

**Submission
No 314**

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

Name: Mr John E Greig

Date received: 29/08/2012

Mr. Robert Brown, MLC,
Chair, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5,
Legislative Council,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir,

Re: Submission to “The Inquiry into the Management of Public Lands in NSW”

I am 68 years of age, and have been bushwalking and camping in National Parks, State Forests and other areas of the Australian bush since I was 10 years old. Since 1977, I and my wife, who is now 70 years of age, have been utilising a 4WD vehicle to facilitate touring, camping, sightseeing and walking in areas all over Australia.

My wife and I are also “neighbours” of Royal National Park living as we do in Bundeena, NSW, which nestles on the shore of Port Hacking and is otherwise totally surrounded by Royal National Park. We have been resident in Bundeena for 41 years.

I take great satisfaction from, and interest in our touring, and have always tried to “do the right thing”. I have also very actively encouraged others to do the same. As an example of this, I would encourage you to go to www.tlcc.com.au and click on a button “Member’s Info” and then from the drop down menu click on “Track Permits”. This will open up a set of comprehensive documents which I originally put together in 2005, and which I update on a regular basis. The documents set out the permit requirements for each State on an Australia wide basis pertaining to accessing areas of Native Title, and any other area, whether native title or not, where special or unusual conditions apply in relation to access. The information includes how and where to apply, any costs involved, any special conditions which apply, and a whole range of contact details and other helpful information. The documents also cover access to some State Forests and National Parks Australia wide. They are reproduced in about a dozen other websites around Australia.

I would also encourage you to go to www.escapewithet.com and register on their site and then access their “Escape” e-magazine. In most issues to date of that e-magazine you will find a short story written by me, with photos, of a 4WD trip to a whole range of unusual places in Australia. I should add here that there is no financial benefit or any consideration whatever provided to me, or to the organisation under whose banner I write the stories for the e-magazine. I do it to try to awaken people’s interest in the

fantastic areas and sites to be visited in this fabulous land. The e-magazine itself though is a “commercial” enterprise.

I cite the above matters as a demonstration of my bona fides and of the seriousness and care with which we approach our visitation to areas of the Australian bush and the love and respect we have for such places.

If you do go to the “Escape” e-magazine, it might come as a surprise that you will not find a story from me covering any area in NSW. The reason for that is that accessibility by motor vehicle to the more remote and unusual areas of NSW National Parks and particularly the access to vehicle based/facilitated camping in the Parks can be so very difficult. And previously, the NP&WS used to charge an exorbitant fee for a private person like me to use images in a current publication that may have been taken 5 and 10 years ago. Thankfully now, and to their very great credit, that policy has changed, so that I can now use such images without applying for either a permit or paying a fee.

But in relation to access, that is a very different story. Over the years there have been so many areas in NSW which have been declared as National Parks, or worse have been declared as “Wilderness Areas” where traditional access routes, which have been available for use for many years, have ended up being closed. The primary reason for such closures (outside of wilderness areas) always seems to be a lack of funding for maintenance. So what generally happens is that the particular National Parks and Wildlife Office choose to manage the access route by not managing it, and simply closing it. The end result is that in many such areas there has been a proliferation of noxious weeds including blackberries and lantana, etc, and access for fire fighting purposes is compromised by fallen trees and general debris on the tracks. It also flies in the face of the more recent policy objective adopted by NP&WS, (following a direction by Government as I understand it) to increase their visitation rates to national parks by 20%.

A typical example of what I would see personally as the needless and mindless closure of access is Lady Carrington Drive in Royal National Park. Lady Carrington Drive has existed for something to the order of 100 years. It was originally a carriage drive built for horse drawn carriages. Access had been allowed by motor vehicles up until the bushfires of I think, 1994, when regrettably some bush fire fighters from Waterfall died fighting a fire. They were using Lady Carrington Drive as an access. Due to safety concerns regarding burnt trees falling after that fire, Lady Carrington Drive was closed to vehicles, and has never been re-opened. Access currently is only available to walkers or push bike riders. Thus access is denied to some of the most beautiful and scenic areas of Royal National Park, unless one is prepared to walk some 9 kilometres or ride a bike. And yet access had previously been available by motor vehicle or horse drawn carriage, for something like 100 years.

