

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee
Department of the Senate
CANBERRA ACT 2600

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS, CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Let me preface my comments with some general observations:

The initial declaration of nearly all of these protected areas under review was undertaken on academic advice based on appropriate heritage values.

It was acknowledged that there was a necessity for this Estate to be properly preserved. Almost without exception there has been an endless number academic studies undertaken in respect of the most effective course of action to achieve that objective. The cost of these studies has consumed the Lion's share of funding in the development of park administration and policies. Those costs were borne by the taxpayers and led to the formation of current strategies for implementation. Theoretical park management has therefore been achieved at a huge cost. Rather than seeking practical alternatives, the preferred management tool has been to exclude public involvement and to pursue a policy "decreasing activity." Where ever problems have arisen consultants or academics have over ridden any historic or cultural values of the former keepers of these areas. In most cases this has significantly compounded what was formerly easily contained or rectified. (erosion, weeds, blackberries, erosion feral animals etc).

It is now obvious from the need for this inquiry and the current condition of the Estate that the costs of the "no management" policy have reached staggering proportions. Clearly it has not kept pace.

Burnt to a cinder, millions of acres now vividly reflect just how ineffective this process has been. With this highly destructive result has come a great out pouring of academic comment and "so called" solutions. To avoid criticism there has been an endless quoting of scientific papers to support the current "politically correct" policy. The same groups going over and over the same grounds in an attempt to freeze evolution at date of 1788 without regard to global warming or a population of around 20 million people. Much of it reeks of collusion. None of it takes into account the future direction of world population growth.

One can only marvel at the predisposition that locking up huge tracts of land and sea can enhance their value and at the same time have no impact on the balance of land inhabited by Australia society. Much of this has not changed in 40 years.

Clearly it has been the most impractical experiment recommended by Academics anywhere in the world. No other country could sustain such environmental destruction as a result of outrageous fuel loads and extreme bushfires. The risk has been continually identified by many experts and concerned citizens outside of the administration. Likewise the estate has been continually run down to make it more difficult for the stakeholders to access and observe the impacts. Roads, fire trials, headlands, river and sea access, all deliberately obstructed to cause inconvenience.

As a result, in crisis situations, volunteers and emergency service personnel have been put at extreme risk to perform rescue missions in an attempt to protect bio-diversity, human life and property. It would be irresponsible to continue with more of the same practice. Whilst considering the establishment of an additional Marine Park we need to take a look at our immediate shoreline and carefully monitor and assess the activities of International fishing fleets undertaking reckless fishing on our door step. To pretend that the catch is being policed and that it has no impact on our stocks is negligent. It must compound the entire coastal ecosystem.

So many of our reef and coastal problems stem from international pressures, demands and transgressions. Most are accurately depicted in other submissions. The ultimate consideration must be can we afford it? Will it end up like the current Estate in Victoria and NSW? What will the cost be should predictions of a submerged coastline prove correct? Who will foot that bill? If they are correct then we could be facing rapid changes within the next decade.

How important will the Park boundaries be then? We could well be more concerned about impacts and sustainability. What will the cost of management be then?

The problem of adopting a stance given to us by armchair extremists is that you develop a culture which would prefer to offer an endless number of solutions without any practical input. What we have achieved is a top heavy, negatively driven organization which is not prepared to alter the environment should it be criticized. Alternatively it has been more concerned at this point on funding itself by imposing fees for licensing, entry and private enterprise development. Conveniently the majority of the administration invariably sites itself next to towns and then concentrates all Park activity in one area. Instead of where it is required. In the more remote and fragile areas. If you want to adopt the “tread softly on the land” approach, then this surely compounds the effect of usage both inside and outside its boundaries.

Do we share an overall responsibility and land policy? Have we undermined initiative by destroying the corporate confidence of those charged with day to day management?

In short we have far too many people pontificating about what could be done rather contributing at the coal face. Calls for the creation of more and more conserved areas only overlooks the need for a broader look at all land use in Australia. It ignores funding and writes off any other form of land trust management, forestry activity, sport usage or multinational sponsorship. It is time we rolled up our sleeves in a practical productive manner.

