***IN CAMERA* PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

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At Sydney on Friday 7 September 2012

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The Committee met at 9.00 a.m.

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PRESENT

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)
The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. C. Faehrmann
The Hon. L. A. Foley
The Hon. S. MacDonald
The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps
The Hon. P. T. Primrose

Evidence in camera by ROBERT CONROY, MELINDA MURRAY, RAY FOWKE and KEVIN SHANAHAN:

CHAIR: The first part of the hearing is to be held in camera and will be informal, so you will not be sworn for this part of the hearing. Thank you, Mr Conroy, for attending today and bringing your technical team. This session is to get as much information as we can about the scientific and technical aspects of establishing national parks and the process thereof. Questions of a policy nature will not be occurring. We will leave that to the second session when you will be sworn to give evidence. You have a presentation to make and we will listen intently.

Mr CONROY: Let me thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this morning. We understand that the Committee is interested in spending time this morning looking at the question of how national parks are established and, in particular, the scientific basis for establishing parks. We will focus on the specific matters and cover some of the technical details of how the national parks system is developed over time. As we will also be appearing before the Committee later this morning we are not intending in this session to focus on the science that is applied to the management of national parks but how they are established. We will be more than happy to answer any questions on the science of ongoing park management now or in the session later today.

I will hand over to Melinda Murray who will take you through the presentation we have prepared. Ms Murray is Acting Director of the Conservation Programs Division in the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Her substantive role is the manager of the Reserve Establishment and Reserve Information Section. That is the part of the National Parks and Wildlife Service that has primary carriage of the national parks establishment program.

Melinda will be assisted by Mr Kevin Shanahan who has more than 15 years experience in processes involved in the planning, assessment and development of the national parks system. Kevin has a background in forestry management and prior to joining the National Parks and Wildlife Service Kevin worked for New South NSW Forests and for Sydney Water. Mr Ray Fowke has been involved in preparing the material for today and will assist us if we need to locate particular information in response to any queries that Committee members may have.

Ms MURRAY: I am going to start by setting the scene for the national parks system in New South Wales and then delve into more detail about the science. Following that I will provide an outline on how the body of science and policy that has developed over time influences the future direction of the national parks system. I am happy to take questions as we go through the presentation. Feel free to stop me at any point. Amongst the team present we can hopefully answer all the questions you may have, otherwise we are happy to take them on notice and get back to the Committee. In addition to the slides we have a package of materials that has been provided to the Committee and we will refer to that along the way. You also have a copy of the slides.

As we see from some of the historic images and current images from today the national parks system has developed steadily over a period of more than 130 years. In 1879 Royal National Park was established on the southern edge of Sydney. It was the second national park established in the world. Before that Jenolan caves and Wombeyan caves were established as reserves. In the early period of national park establishment many lands were set aside because of their particular scenic beauty or recreation opportunities rather than because of any particular scientific assessment of their biological values or known Aboriginal heritage.

In hindsight many of those decisions seem farsighted. It is difficult to imagine New South Wales without some of those iconic parks: Blue Mountains, Royal and Ku-ring-gai Chase. In the late 1960s and early 1970s work began on developing the sites. To inform the national parks system, a scientific committee was established by the Minister for Lands at the time and over several years they provided a number of reports detailing priority areas for conservation. At a national level in the late 1960s the Academy of Sciences was active in preparing a body of work that related to the science of national parks. The National Parks Service was established in New South Wales in 1967.

The next few slides look at the development of national parks over the past 10 years. This slide shows the situation as at June 2012. The parks system now includes 863 parks, just over seven million hectares or 8.7 per cent of the State. You will see from the slides that in some years there is a smattering of parks and other years there will be more specific comments for me to make. The bulk of the park additions during this time have

come from public land sources, predominantly forestry and only a small part have involved private land purchases. There has been a range of additions that relate to park management improvements relating to boundaries.

As we look at the slides you will notice a shift away from concentration on coastal and eastern parts of the State towards a balanced and comprehensive approach that includes central and western New South Wales lands. I will discuss the reasons for this shortly. In 2000 the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area was created. During 2001-02 Arakwal National Park was created in northern New South Wales. It was the first national park created in Australia as a result of an Indigenous land use agreement. In 2002-03 there was a range of activity in northern New South Wales with the second stage of the northern forestry outcomes. In the west there are a group of properties that have been acquired many years previously and over time. When the minerals issues were resolved in negotiations across Government those lands were reserved as a group. The land circled concerns Willandra Lakes, which were already owned by the Crown through the Minister administering the Soil Conservation Act. As many of you would know, Willandra Lakes now forms a world heritage area associated with Mungo as well.

I will skip to 2004-05 with the major addition of the Nombinnie Nature Reserve. This was an area of land that had been bought 20 years previously and had been explored during that time. It was finally indicated that the land was not worth using for further exploration. The exploration ceased and it was agreed that land could be reserved because there were no mineral resources. In 2005-06 we see the results of the Brigalow and Nandewar regional forestry negotiations. The circle on the map should in fact be an ellipse that extends to the north. In relation to lands to the west, at about 10 o'clock from the circle around the Narran Lake area, that is an example where we had extensive up front negotiations with the mineral sector of the Department of Primary Industries about opal mining occurring in that area prior to reservation.

In 2006-07, in the Hunter area we see the reservation of the Worimi Conservation Lands, the first park being created as a result of an Aboriginal land claim being settled through the creation of a national park. In the south-west of the State we see Yanga, which is referred to in the Committee's terms of reference. In 2007-08, we see a smattering of lands in the Hunter area as a result of the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy. The 2008-09 year is an historic year for me in a number of ways. Firstly, it is ten years since the first hand-back lease was actually signed to hand back management of the Mutawintji group of parks to the local Aboriginal community.

In 2009-10 there was the declaration of the Yengo Wilderness, with further additions in the north of the State to Ledknapper. In 2010-12 we see the reservation of Toorale which had been bought in December 2008. We see the reservation of Hunthawang, which is in the centre of the State, just further above the arrow shown there. It is quite interesting comparing the scenario of Hunthawang to some of the other parks. That park had a water-sharing plan so the owner separately sold the water prior to selling the land to the National Parks and Wildlife Service. You will see the river red gum reserves at the bottom of the map.

In 2010-11 we see the reservation of an addition to Oxley Wild Rivers. We also see four joint management agreements with Aboriginal communities, which is the most completed in the past five years. We have a few graphs on the next two slides which show that, like most other jurisdictions and comparable international jurisdictions, the New South Wales park system experienced growth from the Seventies onwards as the scientific and community understanding of environment and human interactions with the park system expanded. These slides show the growth of the protected areas around the world. The second one shows the growth between New South Wales and Queensland. They are all fairly comparable in shape. During this period, the processes underpinning the planning and assessment of national parks have gone through a dramatic transformation. Also during that time, the building of the national park system has been informed by significant developments in scientific understanding of the status of native plants and animals, habitats and the ways that ecosystems function.

In particular, there have been major advances in the extent of on-ground survey and the mapping of plants and animals and habitats supported by the use of satellite and aerial imagery. The body of science tells us that having a secure and well-managed system of protected areas in the right locations is essential for the backbone of conservation efforts. More recently, the sciences have also highlighted the importance of having well-positioned and sufficiently large reserves as insurance policies to help native species cope with climatic variations such as droughts and floods.

