

Submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas, by Dr Paul Richard Williams. 26 February 2006.

I make this submission as a private Australian citizen. All comments are my own and not that of any organization to which I belong or by whom I am employed. I wish to make it clear that I am an employee of Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and have been for the last 10 years. I am based in Townsville and my role involves undertaking vegetation and fauna surveys to evaluate management programs on national and conservation parks and resource reserves in north Queensland. I also assist with the implementation of fire, weed and rare species management programs on parks. My submission primarily refers to national parks, conservation parks and resource reserves of Queensland, under the management of QPWS. It is based on my observations through three avenues:

1. as an employee of QPWS;
2. through my field work as a post graduate student and subsequently as an adjunct lecturer with James Cook University;
3. through my bushwalking experiences undertaken as a private citizen.

Senate Committee Inquiry into 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:

a. the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;

In my opinion, the primary values of Australia's national parks are the habitats, and associated native fauna and flora, which occur within those parks. Many parks also have cultural values. The primary objective of national parks is to ensure habitats are maintained in good condition (i.e. with high native species diversity, limited impacts from exotic species and the continuation of ecological processes, such as appropriate fire regimes and hydrological cycles in wetlands) so that sustainable populations of the native species are protected within those parks. National parks should also be a venue for all Australians and their visitors to experience the Australian bush.

b. whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;

I consider "resources" to cover financial as well as ensuring that adequate staff time and equipment are allocated to meet those objectives. I do not believe our government is providing adequate resources to ensure appropriate management of park values or to meet the primary park objectives. There has been an increase in the level of funding to park agencies and this is to be commended. However, I believe that too high a proportion of the funding is absorbed by administration and bureaucracy, while too little is converted into on ground actions. For example, over the last few years QPWS

management have implemented a practice of keeping a 7 or 8% vacancy rate. To achieve this, back filling of staff on leave is kept to a minimum and delays are made before replacing staff after they leave, so that an overall 7 or 8% vacancy in positions is accounted for during the year. Unfortunately, in my experience, upper and middle management positions are rapidly filled, even backfilling while management staff are on short term leave, while on ground positions are kept vacant for longer periods to meet the required vacancy rate. The vacancy of on ground positions considerably inhibits our ability to manage parks appropriately.

A second example of where funds could be spent more effectively is through the QPWS Pest Initiative funding. A large amount of funds have been secured for controlling weeds and feral animals and it has without doubt resulted in some excellent control of pests on parks. Unfortunately, strict limits on the use of those funds have meant they could not always be spent in the most effective way. For example, initially (2004/05 financial year) no assets were allowed to be purchased with those pest initiative funds. This rule has subsequently been relaxed this year so that no assets can be purchased above a certain level (\$5000 I believe is the limit). This rule has inhibited the use of those funds to purchase important weed control equipment, such as herbicide units (“QuickSpray units”) that can be mounted on the back of a utility enabling large areas to be sprayed. The rule also inhibited the use of pest initiative funds to contribute to a vehicle washdown facility, which is essential for stopping weed spread and is an action promoted by the Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water. The rules controlling the use of the pest initiative funds also stop the funds being used to employ casual or temporary labour to help undertake the pest control work. The biggest factor limiting weed and feral animal control is the available labour – that is, skilled people spending time in the field undertaking and evaluating the control work. The rules for using the QPWS Pest Initiative funding state that only contractors can be funded to assist rangers. This is a problem because contractors cost considerably more per day than casual ranger staff, so that considerably less pest control work can be achieved using the same level of funds. There can also be limited contractor options available for many remote parks, and herbicide sprayers inside a national park must be skilled and competent – something difficult to ensure if contractor options are limited.

I believe there is a push in QPWS management for de-staffing some remote parks in Queensland. That is, moving staff who live on a remote park and making them work out of a base in a town. This naturally reduces the amount of time spent working on the park, implementing weed, feral animal and burning operations. It also increases the cost of transport back to and from a park and increases the strain on rangers and their families, as the ranger then has to be away from their then town-based families, when back on the park. The primary reason for de-staffing parks is the cost of maintaining housing on parks. This is therefore a resource issue, although I do not believe there is clear evidence that money would be saved by moving rangers off parks.

