

# **SNOWY MOUNTAINS BUSH USERS GROUP INC.** (“SMBUG”)

## *Protecting our Mountain Heritage*

3 March 2006

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

Dear Sir/ Madam,

### RE- INQUIRY INTO NATIONAL PARKS

SMBUG was established in December 2003, and is an incorporated not- for- profit voluntary organization, formed by citizens concerned with the management of KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK (“KNP”).

We are a practical conservation group whose aim is to protect our mountain cultural heritage, our mountain traditions and the mountain environment.

Our mission is to achieve our right to freedom of access to KNP for sustainable recreational use by current and future generations.

We are responsible recreational users of KNP. Our membership continues to grow and now exceeds 900. In addition we have a very strong support base as evidenced by the 9,000 letters and petitions with 4,000 signatures that accompanied our response to the Draft Plan of Management for KNP in August 2004(gathered over 3 weeks). We know that there are many, many more stakeholders out there that we did not reach due to the time constraints.

The majority of our membership reside within a 250 kilometre radius of KNP and includes horse riders, walkers, fishermen, skiers, campers, 4wd enthusiasts, trail & mountain bike riders and of course people who once lived or worked in the mountains. We use the park as a meeting place with family and friends and to enjoy all that the magnificent Snowy Mountains have to offer.

Please note that this submission is confined to KNP, which encompasses 690,000 ha, is the largest national park in NSW and one of the largest conservation reserves in Australia. We are sure our comments will apply equally to other national parks and conservation reserves throughout Australia.

Following the Senate terms of reference we provide our comments:-

## FUNDING AND RESOURCES

We do not have the capacity or skill to research and interpret NSW finances. Nor do we know if separate income and expenditure figures are available for KNP. We do know that KNP is quite unique within NSW because of the income generated from winter access to the ski fields( 660,000 visitors per annum), Alpine Resort Zone lessees, Snowy Hydro Limited etc.

In reviewing the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) Report (“DEC”) “State of the Parks 2004” (page 23) it states “ Within the last decade the NSW park system has grown extensively with 354 new parks and 449 additions to existing parks since March 1995. These additions represent an increase to the park system of 2,114,839 hectares, or around 50%, in less than 10 years. As at 31 December 2004 the NPWS managed 661 parks with a total area of 5,986,921 hectares or 7.4% of NSW.” The report also states on page 15 “The recurrent allocation per hectare has also increased substantially over the past 9 years, rising from \$95 million to \$211 million in 2004/05. This represents a more than doubling in the amount of funding for every hectare in the park system over this period”. Page 9 of the report also states “NPWS has 1,503 staff employed”.

What the Senate Committee will need to investigate is whether or not \$35 per hectare is an appropriate amount of funding and one staff member for every 4,000 hectares is adequate and how these figures benchmark against other states and worlds best practice

From our viewpoint it is obvious that NPWS is coping poorly with the area now under their management control if KNP is any indicator. We will enlarge on this further into our submission under fire, weeds and predator feral pest animals.

## VALUES AND OBJECTIVES

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, Section 30E, as amended in 2001 states “that the purpose of reserving land as a national park is to identify, protect and conserve areas containing outstanding or representative ecosystems, natural or cultural features or landscapes or phenomena that provide opportunities for public appreciation and inspiration and sustainable visitor use and enjoyment”.

We concur with NPWS that “the values of KNP are of two types: the core values of natural and cultural heritage, and the derived values (ie. social, recreational, tourism and economic values) that depend on these core values”.

From the above we deduce that the three key pillars for the management of KNP can be summarised as **conservation, heritage and recreation**. NPWS in their management of KNP should give equal weight to each pillar not favour conservation to the detriment of heritage and recreation which they have done for the last 20 or so years.

For example in 1944 when the Kosciusko State Park (later to become KNP) was declared it consisted of 518,000 hectares, to-day 690,000 hectares an increase of 33% over 60 years, which we have no

problem with. The alarming trend is however the Wilderness Zone within KNP, from 1988 declared wilderness has grown 1800% (18,000 hectares to approx. 350,000 hectares to-day).

