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(6 pages)

Waterbird Conservation Group



Committee Secretary, Senate Environment
Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee
Department of the Senate
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Canberra ACT 2600

PUBLIC COMMENT - INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PARKS, OTHER CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

d) Responsibilities of governments with regard to creation of and management of National Parks, other reserves and marine conservation zones:

Ownership of and responsibility for Australian National Parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas must remain in perpetuity with successive governments, with the Australian people. Governments, despite their deficiencies and limitations, make the most reliable environmental stewards of Australia's conservation estate. Any thoughts of giving control of the conservation estate away from the Australian people would be a dangerous step indeed. Private interests would be unregulated. Private interests constantly change, they are too often driven by self interest (destructive exploitation), and can so easily get out of hand, or in time, fall into the hands of terrorist bodies; they cannot be trusted.

Such a step would also be irreversible. Once sold a government is unlikely to be able to afford to buy the land back. Good environmental managers have a long term commitment and never make decisions or make changes that are irreversible.

A well run government is best placed to provide the necessary continuity, to ensure the provision of humanitarian, long term, broad, coordinated and cohesive planning strategies to meet the difficult environmental challenges of the coming years, the upholding of the conservation estate being pivotal in this regard.

Government investment of funding and resources in conservation and management of National Parks, other reserves and marine protected areas is the only lasting /enduring way of ensuring that public responsibilities are upheld

Conservation is a necessary condition for an equitable/ fair distribution of the country's living natural resources, and only governments can achieve this.

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Recent Government cut backs on resources and funding for our National Parks, reserves and marine protection areas are a serious backward step at a time when strategic government support and long term planning are paramount.

a) Values and objectives of Australia's National Parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas:

It is imperative that the necessary funding and resources needed to uphold the values and objectives of Australian National Parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, continue to be the responsibility of successive governments on behalf of the Australian people.

[Also d)] The values of Australian National Parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas are incalculable, they comprise our very life support systems. Healthy, intact ecosystems are the foundation of our social and economic structure and wellbeing, and always will be. Our ecosystems are our most precious asset, and they are irreplaceable - once destroyed; even using the most advanced ecological knowledge, the critical structures and functions of an ecosystem cannot be fully replicated or restored.

[Also b) and d)]: While on paper, current 'Objectives' give recognition to this understanding and the concomitant values, in practice deplorably insufficient funding and resources continue to hinder the means of achieving these Objectives. Insufficient funding hampers timely progress. Increased resources and funding are needed to uphold them, not less.

Savings that need to be included in the economic equation:

Essential life support services are provided by Australia's living natural resources, contained in our National Parks and reserves and protected areas *at a minimal cost*.

Mitigation: Vegetation zones of our National Parks and reserves systems act as carbon sinks, and help to mitigate Australia's unacceptably high contribution of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere.

Social costs: Conservation is a necessary condition for an equitable/ fair distribution of the country's living natural resources, and only governments can achieve this.

The cultural significance of these places - aesthetic, recreational, scientific and educational - make them enormously valuable.

The intrinsic worth of the country's parks and reserves and protected marine areas is beyond measure.

Intergenerational equity contained in our national parks is of inestimable value and must be ensured by successive governments.

Preventive medicine:

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Many human health problems are directly linked to environmental pollution, poor air quality etc. Such health problems are an enormous and very costly burden on our public health system. Our National Parks and reserves provide clean air and climate amelioration through transpirational cooling, healthy water catchments and many other vital services. *They provide a cost-effective, preventive means of securing public health, rather than a costly remedial one.*

Quarantine:

a) (and also b) Marine protected areas ensure precious fish stocks and their habitats are maintained. A great deal more funding is needed to further build and maintain high *quarantine* standards in Australia at all levels. To neglect this puts our country at great risk. National Parks and conservation reserves are an insurance against damage caused by invasion of exotic pests and diseases elsewhere.

Genetic stocks:

Australia's National Parks, reserves and marine protected areas are the natural repositories for an extraordinarily rich biodiversity by global standards, for the remarkable adaptive advantages bestowed on our flora and fauna in largely harsh, desert environments. Our precious natural genetic stocks need far greater protection from government.

Funding and resources are needed now, not when it may be too late:

The need to conserve, protect, restore and improve environmental values possessed by our National Parks, Reserves and marine protected areas has never been more critical than now in the 21st Century, and this need has grown very urgent indeed, eg due to declining/disappearing fish stocks, rapid decline of biodiversity, severe ecological disturbances and imbalances, loss of critical biomass among other things. Funding and resources need to be in place, and effectively and efficiently applied if our global society is to avert or at least ameliorate the potential impacts of the environmental crises that face us all. It is unacceptable that not enough decisive action is happening at the government level.

b) and d) Adequacy of government funding and resources, and responsibilities of government:

By cutting back, governments are not meeting their responsibilities. Governments are not yet providing sufficient funding and resources to meet 'Objectives':

Cutting back seems to be based on a faulty premise. Under the present system 99.9% of people are involved in projects which last for 5, 10 or 15 years at most, but responses to environmental issues invariably require *long term* commitments of 20 – 50 years, especially as issues are interconnected / interactive. Every time a short term project is concluded and staffing dismantled, valuable corporate memory is lost. Eg as with LCDC here in Western Australia.