I did make a submission to the Draft Plan of Management which first contained the proposal to maintain the closure of access to Lady Carrington Drive for all but walkers and push bike riders. I reasoned that if the Drive was now safe for walkers and push bike riders then it was certainly safe for car drivers, and thus the original reasoning behind its closure no longer existed. I also suggested that as a worst case scenario, perhaps the Drive could be made available to motor vehicles on say, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, thus giving disabled visitors, retired persons and senior citizens the opportunity to enjoy

some of the most beautiful scenery that Royal has to offer, on a limited basis, and at a time when normal visitation would be quite low. But no, you had to be fit enough to walk it, or ride a push bike, or I guess be pushed along it in a wheel chair to get to enjoy its beauties. Such was the then attitudes of the so-called expert planners, and perhaps they still exist today.

A more recent phenomenon which has occurred is the large volume of redundancies offered and accepted in National Parks. It is of such significance that the numbers of Rangers and Park maintenance staff available to undertake the work required appears to have diminished to the point that it is simply not physically possible to do anywhere near the maintenance, weed and feral animal control, that is required to satisfactorily and appropriately manage a national park. As I understand it in Royal for example, 30% of the staff were offered and accepted redundancies.

Whilst I am not certain of the exact figures, one Ranger (not based in Royal) with whom I have had some contact, now has something to the order of 7 or so National Parks for which he is responsible, and he is as I understand it, the lone Ranger (so to speak) and only has some two or three maintenance staff available to assist him. And some of the Parks for which he is responsible are truly iconic. This is a ludicrous state of affairs.

It appears that whilst the National Parks & Wildlife Service "acquisitions" budget has a quite large amount of money available to purchase lands to turn into National Parks, there is nowhere near the necessary amount of money available in their budget to manage and maintain the pre-existing National Park estate to a satisfactory level, let alone maintain new acquisitions.

I note that Yanga and Toorale Stations have been specifically nominated within the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry as grazing properties which have in recent times (1995 in relation to Yanga) been acquired by the NP&WS and gazetted as National Parks. There is another that could be added to that list and that is the grazing property known as "Balmoral" just north of the Capertee Valley area which, whilst not as large as Yanga or Toorale, is yet another grazing property very recently bought by the NP&WS and gazetted as a National Park.

My wife and I have visited both "Yanga" and "Balmoral", and whilst both were obviously magnificent grazing properties in their own right, and the homesteads and other surrounding buildings and grounds are of enormous and very significant historical value, I wonder at the efficacy of the decisions to purchase them, when both offer landforms and habitats of a similar nature to other National Parks in the same localities. Both properties will require scores of years and seriously intensive management of the noxious and other weeds and feral animal problems that exist on them, before they could ever be considered as representative of the natural landscapes, habitats and flora and fauna of the area. And, certainly in the case of Yanga, the gardens and orchards contain "exotic" species such as roses and other ornamental flowering plants, orange, lemon, mandarin and grapefruit trees which normally would have no place within a National Park. But to remove them would mar forever the beauty and history and the general ambience of the immediate surrounds of the homestead which are both so indicative of their period.

I cannot in my own mind even begin to rationalize the thinking of the NP&WS in terms of the future management of all three properties, given the prices paid for them, when the buildings and very particularly the gardens will require intensive, ongoing and dedicated restoration and maintenance efforts in themselves, without even considering the work required to rehabilitate the land comprising the properties. These were grazing properties. Thus much of the native species of grass and other plants and flora edible to stock have been extensively grazed and trampled by hard hooved animals over a very long period of time. Weeds and the more aggressively growing introduced plants have though been kept somewhat in check by the grazing stock. But now that the stock have been removed, or are in the process of being removed, the weeds and other exotics, usually being very aggressive and hardy, will soon take over almost completely and crowd out the more slow growing native vegetation. Thus a very concerted, aggressive and prolonged effort at weed control will be required if any rehabilitation of the degraded native ground covers and other flora is to be achieved.

The thinking at times in the NP&WS seems to be “buy whatever you can get to increase the National Park estate; don’t worry about its environmental significance or its future management, just buy it”, which to my mind is a somewhat stupid approach to what is obviously a serious and very complex and ongoing management responsibility.