This 19 fold increase in wilderness clearly demonstrates to what lengths a state government will go to pacify the extreme conservation groups and chase the green vote. No thought has been given to the fact that the public, other than walkers, are now excluded from 50% of KNP. The core value of providing opportunities for public appreciation and inspiration of natural or cultural features or landscapes is dismissed with the stroke of a pen.

The aged, disabled, young and families etc. are denied access to cultural heritage sites of significance.

KNP is public land, “the peoples park”(as is the case with all national parks), NPWS in NSW is the manager, not the owner. Our members report that there is a great deal of animosity between the community and NPWS because of their arrogant manner, ignoring community input and concerns and their inability to control what cascades out of KNP eg fire, weeds, pests.

NPWS management technique appears to be the “**lockout principle**” which means close it, prohibit access and forget about it. Unfortunately, wildfires, invasive weeds and predator pests know no borders.

SMBUG believes that the natural values of KNP have been compromised over the years when politically convenient, eg. the flooding of valleys, construction of dams, tunnels, roads and the installations associated with the Snowy Hydro-electric Scheme including telephone cables and towers, electricity lines, communication towers and trigonometric stations, the disappearance of townships, expansion of the ski fields and associated infrastructure etc. In our view the rampant increase in Wilderness Zones is some sort of trade-off.

Let us now look at the other two pillars which we believe have been seriously neglected:-

## **Cultural heritage**

We strongly believe in the preservation of both Aboriginal and European cultural heritage.

SMBUG members are distressed that since 1974 government through its agencies, DEC/NPWS has failed to place sufficient emphasis on the European cultural heritage in KNP.

By way of example lets look at-

### **Pastoral use**

European exploration of the area commenced in 1820's and by the 1830's permanent settlements had been established in the foothills of the high country and livestock were moved to mountain pastures each summer. By the 1850's most of the Australian Alps had been occupied by pastoralists, some on a seasonal basis only. In its heyday, some 250,000 sheep and 20,000 cattle grazed in what is now KNP. This increased to 500,000 sheep in drought conditions.

To facilitate this livestock grazing the pastoralists built homesteads, huts (we will cover this point in more detail further into our submission) and developed a network of bridle tracks and trails, some of which then grew into stock routes with associated travelling stock reserves or management and fire trails. With the formalising of grazing in 1880's came permissive occupancy leases, which resulted in much of the Alps being fenced.

In the SMBUG response to the 2004 Draft Plan of Management for KNP ("POM"), dated 14 August 2004, we detailed 25 such travelling stock routes and provided their identification numbers. NPWS has only acknowledged the existence of the 3 gazetted travelling stock routes known as Broken Cart, Farm Ridge and Barry Way which were managed by Pasture Protection Boards. In 1981 these 3 stock routes were revoked and the land returned to KNP. Since then NPWS has permitted, under licence, the limited movement of stock through KNP on what were basically the 3 revoked stock routes.

The POM now proposes to prohibit stock movement in KNP within 2 years of its gazettal. This is a major blow to the graziers still using these routes as a vital link between their high country and Riverina properties. Also in time of drought such access is critical.

Also in our response to the POM we provided a comprehensive listing of historic access tracks, bridle tracks and fire and management trails

Prior to wilderness zoning it was these tracks and trails that permitted horse riders to transverse KNP north/south and east/west unimpeded. The tracks were developed by stockmen moving stock to and from summer grazing pastures and the social interaction between those people occupying the huts and people from surrounding communities. A map detailing all the tracks and trails would take on the appearance of a spider's web. Clearly, European settlement of the Alps has left an unmistakable imprint on the landscape and we seriously question if this area ever genuinely qualified for wilderness zoning.

We strongly believe that these tracks and trails are of significant **heritage** and **historical** value and should be kept open and usable even though approx. 50% of them are within what is now wilderness zones.

