

8 NPAC strongly supports the concepts of a National Reserve network, and considers that the Federal Government, through the Department of Environment & Heritage, has a very important leadership role, in

- setting policy
- development of appropriate institutional frameworks that incorporate both incentives and regulatory measures
- contributing to understanding and appreciation of our natural inheritance
- contributing financial resources for research, acquisition and long term good management

9 NPAC is concerned at the fall-off in funding for the NRS programme, so critical for securing public and private areas towards meeting the basic targets across the range of bioregions. This is starkly apparent in the Reports on the DEH website, showing the levelling off in the curve of lands acquired with NRS assistance.

10 NPAC is concerned over misunderstandings and tensions that have arisen with the transfer of lands selected because of their high conservation value to secure public protected areas under Regional Forest Agreement processes. In some instances these have been promoted for recreational access without sufficient consideration of management constraints necessary to maintain the very values for which the areas were selected. The programme should address this issue, and means sought to assist acquisition of additional and complementary areas to cope with the increasing numbers of people seeking outlets for high impact recreational visitation and activities not dependant on high conservation value habitat.

11 NPAC Member groups are concerned to foster pride in our natural heritage, and continue to play an important role in increasing public appreciation of the role and

benefits of protected areas. It is interesting that this is also implicit in some tourist promotion, which it has been noted should avoid promoting national parks to death. Some years ago NPAC organised a series of forums open to local and non government organizations with an interest in conservation, as part of a Community Liaison Project referred to in paragraph 1) with the fore-runner of DEH. The day long meetings, held in various capital centres in conjunction with Member Groups, provided a valuable opportunity to increase understanding of the NRS programme, its purpose and its potential. NPAC was also enabled to put forward various suggestions for taking this liaison forward but unfortunately further funding was not forthcoming. More recently, an application by NPAC for a grant to undertake new education activities on the NRS programme was unsuccessful. NPAC considers this aspect of partnership has merit and should be pursued.

12 In conclusion the NPAC re-affirms the value of the NRS programme; regrets that limited resources have precluded its fuller realisation; and urges that the programme be maintained into the future with enhanced funding.

Anne E Reeves OAM
Hon President
National Parks Australia Council