In relation to the many “wilderness areas” declared in NSW, it often appears to me that some such declarations have been used by the NP&WS to implement a strategy of “inactive” management. With vehicles being forbidden to enter, one can perhaps be forgiven for believing that the NP&WS seize on the opportunity to simply let such areas look after themselves regardless of the ravages of lantana, blackberries and other noxious weeds. Fire management in wilderness areas is also a matter of great concern when fire trails that previously existed have become overgrown and impassable due to fallen logs and other debris. I don’t think I would like to live on a rural property anywhere near a wilderness area.

In relation to vehicle based/facilitated camping in NSW National Parks, (my wife and I are still “tent” campers), the general thinking in Draft Plans of Management is to set up either “koppers log corrals” or “walk in” tent camping areas. Now if one wants to be herded together with everyone else in the Park so that you are forced to listen to other people’s loud music, drunken and romantic conversations and carryings on, then it might be OK. But if you want to camp in a more remote areas of a Park, where you have a good chance of being alone to enjoy the solitude, peace and ambience, then in so many cases you are out of luck if you are a vehicle based or facilitated camper.

The “koppers log corrals” are essentially designed for persons to park either a camper trailer or caravan in a rectangular area delineated by the “koppers” logs, and then park the car in front of the camper trailer or caravan. Now whilst that might be OK for camper trailers and caravans, it is usually hopeless for “tent” based campers as inevitably, the road/parking surfaces will sometimes be bitumen but more often gravel or rolled dirt, which is generally as hard as nails and as such one requires a jack hammer to drive a peg in, and is not conducive at all to comfortable tent camping.

The “walk in” camping areas are in essence designed for bush walkers who carry everything they require in a back pack. Almost inevitably the “walk in” areas are up to three hundred metres and more away from any parking area. When one is away from home for months at a time, or is catering for a family group, or even for people like my wife and I who no longer enjoy the back packing lifestyle, you need the vehicle beside the tent so that access is available to all of the items that at our time of life make camping just that much more comfortable and enjoyable. We would not even be able to carry our tent for the distance that some of the “walk in” camp sites require, let alone self inflating air beds, gas stove, cooking gear, food, etc.

Vehicle based/facilitated tent campers seem to be at the lowest end of the pecking order when it comes to the provision of opportunities for camping and touring in national parks.

Being a neighbour of Royal National Park, my wife and I these days harbour extremely serious concerns about the possible catastrophic effects of a future bushfire in the area. We have lived through three major bushfires in Royal National Park in the 41 years we have resided in Bundeena, and believe me; the fuel loads that are on the ground in that Park now are far more significant than at any time in the previous 41 years of our experience. The very high rainfall that has occurred annually since about 2006, has led to high growth rates, particularly of the under storey and heath vegetation, such that the growth along the sides of many roads in Royal is virtually impenetrable.

Such growth and ground fuel loads will almost certainly lead to a bushfire of the new “catastrophic” classification when one occurs. And it’s not a matter of if one occurs, but when one occurs, because as surely as night follows day, one will occur, and given the current drier conditions we are now experiencing it might be sooner rather than later. We have been very fortunate since 2006, in that significant rains have fallen during late spring and summer time, which has had the effect of dampening the bush, and thus easing the threat levels, but with the Southern Oscillation Index now getting back into El Nino territory, the threat level is rising by the day.

I have been so concerned at those threat levels in the last few years, that I have sent letters of concern to the Premier, with copies to the Minister for the Environment and the local Rural Fire Services Commander, begging that effective “protective burning” measures be instituted around the villages of Bundeena and Maianbar. Apart from one small pocket handkerchief sized protective burn a year or so ago, there has been virtually no other “protective burning” take place for about the last 10 years anywhere near the two villages. (A copy of one of those letters has been provided at the end of this submission).

