

**Toyota Land Cruiser Club of Australia,
Sydney**

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into

**“Australia’s National Parks,
conservation reserves and marine
protected areas”**

Submitted by: Aidan Cashman
President
Toyota Land Cruiser Club of Australia, Sydney

Introduction

The Toyota Land Cruiser Club of Australia, Sydney (TLCC) was founded in 1969 with a current membership of approximately 1700 individual members, making us the largest 4WD club in Australia. The majority of our members are from the Sydney region but we also have members stretching from Newcastle in the north, Bathurst in the west, Wollongong in the south and also some members from the ACT. We also own our own properties, which we use for some of the club activities, which include Driver Training for all members and various other training courses. We promote four wheel driving as a legitimate recreational activity, and promote the "Tread Lightly" policy to our members and the general public.

Background of the TLCC

Since the clubs beginning we have been actively involved in cleaning up the environment. For example, at Kurnell on 21st March 1976, 120 vehicles participated in the clean-up of the area surrounding Boat Harbour for the *Save Kurnell Committee*. Since this time the Club has continued to assist in clean-up activities at Kurnell, Camperdown Cemetery, Joadja, Stockton Beach, Lucas Heights, Woronora Weir, Wombeyan Caves Road, to mention just a few. We also regularly remove dumped and wrecked cars from the bush for the Wingecarribee Shire Council. We have also been active with land issues, such as N. P. and W.S. Draft Plans of Management, Wilderness Proposals, Crown Lands and Forest Land Usage, Coastal Policies, track access and closures etc.

The TLCC also does a lot to promote access to the bush for all and sharing the joy of travelling in the outback. These include:

- In 1988, the Club took 50 cadets from the 'Tall Ships' on a day trip into the Australian Bush.
- In 1994, taking 10 wheelchair people, along with a medical back-up team, on a trip to Central Australia, Kakadu and Central Queensland was a major event and most successful.
- The *Swiss Paralympic Team Australian Experience* occurred late in October 2000. This consisted of three days when 38 members of the Swiss Paralympic Team were hosted by the Club and transported in members' vehicles for a day in the bush.

The mains aims of the club are:

- To continue to foster the 4WD movement,
- To strive for access, and
- To provide for the recreational needs of our members whilst looking after our environment for future generations.

As part of the TLCC's ongoing commitment to educating our members and for caring for the environment, we provide driver training, of the highest standard, to all our members. As a result the N S W Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board approved the Club's driver training course, Modules 1, 2 and 3 in 1998, and in 2001 VETAB gave the approval for the Club to be listed as a Registered Training Organisation.

4WD Recreation

As 4WD enthusiasts, we are very aware of the environment that we travel through, and do everything in our power to minimise any impact we have on it. As the 4WD vehicle has come more popular over the last decade or so it has seen a growth in the number of people travelling to the remote areas of Australia. Every one who owns a 4WD has their own reasons for ownership, but the main reasons our members own 4WD's are:

- So they can get out and see parts of Australia that it is just not possible to see, safely, by any other means.
- Family time together, exploring new places and experiences.
- Seeing Australia, travelling to remote parts of Australia to see what it is really like away from the cities and exploring this great country.
- Conservation, while most of our members may not be what is referred to as "Greenies", we all do care for the environment and want to both see it as it is, and also preserve it for our children and grandchildren.
- The challenge of going off the graded road. Most 4WDers like to go to places that you can't go in a normal vehicle as they are quieter places to visit and we enjoy the driving and camping experience.

As modern lifestyles have become busier and with more pressures, more people are turning to the bush to get a break from the pressures of modern life. Travelling to National Parks and other public areas to get away from these pressures, even if only for a few hours, is how many people find relaxation.

Consideration of the Terms of reference

Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas are part of the Australian identity, and some of its greatest assets that require sustaining and protecting. However this should not just mean locking off large areas of the bush and closing all access to them. There is no benefit in having large areas protected if only the elite few can actually enjoy them, i.e. national parks staff and some bush walkers. After all the entire system of parks and conservation areas are funded by all Australian taxpayers.

The closure of large areas of the National parks to public access and the expansion of National parks over Forestry land has resulted in fewer places for people to access the bush. While the closures are aimed at preserving the bush, it is actually having the opposite effect on the few tracks that are remaining open, as they then get more use and less chance to regenerate. This ends up being a vicious circle of areas being closed due to over use, only to end up putting more pressure on the remaining open areas. The best way to remedy this situation is to open up some of the closed areas and cycle through the areas closing some for a few years to let them regenerate and open others for access.

Over the years it has appeared that it is easier to just close off large areas then try and do any effective usage management. This has appeased the vocal "greenies" but only alienated the conservative majority by excluding them from areas they like to visit.

