



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

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Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

Submission Number: 20

Date Authorised for Publication: 8 August 2018

The Standing Committee has resolved to conduct the following inquiry –

Noting the importance of the natural environment to Canberra, including the level of public support for nature and the natural environment, the growing importance of urban open spaces and bushland reserves and the benefits they bring to Canberra and opportunities for development of Blue – through water – and Green – through natural form – infrastructure in Canberra resolved to inquire into and report on the matters affecting the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra, including:

1. The level of public support for and satisfaction with amount and quality nature and natural environment areas in Canberra, particularly in urban areas.
2. The types of nature and natural environmental areas within Canberra e.g. urban open spaces or bushland reserves and the existing or potential benefits and challenges they bring to Canberra's:
 - a. Social amenity;
 - b. Economic development;
 - c. Biodiversity; and/or
 - d. Climate resilience.
3. Opportunities for Blue (water) and or Green (natural) Infrastructure in Canberra including;
 - a. Functional requirements of proposed infrastructure;
 - b. Cost and Maintenance considerations;
 - c. Amenity benefits; and
 - d. Conservation and biodiversity benefits.
4. Managing the interface between the natural environment and urban areas particularly in regards to conserved environmental areas.
5. Current policy or regulatory settings that impede the integration of the natural environment within optimal urban development and design.
6. Any other relevant matter.

The Committee intends reporting to the Assembly on the matter by the end of 2018.

Adopted 6 December 2017 and announced 22 February 2018

Submission

I would like to congratulate the Standing Committee on investigating such an important subject as 'the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra'. I note the terms of reference and will make comments accordingly.

I believe strongly in what underlies the thinking and practicality of the notion of Canberra as a Bush Capital and feel that these elements have been seriously eroded by governments over the past two decades. As the introduction to the terms of reference suggest, it is our experience through networks of friends, neighbours, work colleagues and suburban acquaintances, that indeed all strongly believe in: "...the importance of the natural environment (and) the growing importance of urban open spaces and bushland reserves and the benefits they bring to Canberra..". Whatever the basis to this assertion on the part of the Standing Committee, I believe the attitude of the Canberra community in support of this introductory statement is far wider than has been recognised by ACT Governments and their agencies over the past two decades and the time has come for it to be practically recognised in on-ground actions.

I am of the view that trends in our democracy are toward greater secrecy and power to the Executive. Nevertheless, my view is that the Standing committee report strongly advise both the House of Assembly and the Government and its many bureaucratic agencies that an immediate review should be taken of all policies and programs so that they will support the goal of making sure that nature and the natural environment are valued highly in an urbanising Canberra and moreover that this view is then reflected in daily Government and government supported operations. Lip-service to these very significant goals has gone on for far too long and our future generations will pay the price for this appalling misdirection in existing community planning and practice.

Despite researching this matter, I was not able to find any Hansard report on the reasons for this subject being adopted by the Standing Committee nor could I find any back ground document which might provide us with an overview of the issues considered when thinking of the subject matter. These are deficiencies in process which I feel are very important. I wish to be reassured that such an omission does not imply the work of the Standing Committee is a tactic by the political parties to soak up the energies of those in our community concerned about this issue, as such people are probably more disparate in their spread across Canberra than the focussed lobbyists opposing this issue.

1. The value of the natural environment – what does this mean?

I note that in an article on this matter of the work of the Standing committee in RioACT, the following is stated:¹ "... the Environment and Transport and City Services Committee is undertaking an inquiry into nature in our city. This inquiry is a great opportunity for Canberrans to have their say about how the balance of natural and urban environments can be managed in Canberra, now and into the future.

¹ Nature in our City RiotACT Friday 8 June 2018

This is a very important statement because it gets to the heart of what may or may not be considered in detail by the Standing Committee. It does so because there is confusion about the terms 'nature' and 'environment'.

Philosophers have long argued about what is meant by the word 'nature'. For example, taken at random is the following: "*..nature is that what is not artificial. The concept of nature would thus cover all those entities and processes that come into being or exist without any human intervention. Natural entities are not the result of human intentions, but rather they exist independently from human designs or purposes. Therefore, we can understand nature, as John Stuart Mill does, as "all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers"* (Mill 1998: 8). This article continues "In Pollini's words: *The environment is, by definition, an anthropocentric concept, in contrast to nature, which refers, by definition, to an otherness, or to the otherness, the mysteries, within ourselves. The environment, as well as its representations, are socially constructed, at least in part, whereas nature, by definition, is not socially constructed (only its representations are)* (Pollini 2013: 39).²

Item 1 of the terms of Reference is relevant here: *The level of public support for and satisfaction with (the) amount and quality (of) nature and natural environment areas in Canberra, particularly in urban areas.* It is possible to see this Term of Reference statement as a tautology since 'nature' and 'the natural environment' might be seen as the one thing except that the environment, as we indicated above, by definition is not natural. This argument above is not just nit picking. Our argument is that we are most unhappy with the residual amount and quality of nature in our Canberra urban areas and therefore suggest that what to us appears as unfettered urbanisation stop immediately and be replaced by smarter alternative urban and city planning which does not further impinge upon nature.