There has been substantial research into the design of national parks, looking into how big they should be to protect conservation values, what shape and boundary configurations they should have, and how connected

they need to be to other parks or other private lands or natural areas outside the park system. Collectively, this work has informed the way in which park managers around the world have taken a more structured and analytical approach to identifying the highest conservation value lands that are of greatest priority to include in the national park system.

These two pictures illustrate the role of parks as part of a productive landscape. This scenario has certainly become more understood in the last few years. The slide on the left illustrates the landscape-level relationships, with parks providing the conservation nodes, balanced with the range of sustainable productive uses. This landscape-scale thinking is essential to understanding where national parks and other reserves fit in the overall management and use of land.

I will return to this topic shortly, but the key point is that reserves are about protecting a sample of each landscape type, and managing these primarily for conservation, public use and enjoyment and education. Reserves are therefore only one part of the broader landscape, nestled amongst a range of other uses, including agriculture, urban development and infrastructure.

It is accepted that the majority of land will remain outside the national parks system. That will include areas of important conservation values on private land. Getting good management across the landscape is therefore critical, whether it is on public or private land. It is this type of thinking that has informed some of the more recent initiatives, such as the Great Eastern Ranges program—which is shown in the right slide—where the Office of Environment and Heritage is currently working with public and private land managers to improve connectivity across 1,200 kilometres of mostly mountainous ranges between the Victorian and Queensland border. Under that program, private land holders have already established voluntary arrangements, including 177 conservation agreements and 220 wildlife refuges to support corridor connections between parks or important areas of native vegetation within the Great Eastern Ranges area.

This next slide is a bit dense, but I wanted to briefly mention it before I take you through some of the specific science underpinning national parks. Efforts to protect the protected area system fall within a framework that consists of a number of important international and national commitments. These include the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity and Australia's National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy that has been endorsed by all jurisdictions. Under this broad umbrella there are specific commitments to build the National Reserve System by combined efforts across Australia. Under the banner of the National Reserve System, criteria and guidelines for establishing national parks have been put in place.

The package that I tabled earlier has provided two key documents. They are the Australian guidelines for establishing the National Reserve System and Australia's national strategy for the National Reserve System 2009 through to 2030. The Australian and New South Wales Governments are also members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN]. The IUCN has existed since 1948 and provides significant expertise in the area of protected management and works with partners around the world. It has a range of government members and conservation organisations informing its work.

The IUCN has established a standard system for classifying protected areas and determining management priorities. The IUCN also has a standard definition for protected areas which highlights that these must be places managed for conservation and secured through legal or other effective means. National parks and reserves are considered the highest level of protection available consistent with this definition. However, other lands can meet this definition, including Indigenous protected areas and certain types of private conservation lands, but it is sometimes assumed the categories apply a decreasing level of conservation importance or protection.

The IUCN guidelines make it clear this is not the case. Rather, the appropriate category should be chosen that will best provide for conservation and address threats. The other point to note about the IUCN categories is that they have no legal effect. What they do is provide important guidance on the sort of management regime that should be applied and they are used as the basis for Australia to reliably measure and report on its international obligations and provide a worldwide standard for the protection of natural and cultural heritage.

In New South Wales, as in most other jurisdictions, it is legislation that establishes a set of reserved categories that are accompanied by specific management principles. In New South Wales in broad terms this mirrors the IUCN approach. So, for example, nature reserves in New South Wales generally meet the IUCN's most protected category, which is 1A, and most national parks would meet the IUCN category 2. However, this is not always the case. In each situation the decision to classify New South Wales reserve to IUCN category takes account of the particular values and circumstances and the management of that place.

Arakwal National Park, for example, is considered an IUCN category 5 protected landscape seascape reserve, recognising the significant cultural heritage conservation values that it has alongside its natural values. As I mentioned earlier, it was created in 2001 after an agreement with the Byron Bay Arakwal Aboriginal community.

So far I have given you a general introduction to the body of science and policy thinking that has underpinned the reserve system. I turn now to some of the specific principles and approaches that are applied. This slide gives a bit of a snapshot summary. To begin with, there are three key scientific principles that have set the basis for the development of national parks in Australia, and that is about them being comprehensive, adequate and representative. In short, these three are referred to as the CAR principles. These drive the basic assessment of which lands have the right conservation values to become national parks. As the slide notes, once this is determined, a final filter considering social and economic factors is applied, and I will talk about that further.

This second slide shows the application of the CAR principles in more detail. The following slides step through each of these principles. In terms of what to include in reserves, a CAR reserve system is one that samples all natural environments, including examples of the natural variation that occurs across environments. This is what the terms "comprehensive" and "representative" refer to. In practical terms that means the reserve system should include samples of all types of ecosystems, from wetlands to heath, scrublands, forests, woodlands, alpine and subalpine areas, estuaries, floodplains. This is across all climactic zones such as arid, semi-arid and tropical, different altitude and all variations, and so on.

It means sampling within each ecosystem to capture the type of variability within each ecosystem, for example by protecting examples of different types of rainforests across a variety of locations in a region. The key point to note is that it is about sampling the range of ecosystems and enough of them at different scales. It is not about protecting every piece of land that has value, just the best. Having decided what to conserve, the next question is how much needs to be protected and which areas should be prioritised. Within Australia the basic planning unit for all conservation initiatives, whether they involve public reserves or private conservation is about bioregions. These are large areas of similar geology, geography and geomorphology.

The mapping of bioregions is a collaborative endeavour involving all jurisdictions to create a sensible framework for conservation planning. The key outcome of this process is the interim biogeographic regionalisation for Australia—a bit of a mouthful but otherwise known as IBRA. It is labelled interim because it is updated regularly as improved vegetation and spatial mapping is provided by States and Territories. The latest version is IBRA 7, published this year. Each bioregion supports a suite of native plants and animals and other features distinct from those in adjoining regions. While some plant and animal species may occur over several bioregions some are limited to only one or two. With your permission, Mr Chair, I would like to table a copy of a document on bioregions in New South Wales.

Document tabled.

This slide shows the overall level of national park reservation in the 18 bioregions within New South Wales. The bioregion is the highest level, coarsest categorisation. In summary, the proportion of lands protected is significantly greater to the east and along the coast. The dark green areas show you bioregions that have reservation levels above 15 per cent. As you can see, these are grouped along the coast. As you can see, most of the areas to the west have less than 5 per cent reservation. As I mentioned, this is a basic measure for assessing how comprehensive the reserve system is at sampling the range of broad environments in New South Wales.

Drilling down further, a similar pattern is shown in the next slide, which is a bit more complex as it looks at the 129 subregions. Drilling down further, this slide goes to a final level of analysis again, looking at the 623 broad vegetation types mapped across the landscape. These last two pieces of information, being subregions and Mitchell landscapes, are a key part of measuring progress towards achieving a representative reserve system, that is one which is sampling a variation in ecosystems. These measures all indicate the relatively low level of protection to ecosystems in the west, meaning that we have more work to do to achieve a suitable sample in these areas.