Some of the problems with the close and forget process that has been taking place, and are now beginning to be highlighted, are the large bushfires that have been a feature of the summers for the last few years. There is now a large amount of regenerated bush that has become inaccessible due to the fire trails becoming overgrown and as a result it is not possible to gain access to them in emergencies. This means fires can burn longer before the RFS can access the area to try and contain it. There is also a weed infestation in many of these Wilderness areas, as there appears to be no effective management of the areas to control weeds or feral animals.

From speaking to many of the national parks staff that patrol the parks, they are short staffed and under funded for the work they need to do. Yet when we, the TLCC, as a club offer to help with keeping tracks and fire trails open, we are not allowed access as the senior management of the National Parks object to it. There are a large number of people, both in our club and other 4wd related clubs, which are more than willing to get involved and assist with the maintenance of tracks within the national parks and with other activities in the national parks. However, there appears to be no support for type of proactive assistance by the senior management of the National Parks service. The only state that seems to have embraced the idea of working with volunteers from the 4WD movement is Western Australia via CALM's. From what I have read and heard they are making great strides in the maintenance of tracks and keeping areas open and have a positive working relationship between the users of the park and those who manage it. If this approach was embraced by the National parks staff, particularly in NSW, VIC and QLD, where there seems to be a "them and us attitude", it would go a long way to improving the relationship between the users and the managers.

The members of the 4WD movement, and particularly the TLCC, have been heavily involved in assisting the local community with clean ups, active RFS members, etc. There is a large pool of willing and able volunteers with a wide range of experiences that are willing to provide assistance. But all that is asked in return is access to areas that will allow us to enjoy our chosen recreational activity. One of the reasons given for not allowing volunteers to assist with work in the National Parks is that there is a public liability issue. But by making use of members of 4wd clubs, this is not an issue, as the TLCC and all clubs who are members of the 4WD Association in their respective state, have full public liability cover and also most have voluntary workers insurance as well.

If the parks management are not willing to open the closed areas of the parks to all users, as there is always an irresponsible element in the general public, then maybe they would be willing to open them on a controlled basis to members of 4WD clubs. This way they know which group is using the areas and also know that the members of the clubs have a respect for the environment and are accountable for their actions.

There are many areas, particularly around Sydney, and the other metropolitan areas, that have been closed off over the last decade or so. If some of these areas were reopened, even with controlled access, they would reduce the wear and tear on the tracks that are currently open. It would also provide access for emergency services when needed. The amount of environmental damage caused as a result of a bushfire or other natural disaster far out weights any that can be done by a four wheel drive vehicles. By opening up fire trails the impact of a bushfire may be reduced by increasing the ability of the RFS to access it closer to the source.

Over the last decade there has been a large increase in the number of national parks, particularly in NSW, but no significant increase in the funding of the parks. This has resulted in the majority of them being declared a National Park and then immediately turned into wilderness areas or closed off for conservation. It seems to be easier to just not allow any activity to take place in the parks rather than manage the use of the parks. This has alienated a lot of people who may previously have enjoyed these areas and now find they can't even enter them.

There is allowance for bush walkers to enter areas on foot, yet to get to the most scenic areas requires a person of above average fitness and also may take a number of days to walk in and out, so a large amount of gear is needed to be taken with them. These actions actually excludes the vast majority of people as they are either not fit enough or don't have the time to allow them to do the hike. Yet if the fire trail that is already exists was opened and vehicle access allowed on the existing track, it would have very little impact on the wider area away from the access road. Obviously, during certain periods the area could be closed to vehicles to prevent erosion after bushfires or heavy rain.

The lower number of visitors to many areas around closed/locked National Parks and wilderness areas has a detrimental effect on the local communities. Tourism is a very big industry for many of the small towns in the bush, even ones close to cities, and any action that reduces the number of visitors passing through the area can have a very large negative effect on the local community.

Summary

The best way to improve the National Parks and other conservation areas in Australia is to begin opening up these areas rather than closing them up and locking them away. To assist with the management of these areas, the management of the National Parks service should look at utilising the large and willing volunteer groups that exist within the 4WD movement. The TLCC is a large club with a long proven history of caring for the environment and assisting local communities with environment projects. Being a club we also have good control over the actions of our members and as a result there is control over any unruly or destructive behaviour. For some reason four wheel drivers have been given a very poor image and this seems to have been branded on the majority even though only a very small minority (similar to any other group) is responsible for it.

We would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide comment and feedback on the future direction of National Parks, conservation reserves and marine parks. We look forward to the outcome of this inquiry and hope that we will be allowed the chance to assist with the work in the parks and reserves. It is time for a new era of co-operation to help out with the caring for the environment, rather than the current lock and forget approach.