I will now address some of your terms of reference:

Values and Objectives:

One must acknowledge that we have now established a huge area which requires considerable surveillance and maintenance.

It is either funded by the taxpayer or represents land which otherwise would help sustain our population. In economic terms it therefore has enormous value. If not used by the stakeholders it has little hope of ever becoming self supporting. Locked up it will never generate an income!

One must acknowledge that we are taking steps which ignore our immigration practice and the effects of major climate change. Both unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future! We must therefore deduct that our contribution on an operational level must be more practical and affordable. The Estate will only be of value to any generation if can be used. After all supposedly these assets were considered to equal to the finest parks in the world. Valued for their beauty! I am sure they were not intended to be closed to subsequent generations.

Consequently, all user groups, private enterprise, academia, and government need to look for a much greater level of project activity. This needs to be regular and practical. Users of Park resources need to assist in preventing unwanted impacts. They need to involve themselves in actually making an effort to contribute to “improvements”. Whilst we have excellent evaluation skills we continue to overlook the fact that the overall trend has been “negative”. Despite the loss of life both inside and outside the park as a result of fires we still seem to view “the judicial use of fire “ as a solution instead of an absolute last resort. Leadership is required in finding practical solutions and identifying how best to co-ordinate and inspire productive input. Controlled grazing would certainly be a better alternative to fire if scientifically managed. Track management is preferable to uncontrolled erosion.

User reported black berry and weed infestations is better than ignorance. Awareness should lead to practical solutions. These are more passive solutions than the use of fire. We should cease flooding our protected areas with toxic poisons. Reconstruction of historic huts should lessen the pressures of random camping. We need a history to pass onto future generations. Surely these cultural pursuits give us a National identity and a reason for Parks. Our gray army (elderly citizens) may welcome some significant pottering input around the edges.

Government Input/ Funding and resources:

Here, once again, we seem to be closing the gate after the horse has escaped. On the one hand we keep declaring more and more areas, whilst on the other not anticipating costs. This in turn leads to neglect which compounds and makes the end result all too difficult and expensive. We forget what the original condition was and then revert to “visions of utopia” rather than practical solutions. Academics instead of identifying that weeds are flourishing under Parks management would do well to organize projects of practical weeding. Government needs to look at how effectively priorities are being applied and what is realistic expectation from an affordable administration – without having to sell off Snowy Mountains Hydro which is at the heart of our catchment area and water course management. Despite its critics SMHA is best kept in Government hands. Some balanced consideration must also be given to other State pressures, including the current proliferation of “concrete jungles” elsewhere. Every decision comes at a cost.

I spent 14 years looking at developing countries priorities and executed the delivery of Aid on the most effective dollar for dollar arrangements.

The keyword for most of that Aid was “sustainability”. For any activity to be sustainable there must be a reasonable level of viability. In short the more the stakeholders are involved, the greater the level of investment and cash flow. The policies of “lock up and hope for the best” will never result in pride, confidence and performance. At one stage I coordinated 18 single institution courses at Australian Academic Institutions for overseas students. All of these courses were at post graduate level, either Masters or PHD students. Without projects those graduates were not compelled to return to their countries and there was little incentive

for them to make an economic contribution. Similarly our academic elite cannot be involved at a practical level unless there is a beginning. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee would be well advised to program courses which mesh with Government planned and directed projects. Given there is a general lack of related employment for graduates there is need for some forward thinking and practical application. If not we can expect “brain drain” and under employment.

For this reason I doubt that locking up huge areas of coastline will be any different. What will happen to the current infrastructure? Already state governments struggle with funding. As it is now, without taxpayer support who can employ those talented graduates? They will fall by the wayside and focus talents elsewhere. What ever happened to “the clever country”?

Australian high school students could also be focused through “summer camps”, learning introductory leadership and practical management skills to apply in wilderness areas. A great alternative to spray cans and viaducts! Those activities could be coordinated through YMCA, Outward bound, Scouts and other groups. This too would reinforce the importance of these assets to the next generation. Far more practical than geography lessons!

