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Introduction

The Inland Rivers Network (“IRN”) is a coalition of environment groups and individuals concerned about the degradation of the rivers, wetlands and groundwaters of the Murray-Darling Basin. It has been advocating for the conservation of rivers, wetlands and groundwater in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1991. Member groups include the Australian Conservation Foundation; the Nature Conservation Council of NSW; the National Parks Association of New South Wales; Friends of the Earth; Central West Environment Council; and the Coast and Wetlands Society.

IRN appreciates the opportunity to comment on the 2006 Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas. The submission focuses specifically on the value and importance of freshwater areas as an essential aspect within the protected area system, and highlights the need to substantially enhance freshwater protection to enable the system to be more appropriate and effective. To this end, IRN will generally address points (b) whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements; (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; and (e) the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Comments on the Protected Area System

An IUCN resolution passed at the World Conservation Congress (Bangkok November 2004) recognises the importance of protecting freshwater ecosystems and calls on all countries to establish protected areas for all freshwater ecosystems, including rivers, lakes, wetlands, estuaries and groundwater dependent ecosystems (see the box below for an extract of the resolution).

The World Conservation Congress at its 3rd Session in Bangkok, Thailand, 17-25 November 2004:

1. RECOMMENDS that all States:

(a) establish protected areas representative of all freshwater ecosystems, including but not limited to riverine, lacustrine, wetland, estuarine and groundwater dependent ecosystems, in cooperation with local communities and resource users, so as to safeguard the biodiversity of each of their freshwater ecosystems, and set targets for protection where useful and appropriate;

(b) establish their systems of freshwater protected areas within an integrated river basin management approach taking advantage of the full range of governance types;

(c) as part of their overall programs, establish viable freshwater protected areas, to ensure the inclusion of areas which meet the protection criteria for IUCN Categories I and II.

(d) that are parties to the CBD implement the targets adopted in the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas 'COP VII/28' February 2004, in relation to freshwater habitat, including the enhanced implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; and

(e) develop and implement national action plans on these issues.

2. RECOMMENDS that the World Commission on Protected Areas develop guidance on the application of the IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories in freshwater environments.

3. RECOMMENDS FURTHER that IUCN strengthens its work with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in order to facilitate better management and assessment, monitoring and reporting on freshwater protected areas, including through application of IUCN's Guidelines for Protected Area Management Category System.

IRN supports the protected area system as a critical tool in achieving Australia's biodiversity conservation goals. However freshwater ecosystems, including river channels, anabranches, wetlands, ephemeral lakes and

groundwater dependent ecosystems, continue to be a major gap within the protected area system. Urgent action is needed to protect and rehabilitate freshwater ecosystems across Australia. A national system of high conservation value freshwater areas should be developed, which is comprehensive, adequate (in particular protecting all elements of the ecological communities within them) and representative.

River and aquifer protection requires a range of tools reflecting the complexity of the issues facing riverine ecosystems. Developing a system of protected, high-conservation value freshwater areas is an essential plank in a good planning framework and would provide in-situ protection of areas from externally driven problems, as well as an opportunity to strengthen broader catchment management tools.

Recommendation 1

It is imperative that the protected area system includes high conservation value freshwater areas as a priority component for ensuring a comprehensive system.

Recommendation 2

That the attached IRN/Australian Conservation Foundation paper “*Vision for a Framework under the NWI for the Protection of High Conservation Value Freshwater Areas in Australia*”, proposal for be adopted as the mechanism through which the protected area system will be able to more comprehensively fulfil its obligations. The paper stresses the value of an overarching consistent framework to guide comprehensive protection and management of high conservation value freshwater areas.

Recommendation 3

IRN calls for a substantial funding program to be provided to enable DEH and relevant state and territory departments to address the gap in the protection of freshwater areas through developing a national framework and any necessary legislative and policy development.

Freshwater Protected Area Conference

The *Freshwater Protected Areas – new and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems in Australia* Conference was held in September 2004, Sydney (jointly hosted by WWF and IRN) and was attended by almost 100 people over two days, including highly respected key note speakers and practitioners of freshwater ecosystem management. The conference brought together a diversity of speakers and participants from around Australia, including farmers, fishers, conservation groups, Indigenous people, government officials from all jurisdictions and researchers.

The Conference consensus *Statement and Recommendations* set out a clear rationale for conserving freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value and aspects of a way forward. A copy of the summary brochure is attached.

Recommendation 4

That the Freshwater Protected Areas Conference Statement and Recommendations be considered when developing the freshwater component of the protected area system.