You will recall in earlier slides I showed illustrating the development of the park system since 2000 the gradual shift from the east to the rest of New South Wales; that was designed to address this shortfall. There is no numerical target for the amount or proportion of land that should be protected within any one bioregion. As I

indicated earlier, the aim is to protect a sample of environmental values that are capable of long-term management in the national park system.

I wanted to briefly touch on some of the targets to do with the CAR principles. There are some overall targets endorsed by the Commonwealth and all jurisdictions that guide the sampling process. It is important to note that these are not targets for hectares of land; they are sampling targets. I will show you in relation to how we track against some of those targets and will provide some examples of the core areas and critical areas that have been mapped as priorities.

The Hon. LUKE FOLEY: When you talk about the national targets, that involves all jurisdictions being a signatory or party to those national targets?

Ms MURRAY: That is correct. Over the last 10 to 15 years there has been a careful and deliberate strategy of looking to build the national park system in those bioregions and subregions with low levels of reservation. The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service regularly assesses progress towards these targets in this overall objective. This slide shows that over time there has been a gradual movement in the level of reservation across subregions. For example, in New South Wales around 54 subregions had less than 2 per cent reservation and that figure is now down to around 33 subregions.

CHAIR: From what to 33?

Ms MURRAY: From 54. The red box was 54 in 2000 and 33 in 2012. This slide shows how well we are going towards achieving the target of sampling 80 per cent of the number of ecosystems in each bioregion. We have met that target in some parts of the State and there are others where we have not. We have grouped the bioregions in relation to the five broader landscapes that are referred to in a further Department document that I will discuss later—the National Parks Establishment Plan.

I want to touch briefly on adequacy. It is one of the hardest parts of the CAR equation to measure in any quantitative way. However, qualitative science tells us that the size, shape, condition and surrounding land uses are all important factors in determining the ability to provide for long-term protection of an area. It requires that the reserve system be well designed to ensure its survival and viability in the long term. This is a critical factor and has a major influence on whether lands are considered suitable for inclusion in the national parks system. It particularly drives our consideration of whether a property is capable of being managed as a national park. For example, with the picture on the right, the preference would be to choose a reserve shape for an addition that is providing a large intact group of vegetation rather than a linear or fragmented option.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Why?

Ms MURRAY: In terms of the principles behind having a core area that protects and provides a buffer from adjoining land uses, it will provide strengthened viability for that reserve. Part of that question will also be about surrounding uses in adjoining parks. So, for example, with the constricted shape on the right, if the area of the narrow neck were buffered by voluntary conservation agreements or Crown reserves that related to environmental protection that could still provide a viable core area in a more circular shape if you are looking at other land resources.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I was under the impression that a lot of species require a large edge effect. A lot of them—for example, kangaroos—live in the forest but feed on grasslands.

Mr CONROY: That is true. There are some species that prefer that ecotonal situation where they might seek shelter within a forest, for example, and graze adjoining grassland. In some circumstances having that high edge effect could favour some species. We are talking about some principles that were derived in the mid-1970s which related to biogeography and which were further developed by Jarrod Diamond. It is theoretical and they are applied generally. You can always find specific examples that are contrary to these principles. Generally these are the principles that we try to apply across our reserve system.

CHAIR: Obviously from the point of view of trying to get a core area the linear arrangement is the least desirable.

Mr CONROY: That is correct.

CHAIR: Some of these subsystems, for example, riparian zones, are by nature linear. Alpine zones, or high areas because of the shape of our mountain ranges, are also probably somewhat linear. Under those circumstances, what sort of strategy do you apply to protect the core values within a less than ideal zone like a linear zone? Is it the same as for the connected zone; that is, do you try to provide a buffer by other means?

Mr CONROY: There are certainly situations where there is no choice but to have a linear configuration for the reserve. However, the strategy that we apply is to work closely with our neighbours. Ms Murray pointed to the fact that where you have complementary land uses in adjoining lands, that principle of having a circular reserve versus a linear reserve is perhaps not so important. However, where there are alien uses or threats to the values within the same system along the boundary of the park that is less than ideal. If you can work closely with your neighbours and either have a buffer zone or complementary land uses and a cooperative approach, you can deal with those threats in an effective way.

CHAIR: When you do the on-the-ground research—I am not talking about aerial photography—to what level do you engage with neighbours to assess the opportunities for conservation on those boundaries?

Mr CONROY: It happens in two stages. It happens before the area is acquired in terms of working with neighbours to identify an appropriate boundary for the reserves. We do that wherever we can. Sometimes we cannot do it because of the confidential nature of negotiations, particularly if it is a private land purchase. However, we certainly work with other government authorities and with neighbours in establishing the reserve beforehand. That is in the acquisition of the reserve. Once the reserve is acquired, we have the plan of management process that we go through where we work with local authorities, the Rural Fire Service and neighbours in developing a draft plan of management that is placed on exhibition. The submissions to that exhibition process are then analysed and go through an advisory committee process and to the advisory council before the plan is adopted by the Minister.

CHAIR: A local advisory committee?

Mr CONROY: A regional advisory committee.

Mr SHANAHAN: Notwithstanding that we might initially have a reserve shape that is far less than ideal—like a linear shape—where it is probably fair to say the management effort per unit area is greater than for a large consolidated area because there is so much boundary to deal with and therefore the potential of incursion and excursion of pest animals, fire and so on. The management effort per unit area for a linear reserve is greater for than for a more consolidated reserve. However, as Ms Murray will explain, we might start with an area that is linear and less than ideal, but we will look to consolidate. One of the big things is the issue of consolidation to improve long-term management. Clearly the ideal is not to have a linear reserve.

CHAIR: When you say "consolidation", do you mean extra access to build?

Mr SHANAHAN: To build around it; that is right. It is "consolidate" as in increasing the size and decreasing that edge-to-area ratio. The ideal is a circle and we gradually move towards that. There are some good examples of that later in the presentation.

Ms MURRAY: While bioregions and subregions are useful guides for the overall direction of where reserves might be best placed, they need to be supported by finer scale assessments to identify particular areas and locations that are our conservation priorities. This slide shows how lands that might be available are filtered to determine whether they should be considered for reservation. At the top we see land from multiple sources that can enter the reserve system. It is important to remember that there is no single map or assessment for the whole State that identifies the priorities. Instead, information is drawn from a range of sources—comprehensive regional scale assessments to vegetation mapping, conservation plans and expert opinion. I will include in my presentation later a few examples of some of those more specific regional or local sources of information.

In some instances assessments are also informed by specialist software programs designed to allow rapid comparison of different land-use outcomes for a range of conservation values. These have occurred in some of the more resource-intensive larger scale assessments. The particular benefit of these tools used across government is that they allow the relative benefits of protecting one area compared to another to be analysed reasonably quickly.

As mentioned, here are some of the maps from published sources. Over the last 10 to 15 years we have seen great leaps in the availability of this type of information, virtually all of which is available in the public arena. This slide provides examples of just some of the publicly available information products that are used to inform decision-making. Using available information from the bioregion scaled down provides a solid basis for determining which parts of the landscape might be suitable as parks. Applying more detailed information then allows land that is offered from a range of sources to be filtered to further select only those that are the most suitable.

