



North Coast Environment Council Inc.

Hon Sec: John Jeayes

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRING INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

The North Coast Environment Council (NCEC) is the voluntary umbrella organization for some forty conservation organizations on the North Coast of NSW . NCEC covers the area from the Hunter to the Tweed and west to the New England highway.

It has taken up both Local , State ,and Commonwealth Governments issues which affect the overall environment of the North Coast be they issues of conservation of flora and fauna ,more efficient uses of energy and transport to more rational planning to protect the invaluable natural assets of the coast while allowing for tourism, residential and farming requirements. But we also consider that there are issues which affect Australia and on which we should comment as Australians.

The Council was established in 1974 and in 1975 received funding from the Commonwealth Government to meet costs of administration. These grants continued though decreasing in amount until finally stopped by the current Government in 2004. Yet members have been asked to serve on various committees and our opinions have been sought on a number of issues. As we are an umbrella group it is difficult to raise funds.

This Inquiry into Australia's National Park system is one of the most important that the Senate has initiated on natural environmental issues.

There is still a very inadequate system of conservation reserves in Australia . There is only 10% of Australia in formal protected areas and there is a lack of representativeness in this reserve system. According to the Prime Minister's Science , Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC 2002) if we wish to have 80% of Australia's ecosystem protected then there needs to be an additional 22 million hectares ie 3% of the land mass in reserves .

There are many threats to this range of habitats including land clearance , climate change and human use/abuse. The Commonwealth should be leading the way in rectifying the omissions of ecosystems , improving the management and just as importantly ensuring adequate funding is made available to manage such reserves.

The Senate Committee will be aware of the following important documents which give the background to the inadequate nature of the nation's reserve system .

1. Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment 2002 by the National Land and Water Resources Audit

2. An Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia 1995 by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency

3. Land Cover Disturbance Over the Australian Continent 1995 by the Department of Environment Sports and Territories.

4. Native Vegetation Clearance, Habitat Loss and Biodiversity Decline 1995 by the Department of Environment, Sport ,and Territories.

5. State of Environment Reports 1996 and subsequent Reports. Prepared by State of the Environment Advisory Council.

6. Action Plan for Australian Birds 2000 .Prepared for Birds Australia

If there is any doubt about the parlous state of Australia's unique fauna and flora these documents drawn up by experts in their fields should remove such doubts.

To comment on the five points which the Committee has listed we have these comments

The Values and Objectives of Australia's National Parks.....protected areas

To date the areas that have been set aside for conservation reserves have been largely those near centres of human population or which for reasons of more human interest have attracted the community or authorities to have set aside as reserves. There are also areas which have been largely ignored for pastoral and agricultural purposes and sometimes these have been declared as reserves. But some of the areas which have particular attributes of climate and soil have been claimed for farming or even urban development and the conservation of flora and fauna in such areas have become a poor second in priority .

The result has been that many ecological "hotspots" for fauna and flora have been lost or else the need for conservation has been ignored and where there have been reserves created they are often small "islands" with a very limited life for the protection and continuation of their flora and fauna.

There are gaps in our knowledge of our fauna and flora and despite all the reports listed above there is still need for more detailed research but funds are very limited.

Many of Australia's reserves are quite small and isolated and therefore are likely to lose species over time according to the island biogeography theory .(various authors including Dr. Jared Diamond in "The Island Dilemma : Lessons of Modern Biogeographic Studies for the Design of Nature Reserves " (Biological Conservation <7> 1975) .There is need to be able to "connect" such islands by corridors so species can move into more suitable environments when there are changes in such as climate and to ensure there are adequate gene banks. In any case some species of fauna need large areas to survive eg one pair of powerful owls need somewhere in the region of 3,000 ha. for breeding and hunting. According to a paper (The Role of Connectivity in Australian Conservation by M.Soule, B.G.Mackey, H.F.Recher, J.C.Z Woinarski , Don Driscoll, W.C.Dennison , M.E. Jones and J.E.Williams published in Pacific Conservation Biology 2004) "culturally ,one

of the major impediments in effective conservation, worldwide and in Australia, is the ignorance of connectivity's role in sustaining ecological dynamics and diversity" (p.275)