A high proportion of rangers’ time is spent maintaining visitor infrastructure (i.e. camp grounds and walking tracks). While visitor infrastructure is very important and must be maintained, its maintenance currently occurs at the cost of limited habitat management. Increased resources are needed to be able to manage both visitor infrastructure as well as the habitats, for which visitors come to see.

c. any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;

The primary threats to the values and objectives of national parks in Queensland are the potential for inappropriate fire management, and negative impacts by weeds and feral animals and also potential visitor impacts.

Appropriate fire management in Queensland requires considerable time and effort. Considerable time is required to ensure sufficient early dry season, low intensity burns are implemented to protect human life, property and fire-sensitive habitats. Early dry season burning also creates a patchily burnt landscape considered critical for many fauna and to help contain more intense burns later in the year. Adequate implementation of early dry season burns, in March to June, has been inhibited in the past by insufficient ranger time, as rangers have been caught up doing other work, particularly maintaining visitor infrastructure. Aerial ignition is a valuable means of implementing burning programs in remote locations and currently insufficient funds are available for that. Funds for overtime for rangers are usually not available, so that planned burning programs are put off or implemented too quickly, or too early in the day.

There is currently insufficient ranger time allocated to implementing weed and feral animal management on parks. As discussed in section “b”, increased available funding for weed and feral animals has been provided to QPWS, however the primary limiting factor in weed and feral animal control is labour, and the increase in funds is not available to be spent on casual, temporary staff.

Another potential threat to the management of national parks is if upper management did not continue to remain focused on clearly identified objectives and firm in its agreed management actions when under criticism from the public. For example, a minor number of people complain forcefully about the implementation of carefully planned and approved fires in eucalypt forests. It would threaten the sustainability of habitats (and reduce protection to life and property) if upper management did not continue to provide firm support to on-ground staff who implement approved burning operations on the park estate.

d. 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;

I believe it is the state and federal park service agencies’ responsibility for ensuring the preservation of core conservation areas across the country. It is essential these protected areas are well managed. This system of reserves needs to be complemented by conservation on private land. It is my opinion that QPWS is not fully meeting its responsibilities for managing habitats and fauna and flora on its parks (as outlined above). There is currently little effort going into evaluating and reporting back on the condition of parks, specifically the distribution, abundance and impacts of weeds and feral animals and whether park management programs are achieving their desired outcomes of maintaining healthy native ecosystems.

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

The management of Queensland parks has both successes and less successful results. In my opinion, the demonstrated improvements have usually resulted from the initiative and dedication of rangers. Some demonstrable successes include:

- Reduced weed abundance (especially Lantana, Grader grass and Sicklepod) in Girringun (Lumholtz) National Park;
- Reduced Parkinsonia infestation at Moorrinya National Park;
- Protection from wildfire damage to fire-killed lancewood forests using early dry season aerial ignition programs at Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park.
- Reductions in the weed rubbervine at Porcupine Gorge and coastal sections of Bowling Green Bay National Park.

Examples of where QPWS' record has not been so successful include:

- The wetlands of the Townsville Town Common Conservation Park have become degraded by the weed Para grass, since gazetted as an environmental park around 1980. The exotic Guinea grass has increased in some dry woodlands of the Town Common, therefore reducing native plant diversity and putting the dry rainforest patches at risk from high intensity fire.
- The health of some ecosystems of the Mt Elliot section of Bowling Green Bay National Park has declined over the years through limited resources allocated to manage the weeds Molasses grass, Grader grass, Guinea grass and Lantana.
- Patches of dry rainforest at Forty Mile Scrub National Park have been damaged by lantana invasion and repeated fires burning into these scrubs.
- The abundance of the exotic pasture grass, Buffel, which out competes many native grasses and herbs, has expanded in some parks. These include Dalrymple and Moorrinya National Parks. Buffel grass has fuelled intense fires that have killed gidgee trees in Mazeppa National Park.