It is our contention that **the succeeding generations should be permitted to retrace the footsteps of their forefathers by the same traditional means.**

## **Huts**

NPWS in their POM (page 78) states, "The Kosciuszko huts probably comprise the largest complex of different types of huts, constructed for the widest range of purposes, in any comparative area in Australia. Individual huts have considerable archaeological, social, historic or aesthetic significance, but the huts, ruins and huts sites have national historic, social and scientific significance as a complex". They then go on to say "many of the huts provide evidence for types of work that are no longer practiced or were part of a unique project, such as the Snowy Scheme" further on they say "most huts represent the labour and lives of pastoral workers, small-time prospectors and migrant workers and were used by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people"

On page 79 of the POM, NPWS quite openly admit that if there is conflict between environmental protection and the protection of cultural heritage, cultural heritage will come second. This again is an example of government chasing the green vote.

Many of our members and supporters have a direct generational link to these huts and they are incensed and feel disenfranchised that, if the hut is within a wilderness zone, access is prohibited to all except walkers. This immediately excludes the aged, disabled, the young and families

**It is our contention that if there is an existing bridle track leading to a particular hut then horse rider access should be permissible. If there are fire and management trails in existence then suitable vehicles, trail bikes, mountain bikes and horse riders should have access provided they stay on such trails.**

In the KNP Huts Conservation Strategy- Draft Report-May 2005, NPWS have provided a list of 133 hut sites, which corresponds with the list included in the Klaus Hueneke book "Huts of the High Country" published in 1982, although our members suggest that the number may have exceeded 200 or more in the 1950's.

Prior to the January 2003 fires there were approximately 82 intact huts and standing ruins, the fire then destroyed 19 (23%) of these, which means only 63 remain. Even though there is the possibility that 6 may be rebuilt the end result is a net loss of 13.

Our members report that during the last 25 years NPWS went through a phase of destroying a number of intact huts and standing ruins and removing from around them non-native trees, yards and out buildings to clear any evidence of European influence.

At Coolamine Homestead (built 1883, is recognised as one of the most significant historic precincts in KNP) some external restoration work has been carried out, however, the interior has been neglected. As a consequence the newspaper lining, which we believe is of significant historical value (pre World War 2) is falling off, eaten by rodents or being souvenired by visitors. These internal linings should be behind some form of protective glass.

Currango Homestead (1893) is another historic precinct and for some reason in the late 1940's the five stand shearing shed was removed. Why?

The old Court House at Kiandra is falling into a tragic state of disrepair. Kiandra township in the 1850's was home for some 10,000 miners and should have been re-established as an historic village.

### **Mining and Grave sites**

Prospectors followed in the tracks of the pastoralists and by the 1850's were combing the foothills and creeks of the high country searching for gold, copper, silver, lead and tin. In 1859 gold was discovered at Kiandra and within 12 months it was home for some 10,000 miners. There are some 40 separate mining sites within the mountains.

The Tumut Historical Society has identified 12 gravesites and there are records showing at least another 22 and there could well be more.

Mining and Gravesites are an integral part of our Aboriginal and European heritage and we believe NPWS should develop multi use heritage trails to these sites with freedom of access to all wishing to participate in the experience irrespective of their mode of transport.

## Survey sites

We know of instances where cairns, marking survey points on mountain peaks, in KNP have been destroyed by extreme conservationists who are pushing their wilderness barrow. To us it is the loss of another part of our European heritage.

## Summary

Whichever way you look at it the NSW state government has permitted the demise of much of our cultural heritage within KNP. Whereas, in the rest of the developed world, countries are going to great lengths to preserve their cultural heritage, and hand down the history/traditions etc from one generation to the next.

Your Inquiry should focus on how we best preserve what is left. We should be jealously guarding and promoting our history, traditions, pioneering spirit, mateship, fair play and all the things that make us uniquely Australian.

Surely, all these values are fully encapsulated in the “**legend of the Man from Snowy River**” which has contributed to a particular Australian sense of identity that we proudly showcased to the world in the opening of the 2000 Olympic Games.

## Access

The State government in restricting our right of access to over 57%, with the possibility of a further 3-6% in the latest POM, of KNP (walkers excluded) by wilderness zonings and specific exclusion areas is a major cause of aggravation between recreational users and NPWS.