The unclear and yet socially constructed notion of 'the natural environment' may be a different matter. Since the idea that the environment is a human construct then there are many things one might do to improve this some of which I will suggest below.

Notwithstanding this concern, it will come as no surprise to the Standing committee that understanding the idea of 'environment' is variable across our community although certainly some sort of deeper feeling is appreciated. Not so long ago the then functioning local community group called CROWK (Concerned Residents for West Kambah) produced a detailed report called 'Learning from the Land'. This work was possible because of a grant provided by ACT Health and the project extended for a period of over three years looking at the social and environmental environment of west Kambah.

In this project CROWK twice had a professional company survey our local residents in Kambah regarding their attitudes to the environment as a way to see if our project made a difference. On both occasions the importance of the environment rated very highly in local people's appreciation of the suburb in which they lived.

CROWK also undertook a study of how local people considered their suburb using a World café research project process and the result was the same namely, that the residents of our community value very highly the environment.

When one looks more clearly at the results the issue of 'nature' (eg the mountains, views of the ranges, local fauna) and 'natural environment' (eg greenery, trees in the suburb, shrubbery, weeds)

² © The Author(s) 2015 M. Arias-Maldonado, Environment and Society, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-15952-2_2

may not be clear in people's minds but whatever further education may be required to help people understand this difference, it is clear nature and the environment are rated very highly.

This brief overview brings us to the concept of human exceptionalism, defined by the Oxford Reference as: "*The view (paradigm) that humans are different from all other organisms, all human behaviour is controlled by culture and free will, and all problems can be solved by human ingenuity and technology*".³ In our words, it is a description of how humans see that the earth is just a resource for the benefit of humans at the expense of all other living creatures. It is a subject I am unable to do justice to in this brief submission but it is one which must be put on the table of ideas which the Standing committee has to report upon. My view is that this underpinning and fundamental political conceptualisation of the world by those in politics and business is destroying Canberra's 'nature' and the 'natural environment' to the extent that not only those of us who now live in Canberra are losing important elements of our experience but our children and indeed our grand-children will also suffer.

- 2. The types of nature and natural environmental areas within Canberra e.g. urban open spaces or bushland reserves and the existing or potential benefits and challenges they bring to Canberra's:**
 - a. Social amenity;**
 - b. Economic development;**
 - c. Biodiversity; and/or**
 - d. Climate resilience.**

I briefly look at the subject of the Standing Committee investigation according to the headings listed above.

a. Social amenity

Under this heading I am talking about the less visible types of support that make people feel at home in an area and create a sense of local identity and belonging, like volunteers or community workers who can encourage new residents to meet their neighbours and get involved in shared community activities or the idea that it is a healthy uplift in our spirits and well-being because I see open spaces and nature, as opposed to the oppressive design of neo-brutalist housing development fostered by the creation of profit alone.

I live in a small housing development called Urambi Village. This is what the Australian Architects have to say about this housing development:

Urambi Village was designed by Michael Dysart in 1974 as an innovative housing model that departed from conventional planning policies and involved prospective residents in the design and development process as a co-operative and communal venture. The development consists of 29 single level courtyard houses and 43 tri-level houses set in a natural bush setting on the western edge of Kambah, (and subsequently) overlooking the Murrumbidgee Country Club⁴. The development

³ www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095949791

⁴ Note that the issues of the this Standing committee investigation are front and central to the relationship between Urambi Village and its suburban neighbours with the Murrumbidgee Golf Club as the club attempts to destroy the very things that make the suburb so socially amenable and an important location for bio-diversity.

attracted residents who were interested in the concept of a new choice of housing that gave up some measure of private space in exchange for generous communal landscapes and facilities.

A unique feature of Urambi is that vehicles are restricted to the site periphery. There are five driveway entries off Crozier Circuit that lead to groupings of garages, carports and open car spaces, together with garbage and mail facilities. Pathways connect these service areas to the central spine and then to the various house groups. This results in an expansive vehicle free landscape of mostly native plantings and promotes casual meetings between residents in the shared space. The houses and landscaping are seamlessly integrated.⁵