CHAIR: From say 1995 to now, over that period of time, has the sophisticated nature of the types of tools that have become available to you improved or increased your ability to make these sorts of decisions? Is the science better now than it was 15 years ago?

Mr CONROY: The science is certainly better now. The tools that are available are much better, as Melinda pointed out.

CHAIR: Probably the tools more than the science?

Mr CONROY: The tools are much better but also the knowledge of the values that exist in the bushland of New South Wales with both the cultural and the natural heritage values that exist through some of the mapping that has been done. We have got a much better understanding now of where those values are and whether or not they are sampled within the reserve system.

CHAIR: Are those tools used now to review some of the science going back to 1995, 1996, 1997, or you just do not have enough resources to be going backwards and forwards doing that, so to speak?

Mr CONROY: I think the answer to that question is no, they are not used for that purpose. When an area is reserved as national park or reserve then it is managed for that purpose.

Ms MURRAY: Having determined what types of values to conserve and where the priorities might be, the final part of the reserve planning equation is to make decisions on the timing of when particular lands might be best placed for addition to the park system. This part of the process has a huge range of influences including the availability of public lands. So that, subject to a whole-of-government decision-making process, the timing of when private lands are offered and availability of funding often might depend on the particular circumstances of the private landowner who might be wishing to sell their land to National Parks. There are also timing considerations when other lands, such as donations, transfers from councils and development offsets, are considered. Government priorities and commitments might also influence the timing outcomes for the reserve system.

Mr CONROY: Mr Chair, if I could just answer that question you asked before. Normally when land is acquired for reservation as park it becomes what is called part 11 land under the National Parks and Wildlife Act. That is, it sits there and it is not gazetted as national park or nature reserve but it is in the ownership of the Minister. The Minister can dispose of that land if she so wishes. Quite often we might buy a property and the landowner wants to sell the whole property but we are only interested in particular values that exist on the property.

CHAIR: Such as Yanga.

Mr CONROY: Yanga is a good example of that. So before the land is gazetted as national park the Minister can dispose of land that is not so important for reservation. I just wanted to explain that. It is part of that process.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: That is not limited. There is usually a time limit. It does not go on forever?

Mr CONROY: No, there is no time limit. We still have some part 11 land that was acquired more than 10 years ago where there are certain issues that still need to be resolved in relation to that land. But the option always exists for the Minister to consider either leasing or selling or otherwise disposing of that part 11 land.

CHAIR: Up to gazettal?

Mr CONROY: Up to gazettal and then there is a revocation process involving an Act of Parliament.

Ms MURRAY: The time limit issue that relates to the cypress and river red gum legislation actually relates to land that, as a result of that legislation, was reserved and there is a time limit for, essentially, de-gazetting it after they are looking at boundary adjustment areas within a very limited period. So it is going from reserve to part 11 as opposed to the scenario Bob was talking about, about land being part 11 for a longer period and then being able to be disposed of.

I will spend a bit of time discussing this slide in terms of some of the socio-economic considerations that are applied. It is important to note that our assessment process is not limited to the conservation values. One of the really important social values that we would be thinking about would relate to community recreational values, Aboriginal cultural heritage use and access.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What about loss of industry; for example, the loss of the red gum industry to a town like Mathoura? How thoroughly do you investigate those sorts of economic losses?

Ms MURRAY: As part of the comprehensive regional assessment process for forestry transfers there is a detailed economic assessment that will relate to that, and obviously in the case of the river red gums it has led to quite comprehensive structural adjustment packages and outcomes. My colleagues might want to talk further in relation to specifics about economic assessment in regional forest agreements [RFAs]?

Mr SHANAHAN: The economic assessments that are conducted in relation to those large, particularly forest, transfers and in some cases Crown lands, are not so much conducted by us, they are conducted by what was initially the Resource and Conservation Assessment Commission, which then devolved into the Natural Resources Commission. They are independent of us, and that informs government generally as to the nature of the economics of the industries that are there, the nature of the adjustments required in terms of employment, opportunities for retraining, opportunities for new businesses and the like, and those structural adjustment packages come out of assessments conducted by the Natural Resources Commission, previously the Resource and Conservation Assessment Commission, which then lead to a government determination as to the nature of the structural adjustment that will then be carried out. They are on those broader, large-scale impacts where you get that very formal assessment process carried out.

CHAIR: And they have their own standard practices for doing those things outside of what you would normally do?

Mr SHANAHAN: They will bring in specialist economists to undertake that work, to provide that advice, yes.

Ms MURRAY: Some of the factors in the bottom half of this slide are focusing on some of the broad principles that are considered in relation to economic status and contribution of land; for example, in relation to the characteristics of the land being considered. So if there is private land on offer to the National Parks and Wildlife Service we would be looking at things like the land use, its zoning, the size of the property; current employment—are those people permanent employees or contractors; what is the stocking rate and productivity, what are the trends in relation to that; what are the purchasing decisions of the current owners—are they involved in purchasing goods and services in the local community or elsewhere; what are some of the broader characteristics of the local and regional economy in terms of its diversity in terms of the types of industry in that area, the working population, what are the trends? Obviously Australian Bureau of Statistics data is able to provide comparative assessment.

In looking at some of the possible management actions and investment that might support communities and help diversify economies, obviously there would be examples of transitional arrangements that might be made with owners. Some owners may wish to subdivide and stay on their property as a transition for six to 12 months and continue to de-stock prior to leaving. In terms of some of the social factors I would say, on the whole, of the people who are wanting to sell their land to National Parks, in terms of the demographics of those people, we would often find that they are individuals, rather than agri businesses or they are people reaching retirement who might find that their children have left the area and do not intend to continue on the land. They see leaving the land to National Parks as part of their legacy. They wish for it to be publicly available. They may, in some of the situations we have dealt with recently, be willing to subdivide and stay on the other part of the property they wish. They may be moving to a nearby town.

The particular social circumstances of the people we deal with are something that we would be looking at, that we are trying to get a sense of, as part of the purchasing process. It also fits in with the time question, are there timing reasons. Obviously the number of the properties that are offered to us is far beyond our budget in terms of purchase. I would like to briefly also mention on this slide one of the broader socio-economic factors that we consider in terms of our whole-of-government negotiations, and this relates to what was alluded to in the New South Wales Government's submission in relation to the referral of reserve proposals across government. That includes to the Department of Primary Industries and a range of functions within that organisation, in particular, the Resources and Energy Division.

We have had very extensive discussions and negotiations with Resources and Energy in relation to the minerals values of land and which areas of the State would or would not be suitable for reservation, as part of that whole-of-government decision about whether to reserve land. That is probably enough about that. If you want to ask any questions about this slide we could cover that now, or I am happy to take further questions at the end.

This slide comments on some of the matters referred to by Kevin Shanahan in terms of building a reserve system. We know that the final decisions to acquire land are often strongly influenced by a consideration of adequacy principles. As I mentioned earlier, this requires land that needs to be the right size, shape and location so they are capable of being managed as conservation reserves into the future. Improving the adequacy of the reserve system is an ongoing task, and many parks are built up over a period of time and then they are progressively finetuned to improve their boundary configuration and extent.