This is fuelled by apparent inequitable treatment of certain user groups eg. NPWS has spent \$2.4 million repairing walker damage to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko with a further planned spend of \$7.6 million on the Main Range Walking Track. The Ski Resorts appear to benefit most from the \$250 million that the government recently announced it would spend in upgrading the infrastructure in KNP over the next 30 years.

Other recreational groups such as horse riders, 4wd, trail and mountain bike enthusiasts etc have not received one cent.

SMBUG believes that in order to promote and teach our unique heritage there should be the opportunity for this and future generations of Australians to actually experience on site the natural and cultural values. To see and feel the remoteness and the hardship that our forefathers endured in opening up this great land. The traditions, the skills and the innovation that was required to just survive. If we lose this we may as well call ourselves American as that would be the dominant cultural feature of our society.

It is simply not acceptable to just preserve objects and places of cultural significance without allowing people to experience the culture in situ for themselves.

**If the government had the will and desire to genuinely promote our cultural heritage a way could be found to permit access into wilderness zones.**

## **Recreation**

Recreation is a critical segment of a healthy lifestyle. In KNP we ask that recreational opportunities be given equal weighting as conservation and heritage. From recreation there is the flow on effect of tourism and economic benefit.

## **ARE GOVERNMENTS PROVIDING SUFFICIENT RESOURCES**

We are not equipped to answer this. The Inquiry will need to compare on a state by state basis and then benchmark to worlds best practice.

## **THREATS TO THE OBJECTIVES**

We believe the three major threats to be fire, weeds and predatory pest animals.

### **Fire**

The 2003 wildfires that ravaged KNP and the ACT were indeed a tragic event. In KNP, two thirds or 455,000 hectares, were consumed by a fire that destroyed everything in it's path- eg. heritage huts and sites, wildlife, vegetation, water quality and has contributed to major soil erosion. In Canberra four lives were lost, 500 homes and 160,000 hectares burnt.

In the last month or so we have seen similar wildfires, burning out of control in national parks and conservation reserves, in NSW, VIC, SA and Tasmania and breaking out and destroying farming and grazing land, stock and property, threatening human life, towns and villages.

All this is happening while bureaucrats, scientists and sociologists debate the merits of hazard reduction burns

The Aboriginal people knew the value of a slow cool burn to promote new growth of grasses to attract game. The European graziers in the high country also knew that controlled cool burns did not destroy the trees or wildlife. What these burns did was reduce fuel loads, (which prevented the intense wildfires which sterilise the soil), suppress the growth of shrubs, (which bare the soil around them and promotes erosion) and encouraged the greater growth of grasses.

Wildfires are totally devastating to the environment. It is now three years since the 2003 fires and KNP is still deprived of wildlife in any numbers.

As stated earlier we are a practical conservation group and our members can not see why the attitude to fighting fires on public land (national parks and reserves) should be any different to those on private land. For example on private land the absolute priority is to attack the fire and put it out in the shortest possible time thus minimising the damage. With public land there is bureaucratic indecision, red tape, lines of demarcation etc which often means it is hours or days before the first litre of water is put on the fire.

A wildfire is a wildfire is a wildfire, you put it out as soon as possible. We do not subscribe to the notion promoted by the extreme green movement that wildfires are a natural phenomenon and we can live with them. History shows us that mankind has done everything within its power mitigate against famine, flood, disease and fire.

This inquiry should investigate-

- the real cost of wildfires in national parks and conservation reserves in regard to damage to natural landscapes and cultural heritage, wildlife, flora and water quality
- the real cost to surrounding communities when the wildfire leaves the park
- the cost benefit of wildfire versus controlled burn to the environment, the community, resources and state finances
- the adequacy and condition of access and fire trails

## **Weeds**

SMBUG is particularly concerned with the lack of success by NPWS to eradicate/ contain weeds in KNP since assuming responsibility for the park in 1967.

The impact of weeds on the biological diversity of the park is the direct result of doing too little too late.

