



Legislative Council Hansard (Extract)

National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (National Parks Volunteer Service) Bill

Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Thursday 28 September 2006.

Second Reading

The Hon. JON JENKINS [3.10 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I acknowledge the co-operation of Opposition members and Government members to enable me to put this bill on the table for a few days. The National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (National Parks Volunteer Service) Bill was drafted in response to the need for the Department of Environment and Conservation [DEC], the National Parks and Wildlife Service [NPWS] and the Department of Primary Industries [DPI] to respond with greater efficiency to the current difficulties posed by the problem of managing the vast areas of land under their control.

There are two diametrically opposed views in this respect. The first is the wilderness concept which is founded in a quasi-religious belief that humans are inherently evil and should be excluded as much as possible from the environment, and nature should be allowed to continue to evolve in the absence of human interference. The alternative is a pragmatic approach based upon the acceptance that man is and always has been an intrinsic part of the environment. The problem with the concept of wilderness is twofold. Firstly, since European settlement of Australia, literally hundreds of invasive weeds and feral animals have been introduced into the environment. These foreign invaders usually have no natural predators and, when combined with a high reproductive rate, have effectively obliterated our native flora and fauna.

In order to save many of our native species we need to intervene to control these feral pests until such time as our native species either adapt to reach equilibrium or we eradicate the feral species completely, the latter being a highly unlikely scenario. However, even neglecting the relatively recent interference in Australia's native ecosystems by European settlement, it is apparent that human beings in the form of the original indigenous inhabitants, had, over many thousands of generations, affected the ecosystem irreversibly. Whether this was by hunting of the mega-fauna or by continuous burning of the various ecosystems, Australia had adapted to a specific environment largely influenced by human behaviour. No true wilderness devoid of human activity has existed in Australia for at least 50,000 years and any attempt to reintroduce wilderness now, in the presence of overwhelming feral animals and weeds and in the absence of the traditional firestick behaviour of the Aboriginal people, will result in the extinction of many of our most precious native species.

The alternative pragmatic approach accepts the fundamental proposition that human beings have shaped the various Australian ecosystems in two stages: firstly, the arrival of the indigenous people with their hunting and burning techniques approximately 50,000 years ago; and, secondly, by the arrival of Europeans a few hundred years ago and the subsequent interruption of indigenous hunting and burning activities combined with the introduction of a whole host of feral plants and animals. Stated simply, the pragmatic approach is an acceptance that we cannot restore either the flora or fauna that pre-dated the arrival of the indigenous peoples. However, we can attempt to preserve the existing flora and fauna species as best we can to protect them from the threats presented by feral pests and by restoring the environment to as close a facsimile as possible to the one that existed prior to European settlement.

The first part is achieved by a combination of manpower in the form of weed and animal control and the second part is achieved by restoring the effect of the original firestick regime implemented by the Aboriginal people. Once we have accepted a pragmatic approach to managing our environment to preserve as much as possible of the current species the overall management strategy for our national parks becomes self-evident. When we further add in almost 50 per cent of the coastline of New South Wales and almost 10 per cent of the State overall it is equally evident that preservation and protection cannot be achieved without the willing co-operation of the community.

The cost to the community of maintaining this amount of estate by a professional paid service is simply unfeasible. The cost to maintain and manage our national parks estate to control feral animals and noxious weeds, proper bushfire management and the need for efficient management of an expanding reserve of marine parks and national parks in New South Wales would consume the whole of the budget for New South Wales. This bill proposes the creation of a volunteer service to assist the National Parks and Wildlife Service in its role as manager and caretaker of the national parks estate. I find it incredulous that no such service already exists. Almost every branch of government that interacts with the community has a professionally managed volunteer service—every branch, that is, other than the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I suggest to honourable members that this is not accidental and that this policy of exclusion has been deliberately implemented or promoted at the behest of fundamentalist and extremist green ideologues under the guise of conservation when

in fact it is a wilderness concept.

The establishment of volunteerism in our country will help forge a stronger sense of national identity and strengthen our national solidarity. A report by the National Opinion Centre entitled "National Pride in Cross and Temporal Perspective" has found that of the 33 nations surveyed Americans and Venezuelans lead the world in national pride, with the United States of America as the nation with the leading score. It is no coincidence that America also has the highest rate of volunteerism in the world. While some countries have forged their national identities through conflicts, which have served to bind people together, I suggest it is also a result of the American way of volunteering that has contributed to its strong national identity. "Take Pride in America and the National Park Service" is a national campaign to encourage Federal, State and local public and private partnerships, and volunteer service organisations, to protect public parks, recreation areas and natural and cultural resources.