Human-induced changes to the environment are increasingly complex and interactive, and when responses are inadequate or too slow, the outcomes can be increasingly

0892951890

consequential, eg greater frequency and severity of adverse weather patterns, irreversible salinity, pollution of groundwater and waterways.

With so many public service cuts in recent times we are heading towards a situation where public servants are being expected to do a lot more with a lot less resources - fewer public servants are being given more to do with less to accomplish good outcomes. This is not going to work. We should be increasing their input. There is a growing public perception that government servants in fields of science and the environment are being squeezed out. Why are they? By which members of government? The background for this needs to be made totally transparent, and subject to full media coverage and debate.

Cut backs are coming from both Commonwealth and State governments. *But Governments hold responsibility, not the public service.*

Greenhouse is a good example, the really serious effects will be felt in 30 years time, if not before. *Adequate Government support enables a long term result. By having long term government agencies in place the strength is there to achieve things. All the crucial matters are held together by the public service.*

Other examples are the Ramsar listings and World Heritage listings which take many years to happen and even after that management plans are still not done. With the parlous state of the environment a great deal more resources and funding are needed to speed up environmental protection and management before it is too late.

It is due to lack of resources that impediments continue to block the creation of National Parks and Reserves, and keep environmental problems festering. Eg A lot of commendable work being done by government employees working for a better environmental outcome, are constantly being stymied by impediments such as those thrown in their path by the Department of Industry and Resources.

The lack of an all-of-government approach stands in the way.

Those who suggest that technological fixes can be used to treat symptoms are seriously misleading the whole debate as technological fixes do not address the underlying *causes*. Technological fixes are invariably immensely costly, seldom lastingly successful, and should be avoided.

e) Record of governments with regard to creation and management of National Parks:

To their credit, successive Australian Governments have tended to show increasing determination and integrity in relation to creation and management of National Parks, other conservation and marine protected areas, as we would expect when scientific knowledge and community appreciation of the vital role of such places has greatly expanded, and when more and more the declining state of the environment demands it.

0892951890

However governments continue to be far too slow in responding, or incomplete in their responses, and far too weak/susceptible under pressure from industry and development groups to block creation of conservation parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas. This is totally unacceptable.

We have already drawn attention to the fact that recent changes and strange cut-backs to funding and resources in the public service and science areas are self-limiting, insidiously they are preventing good outcomes. Why is this happening?

Inefficient / ineffective use of government funding and resources:

Funds and resources could be far better managed if habitats could be given full protection by the immediate establishment of a comprehensive National Parks and reserves system, having effective management strategies in place which serve to stem the tide of species loss. Unquestionably this helps enormously to reduce and reverse the factors that trigger the decline of species, and assists with recovery.

Preservationist management can be inefficient when it focuses on a species that is already in dire straits. *It uses enormous amounts of money in an attempt to save a species but because it is crisis driven, it comes too late to make a difference and uses large amounts of scarce assets.*

The crisis driven response mode stems from legal considerations, where the principal tool for enforcing protection of endangered species does not require action until the species is already in serious trouble. By updating/adjusting our legal system (law reform), this could be avoided.

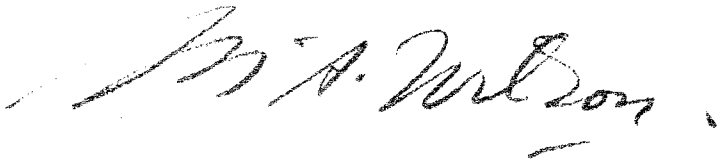
Proper regulation of exploitation of our living natural resources is also a means of decreasing mortality and consequent species loss through extinction.

c) Threats to the Objectives and Management of our National Parks other conservation reserves and marine protected areas:

Mining, unchecked and inappropriate development, greenhouse/climate change through clearing and loss of critical biomass, gross inadequacies in our current legal system, salinity, urban sprawl, pollution, biodiversity threats, feral animals, noxious weeds, exotic plants and dieback disease, inefficient water and energy use, corporate greed and self interest, rampant consumerism, widespread ignorance and apathy, ongoing impediments to change (as discussed above), and failure at various levels to take necessary steps towards adaptation.

These threats are rapidly increasing yet none are adequately resourced and funded. *There are no excuses - government must meet its state, national and international obligations and responsibilities without delay with regard to the above matters.*

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Margaret Wilson
(Secretary)
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