When we first moved in to Bundeena, protective burning or hazard reduction, was generally carried out on an annual basis on a rotational plan around the villages, but recently I fear that the Rural Fire Services have given up in despair due to the unbelievably bureaucratic and difficult processes placed in their way when trying to secure approvals to undertake protective burning and hazard reduction. For example, an approval, which can take months to secure, might be given to hazard reduce in a specific area, on a specific weekend. That weekend then turns out to be too hot, or too windy, or too wet, or whatever, and the hazard reduction is not able to go ahead on that weekend. On the following weekend the

conditions are absolutely perfect for the hazard reduction to take place. Can the approval date simply be altered locally to facilitate the hazard reduction occurring? Not on your life. The Rural Fire Service has to start all over again and make a further full and detailed application, which again, will take months for an approval to be received, or to be rejected, which often means that the opportunity for that year can be totally lost. That is an absolutely ludicrous situation. One could be excused for thinking that the NP&WS are putting rules in place specifically designed to thwart the best efforts of the Rural Fire Services. There seems to be little thought given to the ultimate safety of the communities near to, or surrounded by National Parks.

Forests NSW do extremely well in managing their visitation and assisting and accommodating vehicle based/facilitated tent and other style of campers. They have also recently instituted a Permit system for "commercial" users of their Forests in relation to car rallies, large group "fun runs" and similar which require large organised groups of volunteers and participants, and for "commercial" filming and photography, etc. Whilst the applicability of such Permit processes to people like my wife and myself is very unclear, even following some detailed telephone discussions, Forests NSW have asked me to forward an email setting out my questions. This has been done, and no doubt I will be provided with an answer in due course.

As far as management of the natural estate is concerned, I think the management and rehabilitative processes applied by Forests NSW speak for themselves. There are a number of previously logged State Forests which have either been gazetted as, or were proposed to be Wilderness Areas, based on an assessment by officers of the NP&WS. Some of those forests had been logged extensively in the early 1900's and up to the 1940's and yet were considered to be of such pristine natural values as to qualify for nomination as a "wilderness area". The NP&WS could learn a lot from the general management practices of Forests NSW.

There is however a very distinct difference between the approach to vehicle based/facilitated campers taken by Forests NSW in comparison to that taken by NP&WS. Forests NSW have always welcomed the responsible and environmentally careful use of their forests for vehicle based touring, camping and sightseeing. The NP&WS on the other hand, have since about 1975, made people such as my wife and I feel like we are viewed as being environmental vandals, and second class citizens, and as such they seem to have gone out of their way to make access to and enjoyment of their Parks as difficult as possible. On the other hand, the backpacking bushwalker (which we were in our younger days), is seemingly placed on a pedestal as the epitomic and desirable visitor to National Parks. I can well remember reading once, or perhaps it was said to me by a senior member of the NP&WS, quite some time ago, that they "saw people visiting their parks as a necessary irritant". This at the time was no surprise. But thankfully, and perhaps due to the fact of just how short of funds the NP&WS are, they now are a little more welcoming.

The Department of Lands, or perhaps they are now Lands NSW, are another case in point. As I understand it, the Department of Lands has just one, single, solitary employee who is responsible for all of the maintenance and field work such as weed and feral animal control on all of the lands administered by the Department of Lands in the south eastern area of the State. Given that the

Department of Lands is perhaps the second or third largest land holder in the State that is an unbelievably ludicrous and just plain stupid state of affairs. Again, from my inquiries, it seems to be a situation brought about by the simple problem of a lack of funding.

In relation to the River Red Gum Forests in the southern Riverina area of the State, my wife and I have visited them, but have little personal knowledge or understanding of the issues surrounding their purchase and management. But from what I have read and heard in the last few years it would seem to me that there were some absolutely appalling, or perhaps seriously misinformed, or maybe just plain stupid decisions made in relation to their acquisition and management. However, I will leave the raising of such issues to others who are far more informed and knowledgeable about them than I could ever hope to be.