The United States National Park Service has an active role in this initiative to encourage citizens to dedicate time and service to support and protect the resources and facilities in national parks. The slogan used is, "It's your land lend a hand". Some 45 million Americans participate in volunteer activities each year. I repeat that number so that its significance sinks in: 45 million Americans participate in volunteer activities each year. In the 2005 fiscal year about 140,000 volunteers donated over five million hours of volunteer service to the United States National Park Service. The Volunteers in Parks [VIP] program was authorised by Public Law 91-357 and enacted in 1970. So 30 years ago the United States of America Government had a formalised volunteer service for its national parks. The United States of America Government recognises that the expanding use of national and State parks exceeds the capability and budget of allocated park personnel.

There are 376 units in the national park system, including national trails and rivers, which use volunteers to help accomplish the goals of the National Park Service. As I said earlier, this extremely well-established process is known as the Volunteers in Parks program, which was established under United States of America law. The VIP program includes a web page with general information on volunteering, a list of current volunteer opportunities and a volunteer application form. The volunteer programs within the National Park Service are managed at the local level but training and structural organisations are maintained at a government level. Pest animals and weeds are the greatest threat to biodiversity and conservation in national parks and conservation reserves throughout Australia. Pest animals have also had an impact on agriculture and Aboriginal and historic sites.

Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 the DEC has a statutory responsibility to manage these areas as well as conserve native plants and animals and cultural heritage. The Act requires the control of the impact of pest animals and weeds but at the same time there are constraints on the management practices that can be used. The Government's solution appears to be to keep on adding new areas of reserves into the system. One hundred and twenty-five years after the establishment of the first national park in New South Wales, the park system has grown to 661 parks in 2004 and a total area of almost six million hectares. Rapid growth occurred in recent years with two million hectares being added to the park system since 1995. The allocation per hectare has increased over a nine-year period to approximately 211 million in the park system over that period. As at 31 December 2004 there had been an increase of 22 parks since 30 June 2003, bringing the total to 639 parks. As part of the DEC's strategy to build the reserve system, approximately 120,000 hectares were formally added to it during 2004-05. In that year approximately the six millionth hectare was added. Since then there have been other significant additions, including the Brigalow and Yanga areas.

The Brigalow and Nandewar Community Conservation Area Bill, which was assented to in 2005, introduced a new form of land management tenure known as a community conservation area. More than 350,000 hectares of land were reserved for conservation in the Brigalow Belt and Nandewar Conservation Area. But when the bill was drafted one small thing was forgotten: the community was left out of the community conservation area. The community was returned to the management principles of the bill only via an amendment. On 26 May 2005 the Minister for Natural Resources, the Hon. Ian Macdonald, said in debate that up to 50 workers would be employed in the major white cypress thinning programs and that the number of field personnel on hand to respond to fires would be even greater than before.

But that exemplifies the very problem. Before this land was managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service it was owned and managed by NSW Forests and a significant proportion of the income from timber-getting was returned to assist with management and maintenance costs. Now that this area is no longer income earning, the complete maintenance and management recurrent costs must be borne by the people of New South Wales. In order to cover these costs the Government has taken the astonishing step of diverting funds that were specifically collected for recycling—the Waste Fund—into the Environmental Trust Fund. In case people do not get it, I should explain that this is an indirect form of taxation that is required in order to maintain our national parks.

I note in passing that these costs are additional to the loss of income in towns in the areas surrounding national parks. The Government has shown complete disregard for the economic displacement of the communities affected by this legislation. How many times can we introduce new taxes and divert to the Department of Environment and Conservation millions of dollars intended for another purpose to cover these costs, and how

can we continue to do this on a recurrent basis? In 2005-06 the total expenditure of the Department of Environment and Conservation was approximately \$500 million. This amount included funding for the creation of three new national parks and reserves in 2004-05, which increased the number of new national parks and reserves to nearly 350 since 1995-96.

In 2004-05 the DEC completed assessments of five wild rivers, the Kowmung, Upper Brogo, Upper Hastings and Forbes rivers and Washpool Creek. Flora and fauna surveys, marine park planning and mapping, and land wilderness assessments within the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar bioregions were conducted as part of the western region assessment. Aboriginal cultural heritage regional assessments were also conducted in 2004-05. The "State of the Parks 2004" report is a public report based on a survey of all aspects of the New South Wales parks system. That report of the NPWS concluded that it had failed to achieve almost all its goals in terms of feral animal control, weed control and fuel reduction burns.