If we are short on ideas for eco tourism, (which given our current employment statistics and real post graduate career opportunities, we are), it would be prudent to combine the efforts of the Australian Tourist Commission, the Trade Commissioner Service, State and Federal Governments, as well as Municipal Councils to promote our wilderness overseas. Were the Budawang Range in America it would be the seventh wonder of the world. (There are many other similar sites within our Parks and reserves). We need those people in top heavy management to pack their suit cases and put “Wilderness Australia” on the Map. At the same time paying their way with feature documentaries and publications from the ABC bookshop. Radio Australia, SBS, Foxtel, etc. Transact could also become involved in programming. It will surely fail unless it involves every stakeholder in planning and execution.

If the “Administrators” are concerned about intense concentrations of tourists then they need to plan with local municipalities and involve them also. Service Centers on the edge of the Parks, such as Jindabyne, already assist with tourist entertainment and accommodation. They benefit from the employment. In a broader sense a network of support towns could meet regularly to spread impacts and plan a year round list of activities. This would lessen stampedes and seasonal invasions.

(See the DOC and NZ Queenstown adventure capital websites for some ideas.) In any event if a broader view is never undertaken then surely population growth and activity on the Park borders will have a greater uncontrolled effect. The Australian Film Commission should continue their good work in providing initiative for some further documentaries enhancing our National Parks.

They do need to be marketed more vigorously. If any of this is to take place it would need all interested parties to network and share the promotional costs of advertising, trade fairs and exhibitions. All would share in the profits. They would need to target individual countries and prepare carefully at appropriate times.

Any private enterprise developments undertaken within the Park could be offered “greenhouse” credits for contributions to the improvement and proliferation of desired flora and fauna. Broader incentives could be made available to Australian Industry especially in burnt out areas. Significant contributions could be raised through competitions focused on

land improvements. Prize money, status and standing would be the draw card. This would ensure the success and completion of various project stages. Community involvement could be sought through daily press advertising.

Threats to Objectives:

The greatest threat to reversing current deficiencies and lack of vision is to procrastinate further. The sooner we shed the “convict cringe” and get on with using and promoting our assets the quicker we will solve the resources problem.

We need to develop the confidence that we can change things for the better. Then march forward in strength.

A well designed project co-ordination unit must be established to follow the leads of Yellowstone National Park (with some reservations; you need to be conversant with “Playing God in Yellowstone” a book by Alston Chase). The success of Park promotion in neighboring New Zealand also stands as an excellent model. New Zealand Park management and public usage is streets ahead of Australia practice. Utilisation is both sustainable and effective. Australian academic institutions could advertise undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Park Practical Management to encourage a worldwide understanding of United Nations initiatives. Those students would be involved in day to day preservation, fire control, fuel reduction, project planning , effective weed management, feral animal control, tourist programming, law enforcement, bio-diversity and public relations. They could be funded under the aid umbrella and from the UNDP. It could be a ten year program from which valuable thesis material could be collected.

Our Barrier reef would provide the world’s best Marine based maintenance workshop. It could assist with practical crown of thorns starfish control etc. We certainly already have an abundance of academic theory. From these activities we can then establish world’s best project practice. I am aware that some of this activity is already receiving attention.

It would be sacrilege to miss this opportunity to promote Australian academic skills in this positive way. These schemes would require government endorsement. The immigration department would need to process students quickly and effectively. The institutions would need to sell “the concepts” of practical management. They are skills certainly required in most developing countries.

Periods for training could be set to project activity and not necessarily academic semesters. Supervision could be added by various authorities, SMEC, Parks admin and CSIRO. Qualifications could be designated accordingly. Work experience and specialized trainees could be attached to Councils needing to focus on their involvement. Weed control could be offered to guest workers if unacceptable to Australians. Work for dole payments could be tailored to project activity.

Let me also firmly underline that the last thing we need is another repeat performance of the fires which raged over four million acres on 300 kilometer front. That single act of degradation will take more than 50 years to regenerate.