The economic value of national parks at least in some areas cannot be doubted. According to a study of the New England/Dorrigo area prepared by the Centre for Leisure and Tourism Studies Kuring-gai College in 1988 there was an estimated expenditure of \$173 million in the area and of the 774,000 visitors some 287,000 visited national parks. Another study of the impact of the Dorrigo National Park showed that the Park supported 28 full time jobs. A survey in 1998 by the UNE School of Rural Science and Natural Science showed that Dorrigo businesses consider that 27% of their income comes from tourists and national parks were identified as major tourist attractions.

Australia receives over \$2 billion in expenditure from eight national parks at a cost to government of \$60 million (A Park Managers Introduction to Economic Impact Assessment by IUCN and Australian Nature Conservation Agency –no date). This report also points out the value of national parks in other areas. A study by Read Sturgess of the logging and water values of the Thomson catchment which provides some of Melbourne's water supply showed that if account is taken of the impact of logging on water yields from the catchment then the forest management regime is the least efficient of the alternatives considered and that the net present value of the resource could be increased by \$147 million if logging were prevented altogether (Read Sturgess 1992 quoted in Taxes and Charges for Environmental Protection published by The Australian Institute March 2002 p.33).

This value of national parks and similar protected areas in catchments is acknowledged by the Catchment Management Authorities in NSW which is encouraging the vegetative protection of catchments in all their plans.

The salinity crisis that is occurring in parts of Australia has been linked to overclearing of native vegetation. Where such vegetation can be protected in national parks and similar reserves there is a gain to the whole economy by the prevention of the movement of salt into other streams and areas.

Less measurably is the value of national parks and such reserves for renewal of the human spirit particularly in wilderness areas. It has been pointed out by numerous writers that one does not have to enter a wilderness area to appreciate it . The fact that it exists is enough and that future generations will have options over it.

Whether Governments are Providing Sufficient Resources to Meet those Objectives and Their Management Requirements.

This is a question which we cannot answer in detail but only point to a number of problems of which we are aware.

In the case of the World Heritage Listed Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves the Commonwealth provided a sum of four million dollars in the first three years. These funds were tied to specific projects in research, management ,and infrastructure. In the next year there was a long delay in the allocation of funds and when the Commonwealth decided to make a contribution to the management of this World Heritage site it was one hundred thousand dollars which had to be spent in two months (before the end of the financial year). To draw up projects and arrange to have them approved and then carry them out in

a space of two months is nigh on impossible. The result is that the Commonwealth is taking no responsibility for the proper management of a World Heritage site.

On the other hand we understand that the Government has helped several voluntary organizations to purchase important properties for conservation reserves eg. Australian Heritage Fund has received funds to help in the purchase of two sites (at least) in Queensland namely Ethabuka and Careys Peak , the Australian Wildlife Conservancy has received funds from the Government to help purchase Mitchell River station west of Cairns and Birds Australia received help to purchase Newhaven in the Northern Territory.

It appears that the conservation of fauna and flora is being privatized in that these voluntary organizations are being expected to not only raise a large amount of money but also to manage these reserves with minimal assistance from the Government. These particular reserves are generally creating reserves in biogeographic areas where there are no existing ones and thus are creating a pattern of conservation reserves which are vital to the protection of flora and fauna. Though the voluntary bodies are doing a wonderful job and the idea of such bodies saving natural areas is one to be encouraged the demands upon them is probably reaching a limit to what can reasonably be expected .

There is also a problem with this “privatization” of reserves in that

1. there is a lack of long term security for the reserve if the body is forced to go into liquidation
2. there is no protection against mining being undertaken in the area as with national parks.
3. there could be conflict where the area acquired is leasehold land and government decides to place the lease on the market at a price the voluntary organization cannot afford. Or conditions of the lease may require clearing of vegetation.
4. there is also a conflict where National Reserve System funds –public monies -are used to help purchase land which can then be used or controlled in ways which are not compatible with usual national park management principles and in certain circumstances provide profit to a private company.