The regulations in New South Wales exclude low-intensity burning from the majority of the landscape, including wilderness, old-growth and rare ecosystems, habitats of rare plants and animals, and drainage lines. However, these regulations do not require an assessment of the consequences of not burning or not reducing the fuel load. The lack of low-intensity prescribed burns is also a common problem in other States. For example, the Wonnangatta River flats in the Alpine National Park are now looking more like a weed theme park, and Parks Victoria has let fuel loads build up to the point where there is now an impending fire disaster. It appears that the intense fire in 2003 and the 1998 fires in the Caledonia Range were but minor eco disasters compared with the potential disaster looming in the high country now. Two bushfire experts, David Peckham, a bushfire scientist for more than 40 years, and Rod Incoll, who was previously the Chief Fire Officer with the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Victoria, have come to similar conclusions. In their report, they state:

With these fuel loads a fire in the prevailing conditions was totally unsurvivable for anyone trapped in the fire front, even in vehicles.

This year the Government reached less than 40 per cent of its prescribed burn-off targets—and those targets are less than one-twentieth of what is required to keep the fuel loads below catastrophic levels. I will explain the dangers of fire because I do not think people understand that fire can kill three times. It is a simple fact of physics that the higher the fuel load, the higher the fire temperature. The relationship between fuel load and fire temperature is well characterised by scientific experiments. We also know that different species of trees and seeds can withstand certain temperatures for certain periods before they, too, are killed or destroyed.

The inevitable conclusion is that we know exactly what fuel load will result in the healthy regeneration of the forest and what fuel load will result in cataclysmic destruction of every living thing, animals included. Bear in mind that we also know that many animals retreat into the canopy during fires. They have adapted to do this over tens of thousands of years of relatively low-temperature fires. By so doing they escape the more severe heat at ground level. However, when fuel loads increase to a critical point the fire will no longer stay on the ground and will become an all-consuming crowning wildfire, which consumes every plant and animal in its path. That is the first way that fires kill.

Let us consider the second way that fires kill. If the fire has not been overly intense new shoots will sprout from the ground and trees and new grasses will sprout from seeds in the ground. This provides a healthy food source for animals that may be in distress after a fire. However, if the fire has been overly intense and has killed the trees or sterilised the seeds in the upper part of the soil, any animals that have managed to escape the initial fire will starve to death. Alternatively, animals that are desperate for food will be preyed upon by both feral and natural predators in the now-denuded forest, which provides little or no camouflage or cover. So the fire has killed a second generation of animals. Fires also kill in a third way. After the initial fire has died down there will remain vast quantities of lightweight ash that can, in combination with the now denuded and eroded soil, be washed into local streams and creeks, causing massive fish kills and other aquatic devastation. I hope honourable members understand that the single most important strategy for conserving our native wildlife is to manage fire temperatures properly by maintaining fuel loads at levels that do not result in cataclysmic wildfires.

I will present a hypothetical situation. The national parks system covers approximately 10 per cent of the State of New South Wales and the cost to the community of maintaining this land is already extraordinary. Although some may enjoy the ideologically satisfying feeling that they are maintaining some mythical shrine, for many people this expense delivers no tangible benefit and, in the vast majority of cases, they are prevented from any meaningful interaction with the land. This process presents a very real and immediate problem for any government—whether conservative or Labor. We currently appear to be experiencing the end of a bit of a financial boom. However, that may be about to change. The combination of higher house prices and increasing fuel costs, both direct and indirect, recent increases in interest rates and even things such as the road toll may be starting to have an effect on the metropolitan populace.

Today the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that the jobless rate in Western Sydney has begun to skyrocket as a direct result of the current financial distress that people are feeling. This has the potential to snowball in a financial sense and to affect the confidence of the general populace, which is so important to maintaining a

thriving economy. What will happen if the economy crashes and the State's revenue is dramatically reduced? Which services will be cut first? Will we reduce the number of doctors and nurses in our hospitals? Will we cut funding disability and community services? Will we start to sack teachers and close our schools? The simple answer is no.