This slide provides a case study of how this works in practice for the development of a new reserve node. Oxley Wild Rivers National Park is located in and around the gorges of the Macleay River in northern New South Wales. It was established in 1986 and, as you can see, the additional reservation comprises several small disparate existing public reserves and unallocated Crown land that were transferred to National Parks. Ten years later, after further acquisitions, the park was in the building-up phase. You can see those parts as being joined together. By 1997, and since that time, we have moved into the refinement of the park boundaries. While we are still finetuning, you can see the end result is a more manageable reserve.

The concept of building up reserves to improve their adequacy also applies in identifying corridors and connectivity. These slides show the development of National Parks in the Pilliga and Warrumbungles, and the gradual steps that are being taken to build connectivity, and improve overall ecological resilience. This has involved both public and private land transfers over time. It has been complemented by private land owners who have entered into conservation management arrangements for their property. For example, you can see that light beige colour, the voluntary conservation agreements and other types of agreements as well that are close to the reserve boundary.

Having discussed the scientific principles underpinning the planning of National Parks, I will address how that thinking continues to guide practical action in New South Wales. Our framework for our work in developing the National Parks system, and the implementation of the CAR principles, is set out in the 2008 National Parks Establishment Plan. A copy of that plan is in your package. The establishment plan lays out the policy and planning framework for building the parks system, the application of science of the CAR reserve principles to New South Wales, and the types of areas that may be suitable for reservation in each bioregion in New South Wales.

CHAIR: On that slide it has the targets nationally agreed—

Ms MURRAY: That is the 80 per cent targets about which we talked previously of the subregions and ecosystems.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: At some time that 80 per cent will be converted into hectares and a percentage of the State. How are we to understand just how much of the State is now in the reserve system when it is referred to as 80 per cent across all those tenures?

Ms MURRAY: In some parts of the State there will not be substantial increases.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Because it is over 15 per cent now?

Ms MURRAY: The point I was thinking of was in relation to, for example, the South Western Slopes Bioregion. The amount of clearing that has already occurred in that landscape is more than 80 per cent and so the remaining vegetation that would be suitable for the National Parks system is very small. And so to sample across the 80 per cent will still mean very small percentages of land actually end up in the reserve system. There are some targets we know in some bioregions we are never going to be able to meet. In terms of broad principles from an international perspective, the latest updates to the International Convention on Biological Diversity sets a goal or target of 17 per cent of land within a protected area network, and that is public and private land. Across Australia I think it is about 12 per cent of land within Australia that is within a protected area network, so that is public or private land. But the 17 per cent is a broad coarse target within an international convention, and that was increased from 15 per cent maybe two or three years ago, I think, when that convention was updated.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In Australia it is 12 per cent?

Ms MURRAY: It is 12 per cent in Australia currently within the protected areas network and that is public-private land.

CHAIR: How do private lands get included? Do they have to have significant characteristics?

Ms MURRAY: For Australia's reporting in an international context those IUCN categories are the guiding principle. They have to fit within the IUCN categories one to six.

CHAIR: Which means there is a legal component?

Ms MURRAY: That is correct. They have to be legally protected and they have to be predominantly for the purposes of conservation. This slide just briefly covers some of the broad reservation priority themes within the National Parks Establishment Plan. The plan sets the overall direction for a 10-year period, and identifies the priority ecosystems and other features for future national parks. It also examines each bioregion and assesses progress towards the CAR targets and providing an indication of the types of future priorities. The statistics that we have underpinning the planning in 2008 are updated and published annually.

CHAIR: That was a 10-year plan, was it?

Ms MURRAY: That is correct

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: The 2008 plan?

Ms MURRAY: Yes. All potential new national parks must be consistent with the directions set out in that establishment plan. As that plan is now about halfway through its planned life it is timely to undertake a review of the progress of that plan and to make further refinements to guide effort in the next 10 years. We have already started to commence some work on that within the National Parks and Wildlife Service to adjust our focus of reserve planning efforts to place greater emphasis on opportunities to build corridor connections and the resilience of existing reserves. This is consistent with the Government's green corridor commitments that are seen in its NSW 2021 plan.

In combination with the strategic direction offered by the establishment plan, National Parks also applies detailed reserve establishment guidelines to provide the nuts and bolts procedures to how we establish new national parks. So these guidelines set out details about liaising with landholders, assessing the conservation values of properties on offer, comparing and prioritising properties across the State and consultation arrangements.

CHAIR: From a historical perspective I see that says "2nd edition". What previous iterations were there of those guidelines? Was there one or two, or how far back do they go, or were they started in 2007?

Mr CONROY: Mr Shanahan might be best placed to answer that question, Mr Chair.

Mr SHANAHAN: You will notice the little comment down at the bottom, Mr Chair, that there was a 2004 audit office report. They were actually developed I think in either 2002 or 2003 to give us the detail to formalise the processes that were underway into that document and they have been reviewed since.

CHAIR: So they are reviewed about every five years?

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes.

Ms MURRAY: There is actually a review at the moment. One of my staff members has been particularly focused on reviewing those.

CHAIR: And that is done strictly within the Office of Environment and Heritage, or your own department?

Ms MURRAY: Yes, they are our internal guidelines. They are available on our internet site.

Mr CONROY: While we have not thought through the consultation process for the review of these guidelines, we have had some discussions internally about how we might engage with local government and also with the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Councils in terms of how these guidelines are applied because we think they are both very important stakeholders in terms of the development of these guidelines and the application of the guidelines.

CHAIR: Just to be clear, are you thinking about the consultation process in the development or review of the guidelines or just simply in the application of the guidelines?

Mr CONROY: In the development and the review of the guidelines.

Ms MURRAY: As noted in the New South Wales submission to this inquiry, the National Parks and Wildlife Service does not compulsorily acquire land. We work to identify priority conservation themes and areas of high conservation value. Properties, whether they are public or private lands, are then tested against these as they become available. One stream of this process is the annual endorsement of a statewide priority acquisition program for land purchase which is submitted to the Minister.

CHAIR: That is done on an annual basis, is it?

Ms MURRAY: That is correct. Endorsement of the program ensures that available funds are dedicated to the highest priority properties and in line with the Government's policies and that they have been filtered through a rigorous assessment of a much longer list of potential lands.

CHAIR: You do all the scientific work or the assessment work and then that just stays in abeyance until things roll down through the priority list. Have you always got available to you the data that supports a decision to pick a particular acquisition if funds are available?

Ms MURRAY: Yes and that information would be updated to reflect current circumstances. For example, some owners might approach us to say they are interested in selling a particular block of land, their circumstances may change and they will say they will come back to us a couple of years down the track. That property we would be aware of, it is not officially on offer, but we would have done work to assess that property.

CHAIR: For commercial reasons, or shall we say State budget reasons, you obviously do not make that list publicly available?

Ms MURRAY: No, we do not. Well, I guess some of the land that is on offer to us is also on the public market. There would be some properties that owners have put on the market and the property has not sold and that may be a motivation for them to approach the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

CHAIR: In terms of the list, if you like, of potential priorities down the track, do you not ever approach those property owners until you are ready to go, or are they made aware that you are thinking about their particular property?

Ms MURRAY: The way our program works at the moment is that people are approaching us. In terms of the national parks establishment plan, it identifies the characteristics of the types of properties we are interested in.

CHAIR: Not particular properties?