I offer this as an example of how to practically achieve the ostensible goals stated in the Standing Committee's Terms of Reference. It is so because the social amenity values of the Standing committee terms of Reference are manifest in thinking very differently about how humans might live in some sort of harmony with nature and the natural environment. Located in a peri urban context may appear to give this example special attributes but it need not be the case. Certainly however it highlights the type of 'clash' ostensibly before the Standing Committee for consideration as developments are right now being proposed that will basically destroy the 40 years of considerable social amenity for the wider suburb and its inhabitants plus damage the corridors for animals and birds as habitat and ecology are destroyed just for human pleasure. For example the kangaroos, wombats, blue-tongue lizards, snakes which have been part of our daily amenity for the past 40 years, or the noticeable loss and even change in bird species in our wider district, are all examples of a loss of amenity for all in our suburb because this 'clash' is not even regarded as a 'clash' by the cynical profit seekers aided by government lack of consideration or oversight of the social issues which are the subject of this Investigation.

b. Economic development

I notice the issue to discuss in these terms of reference is not 'environmentally sustainable development' but rather the far more limited concept of 'economic development'. The first comment I would make then is that the concept of sustainable economic development must be given a priority, and in fact be mandatory in government and private sector actions. That is, the discussion about our community development needs to be reframed so that it is at least based on sustainable economic development, where sustainable isn't longevity but ecological harmony. Might I suggest that the expert paper on ESD, prepared by Dr Gerry Bates for the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, be a key take off point in this regard.

The concept of 'economic' is fraught. The declining paradigm of neo-liberal economics is now clearly evident. With respect to 'nature' this form of economics just apparently cannot encompass this notion. One reason is that it is not apparently measurable and thus not a component part of GDP. But such a concept has been a major factor in bringing about devastating results such as destruction of habitat, loss of species, decline of species numbers, enhancement of weed propagation, decline in social amenity for our local communities and severely limiting opportunities for future generations. This is so given the notion of 'the commons' doesn't exist in its lexicon. It is precisely the dwindling

⁵ <https://www.housingchoicecanberra.architecture.com.au/blank-5>

or even dismissal of, the concepts of 'the commons' or 'public good', which impact upon the decline of nature and of the natural environment and which is witnessed in Canberra and our region. The Bates paper referred to above highlights the lip service given to such a concept and underpins our deep concern that non-economic matters (i.e. so-called externalities) are not seriously part of our political leadership thinking or discussion⁶.

I'd like to give you two small but powerful examples of what I mean by the above two paragraphs in terms of economic development. The first is that I have a local wombat which, on the evenings it ventures out, can at times eat our vegetables. This can be most frustrating. However for us the thought that such an indigenous creature lives in our suburb is clearly of far greater worth than the frustration of losing our growing vegetables. How does economic theory and practice take into account this assessment? Added to this is the presence of the cockatoos which can likewise do damage to our garden. They make a lot of noise in the morning and the evenings but for us, changing the environment to destroy their habitat, which is what I fear our neighbouring golf club is attempting to do, is unthinkable. What is the economic equation in such an example? It is as follows:

Wombats + Cockatoos minus vegetable garden loss = big win for our lives

The second example I offer is the terrible incident I recently experienced in killing not one but two young kangaroos as they hopped across Sulwood drive one morning in peak hour. After stopping my car, I looked ruefully at the damage to it but felt even more thoroughly heartbroken at the loss of these two young indigenous and beautiful animals. What's the economic equation here?

Damaged car repair costs and loss of time spent minus two dead creatures = significant social amenity loss

The second of these very simple examples reflects the heart of the economic conflict in this subject. The kangaroos were killed ostensibly by my car striking them but really it was because the government had put human convenience well beyond the needs of indigenous fauna through lack of social planning and no infrastructure which might address their needs, and the result is a loss for us as individuals.

If one sees these types of issues as a problem because of the animals, then this is human exceptionalism seen via an economic lens.

In case even expressing a view such as I do in this submission is seen as a perspective based on an idealistic perception of society, our belief is that there are many jobs to be created from the type of emerging society I am proposing. It is possible already to see some indications of this in tradespeople becoming more sensitive to ecology and construction, just as there should be with urban planning and architecture. There is a whole range of jobs around processing and transformation of the materials in the waste stream, excluding the abomination of incineration. Note the European Union's concept of a circular economy which has been implemented over recent years. Then there are the jobs around animal care and health and the social relationships between humans and animals, for example in aged care facilities, prisons and even schools, all as ways to foster knowledge and gain income. A Bush Capital in the true sense of the word is a place where visitation becomes very attractive and thus less dependent upon block buster art exhibitions.

⁶ Web site of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.

c. Biodiversity

Above, I have mentioned examples of where bio-diversity is suffering because of a disregard for it when planning and developing suburbs and with regard to a decided lack of smart housing design.

The issue of kangaroos in Canberra has been a hot spot in the local political landscape. It is fed by arrogant and wilfully ignorant policies and practices of Government. For us the issue is not one of 'either/or' but for some empathy given to other than human priorities where this lack of such is reflected in town and infrastructure planning totally ignoring available ways in which to achieve both. A great example is the great wire wall around Mt Taylor. I recommend this situation as a subject of specific investigation as I believe it is a sad but clear example of the topic that the Standing Committee is considering.

