

Submission  
No 227

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN  
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Biodiversity must be maintained. Biodiversity can be maintained in a reserve system. The conservation of reserves requires management which is expensive but there are financial benefits to NSW. The financial benefits may not be obvious. Reserves are a cultural expectation for the Australian population.



# Hunter Bird Observers Club

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## **Inquiry into the management of public in New South Wales**

### **Submission from the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. Newcastle, NSW**

The Hunter Bird Observers Club's (HBOC) submission does not include comments on all subjects included in the Terms of Reference.

Australians by and large consider that wildlife species, particularly birds, are of value which is attested to by the number of community organisations the core value of which is the protection of wildlife. NSW has at least 14 organisations stretching from Ballina to the far South Coast dedicated to the welfare of birds and there are numerous organisations dedicated to plants, wilderness, and other wildlife. NSW's biodiversity is seriously threatened and under increasing pressure from a range of traditional threats, such as the clearing of native vegetation and the impacts of exotic pests, as well as more recent factors, such as climate change. Australia's woodland bird populations are decreasing at an alarming rate with land clearing the main cause (Paton *et al.* 2010). To maintain them in populations above critically endangered levels, adequate areas of appropriate natural habitats, including some potentially economically productive areas, need to be permanently reserved. This is nowhere more urgent than in the Hunter Valley of NSW where only small remnants of woodland remain on the rich soils of the central floor of the Valley (Peake 2006) and these are being cleared for open-cut coal mining and associated infrastructure.

The conservation of biodiversity is financially beneficial to the farming industry. According to Lindenmayer (2011 p. 4) investment in intact ecosystems has been found to have a cost-benefit ratio of 1:100 and the rivers, wetlands and floodplains of the Murray-Darling Basin are estimated to provide \$A187 billion in ecosystem services annually.

A system for the conservation of Crown land including national parks and reserves has become part of the Australian cultural expectation and national parks, for instance, provide a relatively inexpensive holiday destination. Reserves, including Travelling Stock Reserves, are also the best way to conserve the rich and diverse range of vegetation and animals, water catchments, Aboriginal and European heritage. Conservation land requires management which is costly and may not return **a financial profit**. With the ongoing increasing Australian population, the alternative to management, i.e. no boundaries or management, may lead to undesirable consequences – people putting themselves in the way of danger, more wildfires, destruction of sensitive vegetation communities etc. This scenario would cause a greater drain on the finances than the current system.

The required professional management of conservation land requires a staff with a greater level of skills than ever before in our 200 years history. Many of the problems associated with national parks, for instance, are due to inadequate on the ground staffing levels. In NSW, 350 jobs are to be cut from the Office of Environment and Heritage over the next few years. The national park estate may be increasing, but the funding to manage land sensibly is not. As a result, unfair criticism may be levelled at the national park system when, for instance, neighbouring properties are damaged through fire or crops are eaten by the burgeoning population of common kangaroo species. The ability to carry out effective pest and feral animal, weed and fire control all need some scientific input followed by the implementation of results by sufficient numbers of ground staff. Successive state governments have reduced funding for the environment to a point where only basic management is possible and some reserves are not managed at all. Fortunately NSW has a generous volunteer body of people who work for good environmental outcomes.

HBOC makes the following comments on some management issues

### **Feral and pest animal control**

The impact of feral animals on Australian mammals, birds and reptiles is enormous and is among the most urgent of problems to be addressed. Currently there may be no effective way of achieving eradication of feral animals on the Australian mainland. A range of strategies may be needed which include, initially, a science-based knowledge of their basic ecology and a means of quantifying their impact. For each feral animal species different approaches will be needed. Effort should be placed on controlling feral animals to a point where their impact is less serious rather than eradication at this point in the process. This would require an increase in the employment of scientists which may be a more expensive option, but is likely to be more effective. Utilising recreational shooters in national parks is undesirable for a range of reasons:

- recreational shooters may not be sufficiently knowledgeable in identifying mammals and cryptic bird species such as quail and button-quail, especially in low light conditions
- native fauna would be put at risk
- the safety of other people using the park would be compromised
- effective outcomes in feral animal control is not demonstrated
- “pretty” animals such as wild deer should not be protected in any way; they are a key threatening process and should be controlled as such

## **Weed control**

Whereas it may be desirable to eradicate weeds, many weed species may be of benefit to some bird species where weeds are the only remaining understorey, e.g. lantana. Bird species use understorey for nesting and foraging. There is no point in the large scale removal of weedy understorey without a program of revegetation where plants are maturing before a site is cleared and importantly, before establishing what species are present on that site.

## **Fire control**

Inappropriate fire regimes are a threat to people (the WA experience), woodlands and forests and wildlife. For birds, fire can be devastating. The immediate response of a bird to fire depends of the extent, speed and intensity of the fire. Many birds may escape but some will be overcome by heat and smoke. Some birds of prey will benefit and be attracted to the fire front in search of injured or charred remains (Olsen & Weston 2005). Burning should never be carried out during bird breeding season usually from early spring to about February for obvious reasons. However, some large forest owl species and the Lyrebird are winter breeders and surveys for their presence should be undertaken before burning takes place.

Most landscapes consist of different types of vegetation. Prescribed burning must be appropriate to the vegetation and a broad scale, indiscriminate burning is undesirable. Controlled burning on a **patchwork basis** is ideal so that sizeable patches of each vegetation type remain until burnt sites have recovered. The Australian Wildlife Conservancy uses a range of strategies in the management of their land assets which may serve as a model for some aspects.

## **Public Access**

Research is starting to establish that being able to access 'wild areas' benefits people's health which in turn would positively affect the amount of money dedicated to poor health issues.

Public access to conservation reserves should be encouraged and maintained as appropriate to the landscape. Access to dangerous areas should be limited but in some cases occasional supervised access as tours on otherwise "off limits" formed roads or tracks by responsible 4WD clubs should be acceptable. The overuse of some beaches e.g. Worimi Conservation Lands north of Newcastle NSW, where at the peak holiday periods over 1500 vehicles/day visit, is detrimental to beach ecology and particularly to beach-nesting species such as the Australian Pied Oystercatcher, Red-capped Plover and Little Tern. Horse-riding, while it may be perceived of as harmless, causes damage to the vegetation and ground-/beach-nesting birds and needs to be strictly limited. It should not be introduced to areas where there is no history of use.

Australia is by law bound to protect its natural attributes: e.g. by the International Convention on Biodiversity, Ramsar Convention on the 'wise use of wetlands', international treaties to protect migratory birds and their habitats. The NSW government is a signatory to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment whereby the Australian Government and all State Governments agreed to the establishment of a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of protected areas. There is still much work to be done as many biogeographic subregions remain under represented.

HBOC believes that the system of reserves in NSW should continue to be managed for people and biodiversity. We believe that this management should be supported by an increase in funding so that staffing levels are appropriate to the needs of the reserve system and should include people with expert knowledge.

Submission compiled by Ann Lindsey for the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. August 2012

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