Ms MURRAY: Not particular properties. It is very much the case that we wait for people to come to us and there is more people coming to us than, as you have alluded to, the budget for that program. As I mentioned, there is only a small number of properties that will actually proceed through to acquisition in any one year and then subsequent inclusion in the national parks system. It is influenced by the available funding and the normal types of issues that arise in any kind of property transaction, such as negotiations, circumstances of a vendor changing, the need for delayed settlement, for example, or other circumstances relevant to purchasing property.

I mentioned earlier that the property assessment criteria and the reserve establishment guidelines are not only concerned with biodiversity values but a range of socio and economic factors. As noted in the New South Wales submission, National Parks recognises this is an area that needs further review and attention to really make sure that we are capturing as much input as we can on the implications for a community when decisions are being made about individual properties. There are significant differences between the social and economic issues affecting rural and regional communities in western and central parts of the State compared to those along the east and along the coast and these need to be considered carefully.

I note that impacts on councils are a particular part of the terms of reference for the inquiry and I understand you have already had submissions from some councils and the Local Government and Shires Association [LGSA] especially regarding the effects of new parks on council rates. As mentioned, National Parks is aware of these concerns. We will be working to review and update the reserve establishment guidelines to ensure that additional socio and economic information for a property is taken into account before decisions are made to acquire land. It will help us better understand the pressures already facing communities and particular areas of vulnerability. It will also mean we can better target early investment in establishing new parks to ensure that benefits flow to communities as soon as possible.

Before I conclude it is worth touching on one final aspect of the finetuning that is undertaken when developing a national park. Mr Shanahan will talk through these slides, but I would just like to note that when lands are acquired for inclusion in the national park system it is sometimes the case that they include areas that are of lower conservation value. As Mr Conroy has mentioned, when we can we try to negotiate with landowners before acquisitions so these lands can be subdivided or separated out from the land when they are transferred. However, sometimes that is not possible before acquisition occurs. In some cases that is simply because landowners are not interested in subdividing their land but want to sell it as one package. Where this occurs we take steps to rationalise boundaries and dispose of lands on the open market that are not required for the park. Mr Shanahan is going to talk through two particular examples relating to Yanga and Toorale.

CHAIR: When we were out at Yanga the divisional or regional manager there made us aware of the fact that they are going to try to acquire some of the private properties to the east and north of the lake, not for the value of the property themselves, because they are of low biodiversity value, but for the water. Would it be fair to say that in the past few years acquisition of water for parks has become a bigger issue for you?

Ms MURRAY: Acquisition has occurred under a specific program that the Commonwealth funded: the Rivers Environmental Restoration Program. There were four properties acquired under that particular program. Most of the water acquisition work is really led through Commonwealth or other agencies.

CHAIR: So future acquisitions with respect to water probably will rely on the Commonwealth injecting the funds to do it, is that right?

Ms MURRAY: That would be my view. In particular I think the fact that water-sharing plans mean that land and water are decoupled affects that too. So the example of Hunthawang that I referred to at the start when we went through the 10-year slides, it already had a water-sharing plan that decoupled the land and the water and the owner separately sold the water on the open market and just sold us the land.

Mr SHANAHAN: That was the point I was going to make as well. The water-sharing plans will see where land is offered, it will be offered dry. We probably will not see the water and land offer occurring. Where you do not have a water-sharing plan the water allocations are tied to the land; you cannot separate them. That is what happened with Toorale. So to acquire the water you have to acquire the land and in acquiring the land you acquire the water. You could not decouple Toorale. Yanga was much the same. Yanga and Toorale I guess are highly specific examples and probably the highest profile examples we will ever see occurring in New South Wales along these lines. We are more likely to see the Hunthawangs, which are much smaller properties. We

buy the land dry and the water entitlement is onsold into the rest of the community for reallocation into irrigation into the surrounding land. That I think will probably be a more common occurrence, rather than the nature of what happened with say Yanga and Toorale.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: Why is that? Is that because with Yanga and Toorale it is more flood plain? Is it banked water, not pumped water? Why is that not decoupled; everything else is decoupled in this State?

Mr SHANAHAN: It depends on whether there is a water-sharing plan in place. It does not matter whether it is flood plain flow and general entitlements in that regard or whether it is pumped; it is whether there is a water-sharing plan. A water-sharing plan allows for a decoupling or a separate market can operate for the water compared with the land. Whereas when there is no water-sharing plan the old 1912 Water Act means that the land and the water are absolutely coupled together. You cannot separate them in terms of their sale. You can give up the water rights if you wish to—a landowner can just hand them back.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: So there is no water-sharing plan?

Mr SHANAHAN: If there is no water-sharing plan the land and water are absolutely coupled together.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: That is pretty rare though?

Mr SHANAHAN: It is changing across the State as water-sharing plans come into play.

Ms MURRAY: I should also mention that there are stock and domestic water rights that are attached to land, so we would hold some licences and obviously they are very small amounts.

Mr SHANAHAN: I should ask before talking about Yanga, is the Committee aware from its visit down there of the nature of the sale? Do you want me to cover it here or is the Committee aware of it from the visit to Yanga already?

CHAIR: We had a bit of a run through of the reasons and the nature of the acquisition and the divestment of some of the assets and then the plan for further acquisitions, all related to trying to get water to separate parts of the park. That was pretty much the briefing we had.

Mr SHANAHAN: Very briefly then, the blue areas have been sold. They were cropping land and were sold at public auction. There are some hatched areas just to the south-west of Yanga Lake itself. They are a bit hard to see but there is some hatched area there. That is land that is yet to be sold. It is being cropped in the meantime. It is cleared wheat country and it is being cropped under a sharecropping arrangement in the meantime. There is a specific arrangement happening there with a landowner. It cannot be a public process because that landowner has land adjacent to Yanga Lake that we are interested in. We have land that he is interested in for cropping. So we are going to end up doing a partial swap, partial sale arrangement with that landowner. It has had to go through a probity check because it is not an open market. It is not a public process; it is an individual transaction. That is well and truly in play now to get that finalised.

The additional land purchase that occurred—there is a lake up further to the north called Lake Tala. There was some land acquired there and onsold: a property called Kieeta was sold to us. We had to buy the entire property; it was the only way we could get it. Yanga was the same. It often is the case where the landowner does not do the subdivision; they just sell it in total. So the property Kieeta was purchased. As part of that exercise separately the water entitlements associated with Lake Tala were also acquired. The four landowners there agreed to the sale of those—they were not large. So there were some gaps in Yanga. The property Kieeta held some land that effectively broke Yanga up into separate sections. So we bought Kieeta, added those to the park and onsold the rest.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: That is the two areas defined by the red dotted outline?

Mr SHANAHAN: That is correct. They were Kieeta-related. There is Crown lease as well as private land. Most of Kieeta in fact is the white country to the east of that and that has been onsold to a neighbour.

CHAIR: That park, I guess you could say, is an example of the linear area definition, but it is so because of the riverine qualities of the park not necessarily the floodplain qualities or the rest. Would that be correct?

Mr SHANAHAN: That is correct. There are parts of Yanga—you can see how narrow it is in some areas, but the land outside that is cropping land. It is expensive to buy and of no value to us other than a very expensive rehabilitation process, which we are not about to undertake. So inevitably some parks are going to have a less than desirable boundary—that is just the nature of it.