Perhaps we suffer from the problem in many areas of Government of having too many tertiary trained "experts" who, whilst being able to espouse theory and dogma, have little on-ground, practical experience, and in so many cases seem to suffer from a complete lack of common sense. To cite an example of this, (not in NSW but in Queensland); there was a couple who had lived for over 40 years as "squatters" in a very remote, and extremely difficult to reach location, on a privately operated pastoral lease, but with the lessee's full knowledge, blessing and consent. The "squatters" were totally self sufficient in their life style. The lessee, at over 80 years of age, sold out to the Qld National Parks. The "squatters" were told by the Qld National Parks that they had to leave their home of 40 years. However, the couple knew vastly more about the flora, fauna, avifauna, marine life, habitats, life cycles and distribution, and locations of very rare and endangered species on that pastoral lease, and the surrounding country than any person then employed by the Qld National Parks, and probably more than any living person. But they still had to go. Eventually however, through as I understand it, a couple of simple demonstrations of the existence of some rare and endangered species that the National Parks had no idea even existed in the area, there was a meeting held with them. I'm not yet aware of the eventual outcome of that meeting, but the circumstances do demonstrate that here was an opportunity for a National Park Service to tap into a vast knowledge bank about a new area that they had recently acquired, but the simple fact that the opportunity even existed didn't even dawn on the "experts" and was never explored until perhaps it was almost too late.

In closing, my wife and I have just returned from spending a considerable amount of time visiting a number of the better known National Parks in America, including Alaska. When I compare the general accessibility, modes of access available, camping opportunities for vehicle based/facilitated campers and the very welcoming and extremely helpful attitude of Ranger staff and other National Park employees in the USA, it certainly contrasts markedly with our general experiences in NSW over the last 20 years or so. The two could not be further apart. On a scale of 10, if the USA experience was about an 8 or 9, then our general experiences in NSW would rate about a 2 or at best a 3.

Yours faithfully,

John E Greig

Copy of letter to Premier begging for appropriate protective burning to be undertaken around the villages of Bundeena and Maianbar:

The Premier of New South Wales,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Premier,

I am seriously concerned that with a very wet summer over and winter approaching, once again there will not be one square centimetre of protective burning undertaken around the villages of Bundeena and Maianbar which sit on the edge of Royal National Park.

With fuel loads currently around 40 tonnes per hectare, Royal National Park is a ticking time bomb just waiting for the right conditions to explode into the worst conflagration in living memory.

We have lived in Bundeena for 40 years now, and over that period the amount of protective burning undertaken around our village and Maianbar has gradually diminished to now, absolute zero. As a result, fuel loads now are heavier than ever before in history.

We have so far survived the 1974, 1994, and the year 2000 major bush fires, but I am extremely fearful that with fuel loads as they are, and the right conditions prevailing, we might not survive the next conflagration. And, as surely as night follows day, there will be a next one; it might not be this next summer, or the one after that, but it WILL happen.

After each of the last three major fires, the State Premier of the day stood up and promised that there would be more protective burning undertaken, but like so many political promises, it has proven to be just empty rhetoric.

You, and the Minister, have a serious responsibility to protect the public from foreseeable disasters. Bushfires ARE both foreseeable and predictable, and there ARE steps that can be taken to protect life and property.

No one is asking that the whole of Royal National Park be protectively burnt, (although that of course is how the original inhabitants maintained the area). A simple 1 kilometre strip around the boundaries of the two villages every three years or so, would probably be quite sufficient; and it could be maintained annually in stages.

The best advice currently available from the Bundeena Rural Fire Services group, apart from preparing your property, seems to be to "increase your insurance". That's just not good enough. But, it may well be that the Rural Fire Captains have simply given up on ever being able to gain approval from the National Parks & Wildlife Service to undertake the appropriate protective burning.

A copy of this letter, and succeeding ones into the future, begging as this one does, for the appropriate protective burning to be undertaken on a regular basis, will be produced at the Judicial or (God forbid, Coroner's Inquest) into the loss of property (and hopefully not the loss of life), that will surely follow the next major fire that is waiting to happen if a proper and appropriate level of protective burning is not undertaken around the two villages.

In the best interests of the residents of Bundeena and Maianbar, please DIRECT the Minister to DIRECT the National Parks & Wildlife Service to undertake with the Rural Fire Service, the appropriate level of protective burning around the two villages of Bundeena and Maianbar at the earliest opportunity.

Yours faithfully,

John E Greig

C.C.: Minister for Environment and Heritage

Parliament House,

Macquarie Street,

SYDNEY NSW 2000

The Captain, Rural Fire Service,

50 Bundeena Drive,

BUNDEENA NSW 2230