It is time the Government took a greater role in the setting aside of reserves in all the bioregions and provided sufficient funds for their proper management. At present we understand (Conservation on Private Lands by Penny Figgis IUCN 2003 p.10) that the NRS provides funds to NGOs to purchase land on a basis of 2:1. Such funds also can be used for short term management

But thereafter the full costs of management fall upon the private NGO and over time these costs can be onerous

In the magazine of Birds Australia “Wingspan” December 2005 the President writes about the negotiations with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy to manage the very important property of Newhaven north west of Alice Springs. The President writes that one of the Councils “greatest concern was that Birds Australia would be placed in the untenable position of facing an ever increasing debt that it could not meet, while dealing with a compromised and constrained management capacity that threatened the very values we are trying to maintain”

If we are serious about protecting the natural environment then the Australian Government must ensure that the Reserves are provided with the necessary funds to

ensure their proper management. Even the Australian Wildlife Conservancy will find itself in a difficult position as it protects more and more of Australia's unique habitats.

Any Threats to the Objectives and Management of our National Parks

There are increasing threats to our National Parks (which include Marine Parks). These might be listed as

1. Tourism
2. Pressure of visitors
3. Inappropriate use
4. Lack of research
5. Lack of funds for adequate management
6. Size

Tourism .

There has been a tendency for tourism operators and authorities to view the Park system as a resource for their use . They therefore often demand facilities which do or can have adverse effects upon the primary purpose of the Park namely conservation of flora and fauna. As a large export earner for Australia there is no doubt that one of the major attractions for overseas visitors are the National Parks whether they are Uluru or the Great Barrier Reef or Kakadu. However if they are over developed they can become "theme parks" and their value to both tourism and the protection of flora and fauna are diminished.

Pressure of Visitors

Anyone who has visited the Royal National Park over a weekend will agree that unless they move away from the more popular areas the experience is more like a city park. It is encouraging that so many people wish to visit such areas but there is need to spread the impact into other areas otherwise the prime reason of protecting flora and fauna are threatened.

Inappropriate Use

Some of the largest threats to national parks are the tools of the industrial world in the form of all terrain vehicles, trail bikes ,horse riding , mountain bikes, commercial bee keeping. There is need for the core areas to be protected and the fringe areas where there is already degradation of the natural environment to be acquired for use by the more damaging recreations. There has been too little attention paid by governments to acquire such areas to take pressures off National Parks . To a certain extent this is being done through the biosphere reserve systems. According to Penny Figgis (Australia's National Parks and Protected Areas-Future Directions p.10) "the greater need for integration of reserves with other land uses"- is gathering pace.

Lack of Research

One example of the lack of research in the natural environment is that during the Regional Forest Agreements the CARR aimed to protect 15% of each forest ecosystem that existed prior to European arrival on the continent. Professor Harry Recher stated "specific reservation target of 15% (which may have been originally intended only as a minimum guiding value) has no empirical or theoretical basis. We simply do not know

what would constitute viable reservation targets, but most ecologists would argue for more than 15%" (The Post RFA Future 1998 Paper presented at the National Symposium on Regional Forest Agreements and the Public Interest ANU)

A further example where more research is necessary is that of the need or not of burning for ecological management. Much of the present information is based on very short (in nature terms) time frames and much damage can be done by inappropriate burning for so called ecological management. The need for ecological monitoring of reserves must be continuous to ensure that they are filling the requirements of protecting fauna and flora.

There is to our knowledge very little long term research into whether the role of the Park estate in protecting species is working. There needs to be studies done on a continuous basis as to what species are present when the park is dedicated and the results over time. In the case of protecting flora and fauna we do not know if the parks are achieving what they are supposed to do and if we are to have value for the money expended we should ensure that such information is available.

Lack of Funds for Appropriate Management

This subject has been dealt with in several items above. Though NSW has greatly increased the amount of expenditure per hectare over the past few years much of this expenditure is for provision of visitor services and weed and feral animal control. The need for funds to help manage the "private reserves" must be a priority for the Commonwealth .