CHAIR: But the acquisitions that you are making are being made for the water, not the land?

Mr SHANAHAN: In relation to Kieeta it was both.

CHAIR: Sorry, I am talking about the ones that are proposed.

Mr SHANAHAN: There is potential to improve the watering of Yanga through the acquisition of land further east. There is a group of landowners in that area—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: This is the Nimmie-Caira.

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes. There have been no decisions made about that at this stage.

Ms MURRAY: And it is being led by the Office of Water.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Have you people made any offers on the land as yet?

Mr SHANAHAN: No.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Has there been any discussion about purchasing that land?

Mr SHANAHAN: The landowners have approached us to talk to us and the Commonwealth. They are mainly dealing with the Commonwealth around the water issues. If that happened to come about, it would mean more environmental water into Yanga. A lot of the watering into Yanga is controlled out of Nimmie-Caira, not all of it but a lot of it is, depending on how it is managed through that system.

CHAIR: So any scientific assessment you did there would be probably more related to the use of the water than to restoration of what is otherwise very good cropping land?

Mr SHANAHAN: There is a lot of land in Nimmie-Caira that is of no interest to us whatsoever as land. So Yanga, as you can see, also then has two white in-holdings down in the south. The one adjacent to Yanga Lake itself is retained by the original landowners, the Blacks. They have got long-term plans there of perhaps establishing some sort of ecotourism arrangement adjacent to Yanga Lake itself. The other larger area is just a private landowning, largely cleared and cropped. It is just one of those issues where in the growth of Yanga over time they did not acquire that. That land is really not on offer to us and it is not of great interest, except maybe some marginal areas where it might improve the boundary in some cases but essentially it will remain an in-holding.

CHAIR: I direct you to the large squarish area surrounding that in-holding. What is the intrinsic biodiversity or land value to Parks of that surrounding land?

Mr SHANAHAN: It is in natural condition. It is black box country, not so much red gum—

CHAIR: It is not cleared?

Mr SHANAHAN: No, it is black box and mulga. It just happens to be it was probably an area of better soil and that was found and cleared.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The black box country is clay soil is it?

Mr SHANAHAN: Heavy clays.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That in-holding there would be a lighter sandy soil quality?

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes, for wheat. The next one is Toorale, which has also got, as you know, large areas—about 2,000 hectares—of cropped irrigation country, roughly where that circle is. It is more of a rectangular shape than a circle. It is being used to grow a variety of crops, including cotton. We gave consideration as to whether or not that should be on-sold. In other circumstances, we may have done so, notwithstanding that it is embedded within the body of Toorale, given its size. But we are now in a part of the country where, without irrigation water, you are not going to achieve dryland cropping in that area. The Commonwealth has the water entitlements for this area, so it was our assessment that there was little value in trying to on-sell a parcel of land that was going to be of little interest because it does not have the water available to it for cropping.

CHAIR: It would only be good for grazing.

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes, potentially for grazing. But then what we create is the very thing we do not want—a new holding in the park à la Yanga and other areas where we have the park surrounding another parcel of land. We try to avoid that, if we possibly can. The decision was made to retain it and ultimately to rehabilitate it and consolidate the park in total, especially as it does not have water available to it to continue its cropping. Other areas were left out of that reserve. There is a quarry that was left out of the reserve for purposes of council's use. There is a public road and travelling stock route just to the general north of the Darling River that was also excluded from the reservation.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: Now that you are the neighbour, do you still maintain the fences? Is it still maintained as a travelling stock route [TSR]?

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: As an operational travelling stock route.

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes.

Ms MURRAY: In terms of operational travelling stock routes, I think our experience in the western part of the State is that they are not used very frequently due to changes in transportation in terms of stock, but obviously they are accessed from time to time.

CHAIR: Because of the drought.

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes. The issue with our Western Division travelling stock routes and drought is that it does not operate in the same way as in the east. Because western travelling stock routes are incorporated with the western lands lease, they are grazed along with the rest of the western lands lease. There is no particular separation of the grazing that occurs in the Western Division on travelling stock routes and the rest of the property.

Ms MURRAY: When they are owned by a private person.

Mr SHANAHAN: Yes, when they are owned by a private western lands leaseholder. When it comes to drought, the travelling stock route is just as grazed as the rest of it, which is different to the Central Division of New South Wales.

Ms MURRAY: That travelling stock route shown in the slide, we would hold a lease over that travelling stock route.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you have the right to exclude travelling stock during droughts, or, if you get an application for stock to move through there, are you obliged to let them go through?

Mr SHANAHAN: Under the Act, a travelling stock route like that, because it is sandwiched between park, needs the Minister to give his or her consent to stock travelling along a travelling stock route in a circumstance like that. Where it has park either side of it, the Minister has to give consent to stock travelling through a travelling stock route that runs through a reserve: outside it, no; or, if it is only on one side, no. The Act has a

provision in it that where the travelling stock route has park either side of it, the Minister has to give consent. It is so rare in western New South Wales, it never arises. I cannot remember a single application ever coming in, in my whole time in the agency.

Ms MURRAY: When we checked, there had not been any for the past 10 years.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: There are differences in both areas of the State conservation area [SCA] and the national park. What are the different management practices that are applied in reality? Are those two separate parcels of land managed any differently, or do they just have different titles?

Ms MURRAY: In practice, the management would be very similar. But because there would have been some exploration licences over parts of those areas as a result of our negotiations with the Resources and Energy Division of the Department of Primary Industries [DPI], it would have been an agreed negotiated outcome across government that the State conservation area reserve category be applied. That State conservation area reserve category applies to 147 of our 863 parks. It does allow exploration to occur.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are there currently any investigations into extensions of those areas either on the Darling or the Warrego rivers?

Ms MURRAY: Not to my knowledge, but it would be occurring probably more at a branch level. But there is certainly nothing I have seen recently.

Mr SHANAHAN: I am not aware of any properties on offer. That is the only way it would come about—if someone actually came to us and said, "We're interested in selling", adjacent to that. I am not aware of any at this point. We are not out there targeting any particular properties at the moment, that is for sure, and there is nothing on offer that I am aware of that is out there.

Ms MURRAY: In wrapping up, I would just like to briefly summarise the main points that we have covered today. Firstly, the science behind national parks has taken great leaps forward in the past 20 years. We have a settled approach used across Australia for planning and designing the reserve system based on the CAR principles—comprehensiveness, representativeness and adequacy. These underpin the national parks establishment plan and all decision-making about how and when the park system will be developed into the future.

However, we know that steps need to be taken to continually improve the way we plan national parks, especially to take into account the different needs and pressures in communities in western and central New South Wales. As mentioned in the presentation, for those reasons we intend to review the national parks establishment plan, continue our review of the reserve establishment guidelines and, in particular, enhance our approach to examining the social and economic consequences of proposed new national parks, including on both local communities and local councils. Thank you for your time today.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Hopefully this would have occurred before acquisition, but I have a question on the appropriate and final description of the area of land that you are acquiring. I will explain what I mean by that. When I bought my property, I had an idea in my mind of what I wanted it to look like. It was degraded agricultural block when I bought it. I had a vision in my mind how I wanted it to look in 10 or 15 years time. When you bought Yanga or Toorale, what process did you go through to build that vision of what Toorale and Yanga would look like physically in 50 or 100 years time? What was the vision that you worked around? Having built that vision, what sort of tools are at your disposal to try to arrive at realisation of that vision?

