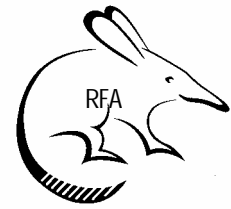


FOUNDATION FOR A RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA (RFA)



Committee Secretary,
Senate Environment, Communications Information Technology and the Arts References
Committee
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600,

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

Submission by Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc.

Background to RFA

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA) is a non-profit entity whose purpose is to encourage research into and communication about the immediate and long-term effects of the European wild rabbit on Australia's natural environment and its natural resource base used for primary production. RFA was formed in 1990 and, prior to the release of rabbit haemorrhagic disease (calicivirus) (RHD) in Australia, was actively promoting research projects in most of the states and the Northern Territory. During the latter part of the 1990s and early in this century, RFA concentrated on building up its funding base as a result of reduced investment by governments into rabbit research for control purposes.

RFA is also concerned with the complacency of many land managers, both government and private, with respect to rabbit control following RHD, which was particularly successful in the rangelands but less so in the higher rainfall areas. We do not want to see rabbit numbers increasing again as they did following the initial success of myxomatosis in the 1950s through similar complacency.

RFA's Strategic Plan is attached for your interest. It provides an insight into the Foundation's proposed directions to address its concerns during next five years.

Relevance of this inquiry

RFA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate inquiry, given the importance of maintaining and enhancing, where feasible, the wide range of genetic resources and biodiversity contained in Australia's protected areas — much of which is threatened by rabbits.

In addition to the inherent value of these areas, RFA notes the increasing emergence of nature-based tourism and related benefits for visitors and related economic opportunities. We also note that branding arrangements for protected areas is variable across Australia. For many years this variability has been confusing and lacking in basic standards, for example, a 'national park' in South Australia can not only have different characteristics with other 'national parks' within the

State, but all can be quite different in their characteristics to 'national parks' managed by the Commonwealth or other jurisdictions. We suggest that this longstanding problem requires attention, possibly based on an agreed and identifiable set of values.

We now comment on the funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

The values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas

RFA believes that much of the protected area system in Australia is the result of lands 'left over' from previous agricultural development, or surplus to some other previously allocated use, including fishing grounds. This often means that the intrinsic values of the area have been compromised by previous use patterns, and/or the real values of the area (both good and bad) have not been analysed and understood prior to its inclusion in the protected area system. Although a past philosophy of 'getting the hectares while you can' has some logic, the management planning process is important in enunciating the range of values and opportunities in the protected area so that whatever management resources are available can be well targeted.

RFA has seen examples of parks set aside for conservation of biological resources yet with those resources being degraded by rabbit grazing (among other things) through poor planning and consequential misallocation of resources. The impact of rabbit grazing is insidious by nature; rabbits, even at low densities, tend to remove certain species and leave less palatable ones, and may thereby dictate floristic structure with little evidence of their impact to the casual observer.

By changing floristic structure, animal species dependent on the missing elements can be excluded from otherwise intact vegetation communities. If the missing element is the seedlings of a long-lived dominant tree, such as Mulga in the arid zone, rabbits can inexorably change the whole landscape by a process that is barely measurable. Park managers might be aware of the presence of rabbits as a management problem, but the lack of quantitative data on the nature and impact of rabbits on vegetation, floristic structure and native fauna often impedes assessment of priorities for action. For example, in relation to rabbit control, the type and density of the vegetation and/or the morphology of landform, such as cliff edges or dune systems, means that reduction and minimisation of the effects of rabbit grazing can be difficult to deal with effectively without creating other land management problems.

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

RFA believes that inadequate funding for effectively-targeted park management continues to compromise proper stewardship of protected areas. This problem is not only about the quantum of funding governments may provide. It also can be created by the methods of funding and the inherent inflexibility of systems providing recurrent funding on an annual basis, with the strictures that annual funding can bring. Many natural resource management problems require long-term attention and rabbit management is certainly no exception. There are numerous examples across Australia of investment in rabbit management programs that run for up to three years (around the term of government) and then are stopped or wound back, so that the value of the initial investment is lost within a decade. This approach to resource allocation for protected areas will not deliver the long-term, sustainable outcomes that are required for park managers to be able to maintain identified values with confidence. More flexible fund allocation systems that give recognition to this problem and that can span financial years would be most helpful.

RFA is not opposed to carefully planned revenue generation through concessions for sympathetic developments on protected areas by the private sector, with the proviso that the generated funds are not lost to the protected area as a matter of course. Treasury departments of government have a great capacity for absorbing revenue generated under such circumstances, thereby removing the incentive for a park manager to ensure best management of the concession.

While this situation is probably not unusual across much of the world, it does often create special problems of access and management of threats, including rabbits, that impact on the values of the area.