Size

We have discussed above the need for core areas to be large. Many of the new reserves in NSW will provide little in the way of protection of flora and fauna unless they can be connected by corridors of suitable size. In the North Coast Region of the NSW Parks system there are 91 reserves of which fifty two (52) are less than 1,000 ha hardly cause to consider such areas will give adequate protection over generations to the flora and fauna. Long term research would be able to indicate if these reserves are performing their role.

The Responsibilities of Governments with Regard to the Creation and Management reserves are set aside and of National Parks ,Other Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas with Particular Reference to Long Term Plans

It is the responsibility for governments to ensure for the sake of the world that adequate reserves are set aside and properly managed . Australia is not only one of the 17 mega diverse regions of the world but with the USA is the only developed country in this group and therefore with the resources to ensure conservation of the range of ecosystems with their unique plants and animals. The task before governments has been fairly succinctly set out in "Directions for the National Reserve System- A Partnership Approach" February 2004 from the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council. All that is required is the will of governments to allocate resources to the acquisition and management of the reserves.

The report notes that in the case of privately held reserves the potential for more reserves is "limited by the need for the organization to raise significant amounts of funds not only for purchase but also for capital works and ongoing management". (p.27) As pointed out elsewhere governments should not rely on private organizations to take up the role of

creating reserves and when such organizations do acquire properties there must be government funds available to assist in the long term management. There will need to be arrangements to deal with the problems that may arise through private ownership such as restricting access, selling etc.

Naturally the State Governments are going to cry poverty and their inability to finance more purchases and more ongoing costs for management in the present state of their budgets. In the Australia State of the Environment Report 2001 p.81 the mid term National Reserve System Program review is quoted

“ While all State and Territory conservation agencies express strong support for the objectives of the NRSP, this is not reflected in the level of financial commitment by many States to land acquisition”

The problem is a national one and the main burden should fall upon the Commonwealth. In fact there is much to be said for having the purchase and management of all IUCN category I and II reserves transferred to the Commonwealth.

There is another way for the Commonwealth to foster protection of natural environments in private ownership and that is through the tax policies. In a discussion paper “Taxes and Charges for Environmental Protection” published by The Australia Institute in March 2002 it is pointed out (p.31) that “ tax incentives for conservation measures are provided to land holders who are conducting a business on the land, whereas landholders who wish to conduct solely conservation on their land are unable to access the same tax concessions (Binning and Young 1999) “

There have been some changes to the tax policy but more needs to be done.

Another method is to pay an annual rent to landholders who agree to tend important ecosystems on their land or whose properties make up important corridors linking national parks. Such arrangement would avoid the capital costs of purchase and also the rather high costs of management by a public body. It would require an annual inspection by a Park Service employee to ensure that the conditions of management have been met before the rent is paid.

NSW Park Act provides for those landholders who enter into a Voluntary Conservation Agreement for their property to apply to the Local Government Council for a reduction of their rates in proportion. This means that the conservation burden falls upon Local Government. Paying a rent would overcome that problem unless government is prepared to compensate Local Government for loss of rate revenue.

The Record of Governments with Regard to the Creation and Management of National Parks, other Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas

The record of governments in creating national parks and similar reserves has improved in the past ten years but we consider that this has only occurred due to the pressure and lobbying from the public and the conservation organizations. It is difficult to point to many reserves which have been an initiative from government. Even now the NSW government provides only some \$2 million for new acquisitions plus approximately \$1 million through the Dunphy Fund. Other amounts become available through other programs such as wetland acquisition. But considering the cost of land particularly on the coast these amounts do not purchase very much. There is also a long running dispute between the Department of Environment and Conservation and the NSW Treasury as to the recurrent financing of new acquisitions which inhibit the Parks Service from purchasing.

Conclusion

There is need for the Commonwealth to provide leadership and the funds both capital and recurrent for the establishment of the necessary series of reserves to ensure Australia protects and conserves its unique flora and fauna.

We have not discussed the situation with regard to Marine Protected Areas. The decision by the Commonwealth to place some 50% of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park under sanctuary zoning is welcome. But in NSW the Marine Parks have only small areas where there is total protection and the whole process appears to be driven by the exploiters and not good science.

Yours sincerely,

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