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Senate Inquiry - National Parks

The Main Purpose of National Parks – The Protection of Nature and Biodiversity – National Parks in the National Reserve System

Queensland is recognised nationally and internationally for its outstanding biodiversity, currently less than 5% in extent and fewer than 70% of Regional ecosystems are protected – clearly this is inadequate.

The National Reserve System or NRS is the main vehicle for meeting Australia's obligations to protect native biodiversity under the Convention on Biological Diversity 1992 (CBD).

Biodiversity means more than just a big list of species; it also means diversity at higher levels, ecosystems and communities, and below the species level – including subspecies and natural levels of genetic diversity.

All National Parks and protected areas in Queensland and other states, as well as Commonwealth areas and even freehold reserves may qualify for inclusion in the National Reserve.

Once in the NRS, Australia can count the area protected toward targets for meeting its international biodiversity protection commitments. One key target is to protect 10% of all plant ecosystems by 2010.

Queensland is not even halfway there yet.

The huge shortfall in meeting biodiversity commitments tempts bureaucrats to try to weaken criteria and inflate the numbers to pretend to the world we are doing a great job of meeting biodiversity commitments. This undermines any justification for working harder and budgeting more money to create new National Parks and build a meaningful National Reserve.

Criteria

The NRS “Directions Statement” lists six criteria for inclusion of an area in the NRS:

1. must be especially dedicated for the primary purpose of protection and maintenance of biological diversity
2. must fit the one of the six Protected Area Categories of the IUCN*
3. must be managed by legal or other effective means with effective security of purpose
4. must contribute to the comprehensiveness, representativeness and adequacy of the National Reserve System
5. must be managed in a manner, which is open to public scrutiny
6. must be able to be accurately identified on maps and on the ground

The prevailing CAR approach or “comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness” for native biodiversity in the reserve system have been criticised as inadequate to protect biodiversity. There is a need for large core areas, broad connectivity and restoration. With the threat of global climate change comes the need for “over-design”: for landscape-scale protection, emphasising connectedness and ecosystem resilience to give native animals and plants a buffer against potential changes in conditions.

Another key criterion left out of the CAR framework is ongoing natural ecological and evolutionary processes.

Although National Parks provide a cornerstone for conservation of biodiversity, currently some National Parks may not meet NRS criteria, which are specifically for biodiversity protection.

Paul Sattler in a paper in press with the Royal Society journal used the 2002 data from the National Land and Water Resources Audit to develop a “report card.” Queensland rated a C for comprehensiveness, D for extent and C for standard of management of protected areas. This placed Queensland one up from the bottom among all states and territories.

The Commonwealth Natural Heritage Trust, since it began in 1996, it has been expending 95% of its money at natural resource management (NRM- comprising Landcare, Bushcare, Coastcare, and regional NRM programs), leaving just 5% for building the National Reserve System.

Unfortunately the NHT has done no analysis of cost effectiveness to justify this decision. Rather it has simply assumed that NRM is a better approach than NRS despite scientific opinion to the contrary.

Renowned tropical ecologist John Terborgh recently noted the lack of science that supports the worldwide trend away from “hard” reserves toward “soft” options like private reserves and “sustainably managed” lands. Other studies have shown private land conservation to be less efficient than public lands for biodiversity protection.

So where are the data to show that expending money at improved management is more effective at conserving biodiversity than creating hard reserves? This is not to say better land and sea management is not needed or not valuable. In many cases it may be the only option. The question is if the NHT should be spending so much of its budget on resource management instead of its core mission of building the National Reserve.

How well has the NRS served Queensland?

According to CAPAD, the Collaborative Australian Protected Area Database, 3.9% of Queensland's land area was in highly protected reserves in 2002, the last release. This was only 0.3% above the 1997 figure of 3.6%. There are several reasons why this may overstate the reality, but the big one is that 56 National Parks are open to fishing. So at a minimum, the areas fished should be subtracted, as they are not highly protected.

CAPAD also listed 54% of state marine waters in highly protected areas. Again this is overstated. The three main questionable inclusions are "Dugong Protection Areas" where net fishing can still operate; "fish habitat areas" where fishing is actually encouraged and Marine Parks where only less than 5% of area was in Marine National Park or highly protected zones in 2002. The rest was open to fishing and other extractive uses. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park has since jumped that figure up to 33%, over combined Commonwealth and state waters. The Great Sandy Marine Park is proposed with less than 5% and Moreton Bay only has about 1% in highly protected zones.

As mentioned only 5% of Natural Heritage money goes to the National Reserve. Of that 5% only 10% has gone to Queensland. This has brought in some new National Parks, but 20% could be considered a more appropriate proportion for Queensland. And a proportion of 50% + NHT funds, not 5%, should be expended on building NRS

Of course just land area alone is no indication of how successful the reserve is at protecting biodiversity. The figures for regional ecosystem protection in Queensland are not encouraging.

Management and Staffing of National Parks

Despite increases in funding there appears to be deterioration in staffing and management due to policies implemented;

Destaffing and base closures in parks are having a detrimental impact on National Parks throughout Queensland. In our area, the National Parks of Tamborine Mountain are visited by over 1 million people per annum, and this number is growing as tourism and local population expands. QPWS formerly maintained a base on Tamborine Mountain but this has now been closed and replaced by flying squads based a considerable distance away. This is an ineffective system, ironically as the increase in visitation demands more on ground QPWS ranger presence this demand has been met by staff decline rather than staff increase. As a result NP maintenance, inappropriate NP use continues to increase.

This is not merely a matter of funding. Poor staff morale, staff turnover and an unhealthy organisational climate are evident.

There is a need for on ground staff that can only be met by directing funds to rangers not more centralised bureaucrats, consultants and PR publications.

Valuing National Parks

Undoubtedly National Parks are a significant attraction and contribute greatly to the Queensland economy. However the principal purpose of National Parks is to protect nature and biodiversity. Any valuation exercise has to emphasise non-market values of protected areas.

Exploitation of National Parks - Tourism

There is increasing pressure from commercial tourism to exploit National Parks in ways that threaten the integrity of the parks. Well-regulated minimal impact recreation is compatible with the primary purpose of National Parks, other activities such as resorts, fishing competitions and trail bikes are not and should be totally prohibited. Although National Parks attract local and international tourists, government funds appear to be spent freely on tourism but not on the National Parks, which are promoted as attractions and draw tourists to the state and regions.

Exploitation of National Parks - Activities

Expanding population of residents and tourists are placing more recreational pressures on National Parks. There is also anecdotal evidence of activities such as illegal trapping and collecting of flora and fauna. Particularly in high growth areas more recreational parks are required to cater for recreational demands. Greater ranger presence in the National Parks is required to protect the parks, visitors and to enforce legislation.

What should be done?

- Commitment by all governments to meet Convention targets by 2010.
- Revise NRS criteria to include connectedness, resilience to climate change and ongoing ecology and evolution.
- An audit of inclusion of all types of reserves in the NRS to ensure criteria are being met.
- An audit of NHT funding for comparative cost effectiveness of NRM versus NRS dollars in meeting biodiversity protection obligations.
- Shift NHT priorities back to the core business of building the National Reserve, devoting at least 50% of budget to acquisition, and 20% of that to Queensland (That is \$30 million per annum) on a 2:1 matching basis with partners (state, local government, land trusts).
- A State Government acquisition budget of \$15 million per annum to match the approx \$30 million that should come from the Commonwealth.
- Increase in State Government funding to develop firm standards for Park management budgets, roll out management plans, and improve park management to “A” level.
- Phase out fishing and all other “non-conforming” uses in National Parks or at least report the real level of protection accurately.