Certainly it did more damage than humans, cars, horses or weeds in our entire history. Given current rainfall patterns it will probably never return to what it was before Park management. The only benefit I can imagine from this event is accelerated run off into catchments. One point is evident the Estate cannot be repaired by dreamy eyed extremists who can only offer theories.

Like any other Government instrumentality resistance to change and inability to accept advice will result in more of the same.

Government Responsibilities:

The initiative for this practical activity must be delivered in the form of directives from all governments involved. It needs to be bi-partisan and accurately coordinated. The Senate committee should find common ground on both sides of the chamber to promote co-operation within the Parliament. A working group made up from those submitting submissions, could identify and accurately list practical programs, in consultation with User groups and Park administrators. A detailed submission could then be refined and submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

The Senate is the obvious place in which to debate the broad parameters for a working manual and list of operational activities to be sought from within their constituencies. No longer should this be left to fractured groups of individuals to develop policies on a trial and error basis. At all times the significance of such events as the Thredbo landslide disaster and the loss of over 400 houses by fire be kept in mind. Given ministerial accountability it is your responsibility to ensure that we never repeat these happenings. I would never wish to witness millions acres of park going up in flames again.

With specific regard to further Marine Park expansions a more accurate funding assessment should be made of not only the current poor financial position of some State Governments but also the likely future impacts on current funding of such expansive area. Whilst some comparisons might be possible from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park it is extremely difficult to forecast expenditure in the years to come. Given our ageing population and associated costs it seems extremely unlikely that we could effectively maintain this area into the future. More usefully we could study the impact of long line fishing and possible introduction of noxious marine pests resulting from intrusions on the continental shelf. Tasmania is certainly raising concerns already in this regard. The Government needs to ensure the responsibility of all International players.

The resultant impact on Freshwater systems and other coastlines, combined with the propensity of the Australian population to favor coastal development should also be a point of focus. Non-compliance is usually the result of poorly thought out and unpopular proposals. Invariably it results in considerable demands on policing and litigation. Rangers should work for the improvement of the park and not be wasted on trivia. We suffer so much from prolific knit picking and over prescriptive legislation in this country already.

Whilst we may be able to afford some of these luxuries now, it could well be a different scenario in 2020. Disputation with Government always adds to costs. That funding would be better spent on enhancing the Estate.

Record of Government:

One can only try and view our track record in a positive light. We have more land set aside to National Park than any other country in the world. Whether this is just “a label” depends on our ongoing ability to return protected areas to their former pristine condition.

Given the current vast stands of burnt out timber and extensive moonscape erosion we must look to Government for some urgent changes in policy and administration. Whilst it is somewhat outside the terms of reference of this committee we need to be mindful that the taxpayer’s dollar is currently stretched to breaking point. As one of the highest taxed Nations in the OECD group of countries we need to be carefully examining ways that our assets are retained. They should not be sold off, funding for our education and health must not be reduced to ashes in the bushfires that rage through our Parks. Heaven only knows how big the recent damages bill was to both government and its neighbors. I have never been able to find where that has been accurately recorded.

We need to ensure that Park policies and practices are not applied at the expense of adjoining land owner’s fences or the houses of the taxpayers who after all fund Park administrators’ salaries. It should also be placed on record that as we all contribute to this society in one way or another, every attempt needs to be made to accommodate maximum use of the Environment. That usage should be more than possible if programmed and managed intelligently.

At the same time I acknowledge and support any legislation that enhances the estate by user co-operation and practical involvement.

It will take a more co-operative approach if we are to maintain areas of this size given the Gross National Product of this country and the trade challenges we face now and in the future. Our retirement funding and standard of living is at stake!

We need to move on from “scorched earth practice” to more practical and less expensive approach.

I believe that an efficient program can generate its own funding and marshal the necessary resources through intelligent co-operation and joint promotion.

Looking at the current state of KNP, it is now five to midnight. If we aren’t more practical soon it will be too late.

We should accurately record on film for future generations the extensive damage which is still clearly visible. Not only will it serve a reminder that we need to be practical but identify what progress we are making and where our efforts are best rewarded. I am sure we all have a debt to repay.

I would welcome the opportunity to detail some of the finer points.

Dudley Nicol