SMBUG members with close links to the mountains can testify that the weeds have proliferated since the termination of livestock grazing in 1972. They have never seen KNP in as bad a state as it is now. In particular the infestations of Blackberry, St John's Wort, Patterson's Curse, Thistle, Yarrow and Serrated Tussock are of major concern. The spread of Needle Bush (Hakea), on the Currango Plain and other frost hollows in the northern end of KNP, is out of control and is causing an imbalance between the native grass species.

We consider the Blackberry to be one of Australia's worst weeds, it is most invasive and in KNP it is quickly dominating river and creek banks and open bushland. Some of the worst areas are- Blowering Valley, Yarrangobilly River, Goobragandra River, a multitude of smaller creeks and Broken Cart Track.

If there were such a proliferation of Blackberry on private land the owner would be prosecuted to the hilt by the authorities.

The Blackberry is also having a disastrous effect on some native wildlife eg. kangaroos, wallabies and wallaroos, their last ditch defence against wild dogs is to seek refuge in water and they are having their access impeded or becoming strung up, either way they lose. Also the Blackberry is a safe haven for rabbits, feral cats, pigs and is choking out native vegetation.



This inquiry should investigate-

- why has the NPWS been so unsuccessful in their weed control compared to private landholders
- what is the cost to neighbouring communities
- the cost of weed control per hectare compared to the cost by private landholders

### **Predatory Feral Animals**

NPWS since assuming control of KNP in 1967 have had little success in eradicating/containing the predatory feral animals, which are all carnivores eg. wild dogs, foxes, cats, pigs and rats.

There has been widespread public comment regarding the ongoing wild dog problem in KNP. These dogs are having a catastrophic effect on both the native wildlife and the livestock of KNP's neighbours.

In our view, there appears to be a lack of commitment by NPWS to fix the wild dog problem. Either eradicate the dogs in total or build a fence that will keep them in and heaven help the native wildlife. NPWS talk of the restoration of the predator hierarchy seems crazy if it means these dogs are at the top of the food chain.

This inquiry should investigate-

- why private landholders can control these feral animals and it is not being done in national parks
- what is the cost to neighbouring communities of the damage done by these wild dogs
- what is the cost of feral animal control per hectare compared to private landholders

### **RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENTS WITH REGARD TO THE CREATION OF NATIONAL PARKS**

If the government cannot manage their national parks as well as the private sector manages its land, and in our view the results in KNP suggest this, then the government should refrain from adding to their park bank. They should then concentrate all their resources on fixing what they have.

### **RECORD OF GOVERNMENTS WITH REGARD TO THE CREATION OF NATIONAL PARKS**

NSW has certainly created some national parks in the last 10 years, 354 new ones and 449 additions, with the total number of parks now being 661 covering an area of six million hectares which is 7.4% of NSW.

This begs the question of how much productive land should be taken and converted to non-productive land. What is the economically sustainable level of funding for public land 10, 20 or 30% of NSW?

Recently, NSW government spent \$30 million acquiring a productive rural property called "Yanga Station" near Balranald to create another park.

Is this the act of a responsible government, when the public services of health, education, transport and policing are reported to be in a critical condition.

Also governments do not have a good record in the cost effective management of public utilities eg telephone, electricity, water, roads, railways etc

### **Funding of Conservation Groups**

It has been brought to our attention that the Federal Government is providing funds, in some form, to conservation groups-eg The Colong Foundation for Wilderness Ltd, The Wilderness Society, Total Environment Centre, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, The National Parks Association of NSW etc.

This enquiry should investigate-

- what funding is provided by either Federal or State Governments to such groups
- for what purpose
- look at the inter-relationships between such groups, the possibility of double dipping
- are they democratically structured, is the rank and file member truly represented

### **CONCLUSION**

This submission is based on comments from our members. What is clear is that it is not a rewarding experience to be a neighbour of KNP and will not be until such time as wildfires, weeds and wild dogs can be controlled to private landholder's standards.

We sincerely hope our submission will assist you in your Inquiry and would be happy to provide any additional information you may require.

For and on behalf SMBUG  
Clive Edwards, President.