The most likely department to suffer the effects of a recession will be the Department of Environment and Conservation, and for that reason alone it is absolutely imperative that we have a system of management in place for our national parks estate that is less reliant upon the economic health of the State. I am suggesting a paradigm shift in the management of our diverse resources and public lands. The use of volunteers to meet these challenges will require us to re-evaluate the current mind-set of "lock it up and leave it". Our citizens who love the environment can make a difference to our ability to look after these lands. This will help to overcome the difficulties faced by the Department of Primary Industries and DEC in managing effectively the vast tracts of New South Wales that are protected areas.

That is why I have introduced the National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (National Parks Volunteer Service) Bill. The bill is quite simple: It establishes some principles and aims to assist with issues such as feral animal control, weed control, the maintenance of trails and tracks that are part of the fire management regime, the removal of rubbish and the carrying out of other public relations activities, such as guided tours or working in a gift shop. In the United States entire national parks are run by volunteers. People pay money to holiday in a national park and volunteer their services. If we have a pool of volunteers who perform daily tasks in our national parks such as removing rubbish, conducting guided tours and maintaining facilities, this will free up resources to tackle the more confronting park issues.

The need for a force of volunteers is evident given the statistic that 50 per cent of the coast of New South Wales has been declared national park or wilderness area. Yet the list of threatened species continues to increase. With all the land locked up in national parks and wilderness areas the number of threatened and endangered species continues to climb, even with 50 per cent of the land effectively protected. New South Wales has the highest level of national parks and protected areas of any country in the world, and we also have the highest level of threatened and endangered species in the world. Those two things are intrinsically linked. Whatever we are doing, it is not working. We are not tackling the real problems. Feral animals—cats, dogs, foxes and even pigs—are eating our native flora and fauna into extinction. We do not see it because they are nocturnal and most of us visit the parks during the daytime.

Invasive weeds—lantana, blackberry and alligator weed—are obliterating huge tracts of land. Fierce and unnaturally intense fires consume every living thing—plant and animal—leaving our streams clogged with ash and silt to kill at other times. Our trained and equipped volunteer service could contribute significantly to attacking each of these problems. It is the only way in which the community can afford to maintain our natural environment in a pre-European state. I will deal with three objections that may be raised during the debate. The first objection will be that volunteers do more damage than good. In the first instance this is a complete and utter denigration of the many volunteers that support our modern society. Who would dare say that members of the Rural Fire Service or the State Emergency Service do more damage than good? Who would say that our surf-lifesavers do more damage than good? Who would say that wildlife carer groups, such as WIRES, do more damage than good?

The Hon. Robert Brown: Or our conservation hunters.

The Hon. JON JENKINS: Or conservation hunters. The simple fact is that with a small amount of training and fairly meagre equipment the average person can be trained to recognise the difference between bindii, blackberry and bitou bush. They can be trained to recognise the difference between a cane toad and the native frog. They can be trained to do basic fuel load surveys and flora and fauna assessments. There is ample evidence that they can also be trained for more complex tasks such as feral animal control. The current ad hoc system, which is poorly organised and unstructured, is not being utilised, simply because the vast majority of people have no formal training or qualifications that allow them to be used in an efficient and effective manner. A structured and formalised organisation would allow the creation of training courses and formal assessment of skills by volunteers so that rangers could assemble a team, knowing their skill levels, and set them a task.

The second objection might be health and safety. As with the previous issue this is simply a no-brainer. Other volunteer services, such as those already mentioned—the Rural Fire Service, the State Emergency Service the Volunteer Rescue Association, the Surf Life Saving Association, et cetera—operate in very dangerous environments with complete professionalism, and that will continue. It is simply a furphy to raise this issue at all. The final pre-emptive objection revolves around industrial issues. It may be contended that the use of volunteers will somehow reduce the number of available full-time employees. It is extraordinarily disingenuous to raise this objection. Would the same objection be raised with regard to fire services? Would it be said that we should not have a Rural Fire Service because we employ fewer professional metropolitan fire service personnel? The same applies to rescue organisations, such as the State Emergency Service, the Volunteer Rescue Association or the Surf Life Saving Association. Would it be said that we could employ more full-time police or fire rescue personnel if we did not have these volunteer services? I conclude with two quotes. The first is from Leo Tolstoy,

who, while contemplating the things that are required for human happiness, said:

One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be broken.

The second quote is from a much more modern philosopher and environmentalist named David Suzuki, who said:

Involving the community in science-based conservation is the only way to save the planet