Any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas

As indicated above, RFA notes that threats to objectives and management of protected areas principally arise from lack of understanding and appreciation of values of the area (poor planning) and then the consequential incapacity of a good system of funding to protect and enhance those values on an ongoing basis. Natural resource management is a dynamic process requiring continuing inputs.

Other threats involve the juxtaposition of a protected area with others in the landscape, protected area size and the potential impacts of adjoining land use. The latter impact can be in both directions; for example, drainage of adjoining lands for pasture development will inevitably affect a wetland in a protected area. Fire is another threat and must be regarded as a likely event at some stage, with risk management strategies developed to deal with it. Pest animal and pest plant invasions from adjoining land are two definite and common threats, both of which often can be actively managed and prevented with mutual cooperation amongst land managers. Unauthorised taking of fauna and flora from protected areas continues as a real problem and can only be dealt with by regular patrol and surveillance. These are a clear cost of management.

RFA believes that most protected areas are safeguarded by legislation that prevents their resumption for other purposes. However, governments can change legislation, and in the event of such a change, we look forward to any concomitant resumption not furthering the rabbit problem.

Permitted access arrangements for mineral resources exploration and extraction is another potential threat, but can be a potential financial benefit for a protected area provided it is well managed and the range of values are known and can be safeguarded.

The responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans

We have already referred to the importance of the management planning process in identifying values and attributes of protected areas and the need to implement those plans. In relation to long-term plans, we have also referred to the dynamic nature of natural systems and therefore it follows that protected area plans need to be reviewed to ensure they remain relevant. We suggest a maximum of 15 years for the life of a management plan before major review.

RFA wishes to promote the concept of long-term regional natural resource management (NRM) planning, into which a protected area plan should fit. The 'island' nature of most protected areas, whether terrestrial or marine, means that they are unlikely to exist and thrive in isolation from surrounding land uses and land impacts, including rabbit grazing. Some states and territories are

introducing NRM or catchment boards on a regional basis and these seem to be the most relevant governance arrangement by which long-term planning might be driven.

Regional NRM also has the advantage of involving the community in the region, which introduces an important governance element. RFA believes that private sector landholders, in particular, have an increasingly important role to play in contributing their knowledge and interest in the maintenance and enhancement of biological resources, both on their land and in protected areas. We see that governments have a real role in encouraging this sort of involvement and assisting moving away from the 'us and them' syndrome that has been seen in locations in which protected areas exist.

We also strongly believe that governments have an important role to ensure that continuing specific expertise is available for research and development of new management strategies, including rabbit control, and for promoting an awareness of both obvious and insidious (often recurring) threats — a loss of expertise is difficult to recover.

The record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas

RFA believes that governments have not been averse to the creation of protected areas, but have been less successful in providing the resources and arrangements for proper management, given the dynamics of and threats to such areas. We would encourage a more serious approach to the safeguarding of these resources; there are numerous examples of extinctions and serious losses of genetic resources, some of which are already lamented by the community and others of which the value is not yet known.

We emphasised, before, the existing and potential role of the community having greater involvement in the planning and management process to give greater certainty for the future of protected areas. We believe that while the acquisition of land to be held in public ownership is important, it will not of itself ensure the maintenance and enhancement of the conservation values the community will be looking for in the future. We believe that governments have a role in creating incentives to help landholders play a part in biodiversity conservation across the landscape, into which the protected areas are an integral part. We strongly encourage this inquiry to focus on how landholders, in general, might be better engaged to assist this process, as we assert that governments alone will not be successful in meeting this need. We are highly conscious that private resources, including available labour, are diminishing in rural areas which can decrease private landowners' capacity to implement any required control measures — a situation which governments should take into consideration with any incentives.

Further comment

Many of RFA's views are encapsulated in Recommendation 39 (p.161) of the Commonwealth's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry inquiry into the impact on agriculture of pest animals, "Taking Control: a national approach to pest animals" (2005). This recommendation centres on:

- the need for pest animal control obligations to be the same for both government land managers and private landholders, and the obligations to be enforced against government land managers,
- encouraging governments to commit adequate funding for management, including pest animal (rabbit) control, of government-owned and controlled land, and
- the need for future declarations of national parks and wilderness areas to be made only after management needs for the land have been assessed and adequate funds have been set aside for that purpose.

The recommendation goes on to make Australian Government environment funding to states and territories conditional on them achieving agreed targets for control of pest animals on government land.

In brief, this recommendation arose from overwhelming evidence presented to the Committee that pest animals are not being controlled properly on government land, including state forests and national parks — lack of or inadequate funding seemed to be the major cause identified for the poor record of control of pest animals (would certainly include rabbits) in national parks and conservation reserves.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if the Committee wishes to discuss RFA's views further.

We wish the Committee well with this much needed inquiry and look forward to their final report.

Dr Peter G Allen
Chairman
Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc
23 February 2006

Attachment 1: Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia Inc. Strategic Plan 2005-2010.