

Submission  
No 245

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

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# COAST & WETLANDS SOCIETY INCORPORATED

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## **Inquiry into the Management of Public Lands in New South Wales .**

The Coast and Wetlands Society Incorporated welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Management of Public Lands in New South Wales.

### **Term of reference 1**

Over many decades there has been broad public and political support (across the political spectrum) for the establishment of conservation reserves (national parks, nature reserves, flora reserves, etc). This support has endured periods of controversy involving particular proposals in particular areas, but has survived and is underpinned by policy and legislation. For the last two decades the guiding principle for establishment of conservation reserves has been the maximising of conservation of biodiversity.

The majority of nations, including Australia, are signatories to the International Convention on Biological Diversity. The Convention gives priority to the conservation of biodiversity *in situ*. In Australia the major responsibilities for the conservation of terrestrial biodiversity lie with the States. Collectively the States and Commonwealth have been working to develop the National Reserve System. An important development in recent years has been the emergence of a number of non-government bodies as significant owners and managers of conservation reserves. Nevertheless, the majority of terrestrial conservation reserves in Australia will continue to be administered by State governments.

Secure conservation reserves are a key component of the global biodiversity conservation strategy but reserves need to be complemented by measures to conserve biodiversity on non-reserve land, both public and private.

The conservation of biodiversity is important in its own right, but is also essential to the maintenance of the ecosystem services and processes on which all life on Earth, including humans, depends.

The prime purpose of conservation reserves is the conservation of biodiversity, ecological services and processes and geodiversity. Reserves also play an important role in maintaining cultural heritage, both indigenous and European . However, it is always been the case that National Parks provide opportunities for public access for both informal and more organised recreation, provided that these activities do not compromise the conservation objectives set for particular parks.

The process of declaring new conservation reserves is a long one, and many proposals have been the subject of negotiation and discussion over prolonged periods. We recognise that declaration of public conservation reserves may affect the rating base for local government, and that this is an issue which has not been adequately addressed. We also aware of widespread perceptions that declaration of conservation reserves creates threats to neighbouring properties. We acknowledge that these views are sincerely held, but evidence is sparse.

This is an important issue where objective research is urgently required . We acknowledge that in certain instances elements of the claims will reflect genuine impacts on individuals and communities, and that these impacts need to be addressed. Nevertheless, any evaluation of impacts will need to address the overall costs and benefits (recognising that this terminology should not be constrained to economic cost benefit analysis- there important intangible values, which cannot readily be given dollar values, which have to be taken into consideration).

We would stress that the prime purpose of conservation reserves is conservation. However, we are aware of the claims of economic benefits from ecotourism that have been made at the time some new parks were declared. There is no doubt the visitation rates to some parks are such that parks provide major benefits to local and regional economies. It is also the case that images of the natural environment play an important part in attracting international tourists to Australia.

Parks in remote areas, far from other tourism facilities, will attract some more adventurous visitors or dedicated natural historians, but it would be unrealistic to expect visitation rates comparable with those of Royal National Park or Kosciusko. Nevertheless there is a niche market to be satisfied, and this may make a significant contribution to local economies. Local residents with knowledge of the history and ecology of local reserves should be encouraged to develop innovative tourism initiatives. However, the fundamental justification for declaration of formal reserves is the contribution they make to conservation of biodiversity( with the benefits that flow to society from that).

## **Term of reference 2**

Public land is managed by a very wide range of agencies. Those agencies whose principal function is land management are well aware of the need to manage weeds, pests and fire.

While there is criticism in some instances of their practices, we would suggest that, given the constraints of personnel and budget, State land management agencies perform well. Fuel management is necessarily hostage to weather during the winter so goals and targets cannot be met to a strict timetable, but strategic use of fuel reduction for asset protection is widely, and successfully, practised by State land management agencies and fire authorities. The number of environmental weeds escaping into the bush continues to increase, and for many species there is limited information on effective control measures. Public agencies in New South Wales have been active in developing control measures (in this regard it is unfortunate that the Commonwealth government did not continue funding of the Weeds CRC). Management of weeds and pests will be a never ending task, requiring continued commitment and funding, as well as on the ground collaboration between agencies, volunteer groups and land holders.

However, agencies with widely disbursed small parcels of land may not have any programs for active management in place. Indeed, those responsible for developing management programs may be unaware of the nature of their agency's property holdings. The Department of Planning holds many small parcels of lands. The Society has expressed concern for a number of years over the management (or rather mismanagement) of a plot of land held by the Department of Planning at Kurnell . This land supports a stand of littoral rainforest, an endangered ecological community. There has been encroachment on the rainforest from neighbouring properties and spread of garden plants into the understorey. Despite our raising the issue with the Department on several occasions, nothing appears to have been done.

Land set aside, sometimes many years ago, for transport corridors and infrastructure which has not, and is unlikely to ever, eventuate, is widespread and frequently poorly or not at all managed. The Society has, on a number of occasions, expressed concern at the lack of management of weeds , by government agencies, within the F6 corridor. This not only sets a bad example, but it hampers the efforts of neighbouring land holders who manage their land responsibly.

We would suggest that the Inquiry seeks responses from all departments and agencies, not only those that immediately spring to mind as land managers, as to whether they hold information on the environmental attributes of the whole of their property portfolios and whether they have active environmental management programs for that portfolio.

### **Term of Reference 3**

The internationally accepted classification of conservation reserves (the IUCN categories) recognises that there are circumstances in which a variety of uses are compatible with conservation objectives. For example, those areas which are designated as National Parks in the United Kingdom are areas of land, largely in private ownership and used for productive agricultural uses, over which what is effectively a planning scheme is imposed which regulates use of land and development so as to protect landscape values and biodiversity.

These areas would not be called National Park in Australia, nor in the IUCN

categories, but are accepted as conservation areas with sustainable use by the IUCN. This UK model has not been adopted in Australia, but we would suggest that there are areas where similar planning arrangements could be applicable which would achieve conservation objectives at a broad landscape scale without land being in public ownership. Such areas would not be replacements for National Parks but in addition to them.

We would also welcome greater use of Conservation Agreements and Wildlife Refuges to protect biodiversity on private land, while still retaining the rights of land owners to benefit from their land.

We would, however, strongly argue that existing formal conservation reserves represent sustainable use of the land, in that they sustain the ecosystem services and processes which are vital to areas outside the reserves. For example reserves are an important part of the catchments which regulate the hydrology of many dams. Reserves may protect land from erosion and support populations of native species which are important for provision of services such as pollination and pest control. To seek additional uses to impose on reserves is unnecessary and inappropriate.

As has already been discussed, use of National Parks is important for various forms of tourism, as well as providing opportunities for recreation and enjoyment by local residents. This again represents sustainable use, provided that it is managed to avoid compromising natural values .

We would therefore suggest that the existing models represent sustainable use. While there are opportunities to apply new models, particularly in partnership with private land holders, we do not see the need to expand the range of activities in reserves on public land under the premise that this will provide for sustainable use as if sustainable use was not what is currently provided.

Yours faithfully

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