Ms MURRAY: I can possibly talk about the very front end of the decision and perhaps Bob will comment further on the vision. You will have seen in the information provided in the Government's submission that there is often quite a gap between the purchase of land and its gazettal. In that intervening time, there are a lot of very practical decisions that need to be made about boundaries, surveys and other particular uses. For example, are there things such as the quarry that you would be excluding? Where are the roads? Are there other access tracks that we would be wanting to include or not include in the park? Are there particular facilities that we are looking at building in certain parts of the park that might mean you would keep some areas as one reserve category or another reserve category? In terms of that longer vision, perhaps Bob will comment on some of those tools.

Mr CONROY: It is an interesting question. In terms of the longer vision, what we are hoping to achieve in the management of our parks and reserves is really defined in the objects of our Act. But if you were to ask me what the vision is, the vision is to have a healthy ecosystem; to try to restore the natural values of the land that we have acquired; to protect the cultural heritage values, which includes the stories—both the historic stories and the Aboriginal stories that might exist. And it is to have community engagement and community involvement in the management of the place.

So it is providing opportunities to use, enjoy and appreciate the park, and it is providing opportunities for our neighbours and for the local community to participate and to get value out of the establishment of a park. So the sort of general vision is to have a park where the natural values are protected, where the threats are properly managed—threats of fire and pests and weeds—and to have a strong sense of community ownership and community value applied to the park that we manage.

We do that through—I mentioned earlier—the preparation of a draft plan of management. In an ideal situation our staff sit down with the local Rural Fire Service brigade, they sit down with neighbours, they sit down with local government and they prepare a draft. The draft is also prepared in conjunction with our regional advisory committee, which has representation from a number of peak groups. So before it goes on exhibition it goes through that consultative process to develop the draft and then it is on public exhibition. We receive submissions from right across the State.

Those submissions are then analysed and presented back to the regional advisory committee, which gives us advice in terms of how the plan might be adapted or amended to account for the comments received, and then it gets referred to our peak advisory council, which does not have the regional representatives but has the peak body representation sitting on that. They look at the draft plan to consider how well it fits with the general policies that we have within the National Parks and Wildlife Service and they comment on the regional advisory committee comments. All of that is then sent through to the Minister to consider before she adopts the plan.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So in the case of the Brigalow region, for example, there is a lot of documentation that suggests that most of that country was not a dense forest prior to European occupation of Australia but it was in fact quite an open forest. Do you have a vision for that area, for example, that would try to return it to what it looked like prior to white settlement or do we just accept the fact that it is now a dense, overgrown forest and that is how it will remain?

Mr CONROY: What we try to do is manage it for the best outcome in terms of the values that exist there. So whether that is a dense forest or an open forest, it is difficult to say.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So its pre-European condition is not necessarily a precursor to where you are heading with it?

Mr CONROY: Not necessarily but pre-European condition or pre-1770 condition is something that we do try to achieve. When you try to identify what is the natural state for the vegetation that exists on the park or reserve, and certainly making a reference to what it might have looked like pre-1770 is something that we would hope to achieve, we do not manage our reserves to protect the values in a steady state. We acknowledge that systems change over time and that we are more about conservation than preservation—that is probably the best way of describing it. So if we acquire a property and the vegetation is in a certain state we are not about preserving that state; we are about acknowledging that systems are dynamic and operate along with the environmental values that exist and need to be managed.

It is more about the intrinsic values for a property: Why did we acquire it? For example, there might be a koala population that exists on the property. If that is the most significant value—you will find that there is a section in our plan of management which identifies the most significant values of each of the parks and reserves that we manage—and identifying those most significant values, they are the ones that we focus on. Whether we manage it for a closed forest or an open forest will depend on what the significant values are. If for example the significant values are as a cultural landscape, then we will manage it as a cultural landscape rather than a natural landscape.

Mr SHANAHAN: Mr Colless mentioned Yanga and our vision for management around there. Just one sort of real-time example I suppose, water management on that property over the course of time and the construction of levee banks and the like and the way water was held saw red gum expand into areas that it would

not naturally grow into. It was expanding into black box country and during the drought suffered incredibly. You have seen the images. The objective of management around that is to not retain that red gum in those areas where it should not be growing. The objective is to re-establish black box or allow it to regrow into those areas. There are areas where red gum should not be growing. So the vision around management there will be to allow those longer-term processes to reassert themselves so that water where it would naturally occur and support red gum does so and where it does not, to allow the black box and other species to re-establish.

The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD: I want to be clear. One of the consequences of this red gum is potentially a reduction of red gum. The consequence of the acquisition of the park will be a reduction in red gum forest.

Mr SHANAHAN: There will be a small reduction. What we have is a growth of red gums. It is not very old; it is not old growth by any means. This is mostly young trees that have grown, in effect, artificially as a result of the artificial water management that occurred on those properties. One of the objects of management will be around more allowing natural water flows to occur, inundation in particular, into areas where it would naturally occur, not artificially occur because of the construction of levees and gates and things like that. So a lot of the work on Yanga is around re-establishing the more natural water flows and water inundation patterns. It will mean that there are some areas of red gum regrowth or growth that has occurred where it would not otherwise have normally occurred. The focus will be to retain the core red gum habitat as red gum and in some areas allow black box to re-establish itself on areas where red gum has in effect artificially grown.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In effect, if you have that vision about what the forest or the park should look like, you should have a vision about what that park should look like in 100 years time.

Mr SHANAHAN: We call them objectives of management.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Sure, whatever you call them but you have to have some idea of where you are heading in relation to the management. That would then suggest that in order to get to that point in 100 years time or whatever time frame you are looking at, that park has to be very carefully managed and actively managed. Obviously active management is the application of a range of different tools to get you to where you want to be in 100 years time.

Mr SHANAHAN: That is right.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is there anything in that tool box that you specifically exclude or is there anything in that tool box that you are more likely to focus on as being the main tool that you use to get to an end point?

Mr CONROY: No, there is nothing that we would exclude. The objectives of our Act speak to the conservation of the natural and cultural values so any tool that we have available to us to achieve that objective, we are more than happy to use. There is nothing that would be excluded. An example is that generally grazing is seen as a detrimental impact on conservation values but there are a few reserves where grazing is a useful technique to manage the unique values that I mentioned before that exist in particular reserves. There are two that come to mind: the Kuma Nature Reserve near Cooma, where there are endangered reptile species that exist, where it has been shown that grazing can be useful as a technique in managing the habitat for those reptiles; and, similarly, at Oolambeyan National park in the south west of the State where grazing is a useful technique in terms of managing the habitat of the plains wanderer.

CHAIR: I call this in-camera session to a conclusion. I thank you, Mr Conroy, and your staff for giving us an excellent presentation. Given the somewhat lay nature of Committee members, it was very well done and put together. It was informative and easy to understand.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee adjourned at 10.40 a.m.