In brief, the Tuggeranong parkway ploughed straight through the only major east-west fauna corridor of Canberra. Naturally kangaroos were struck, maimed and killed by cars. Now this is not satisfactory. Drivers are upset on several grounds, including not only about their issues related to car damage and affected transportation options but also many who, like myself, are deeply affected by animal loss of life. Was any consideration given in this design in addressing this unique asset of Canberra? Almost certainly the answer to this question is that no such thought was given to the design of the Tuggeranong parkway from a more inclusive and wider species perspective than the narrow human exceptional economic one.

Some years ago, apparently government found that too many kangaroos were damaging cars and trucks and well, this isn't to be continued is it? So, overnight the great wire mesh wall was constructed in long stretches reminiscent of prison yards. Thus the beauty of Mt Taylor, seen as one drove past after returning from work, disappeared. But so have the kangaroos! The mobs of kangaroos peaceably eating the grass no longer are seen. Well, some are, as they escape their prison and hop onto a roadway where there is no way to go but 'hell'. There was no consultation about this action. There was no design thinking as to how the issue might be resolved to maintain the important corridor for our local fauna. Bio-diversity hardly had a look in, let alone social amenity. One wonders cynically whether it is only just a matter of time when housing developments begin to appear in such a wonderful natural place based on this traditional government line of thinking.

d. Climate resilience

In his book entitled 'Sustainable Food' by Michael Mobbs, the author provides a wonderful example of what might be undertaken if sustainability was given its rightful place in the thinking about urban development. He describes a 'hot' suburb reflecting how the way suburbs are mostly designed now as a heat generator, at a time when clearly climate change is evermore making an impact and clearly in our region.

The book is about how communities might grow food, better design our suburbs, better utilise water and generally implement smart design to assist improve our circumstances in becoming climate resilient. This book was published in 2012, 6 years ago. But the examples he gives of smart urban design and facilitated community lives is based on experiences the author had many years earlier. He is not the only person to think in this manner. Urambi Village was designed and built with similar ideas 40 years ago and there are other examples around the world where this type of thinking is evident.

Our point is simple. Governments in the ACT have wilfully overlooked the ideas behind urbanisation so as to be climate resilient. The private sector housing sector at large is likewise culpable. What

then might a Standing committee investigation do about this when the politics are probably hard ball, given the dependence of our political parties upon developers in Canberra and land and housing related tax income for government. It is suggested that Canberra airport buildings have been considered from this sustainability viewpoint or perhaps the developments in ACTON might be claimed to be so designed. Elsewhere in Canberra clearly this is not the case. Then there is the much vaunted energy policy of the ACT government re energy production and use. The core problem in all of these matters is the ad hoc nature of the processes associated with urbanisation in Canberra and where really there is no evidence of incentive, nor essential intent by those in relevant positions to make Canberra a climate resilient city. Take the incredible notion of 'future-proofing' Canberra against water needs. This was done by a former Minister at a time when Canberra had a good record of carefully managing low water reserves but was apparently resolved by taking water from the Alps by diverting it from our rivers and then overturning community awareness and behaviours. Whatever the practical result in this matter of dealing with a water supply for Canberra, the underlying thinking by those making the decisions in resolving the issue through the very concept of future-proofing, it was not one based on sustainable urban planning.

Our recommendation is that the Standing committee should investigate just how planning and oversight of the implementation of urban planning has failed in Canberra and will continue to do so unless drastically changed to incorporate sustainability and a care for nature and the natural environment is embedded in these charters.

Conclusion

The subject of this worthwhile investigation obviously is not an easy one. Our frustration is that the issue of a clash between urbanisation and 'nature or 'the natural environment' has been overlooked for many years to the extent that this investigation may well be only about a patch-up job and the genuine potential for Canberra to be a world class city based on its bush heritage cannot be now satisfactorily implemented. Unfortunately I only found out about the Standing Committee's work a short time ago and thus have cobbled together an overview response. The subject warrants a far wider community discussion process.

The terms of Reference ask us to consider other matters beyond those which I have made comment on and are stated as the following:

4. Managing the interface between the natural environment and urban areas particularly in regards to conserved environmental areas.
5. Current policy or regulatory settings that impede the integration of the natural environment within optimal urban development and design.
6. Any other relevant matter

The answer to these questions in reality is not complex. Start from the perspective that human exceptionalism is unacceptable, and that the existing natural ecology of Canberra and its surrounds is extremely valuable. The knowledge of how to then develop Canberra and overcome its present unfettered sprawl towards a new direction of smart urban design is readily available and has been for years. The matter is not just a cash flow issue. The truly deeply cynical use of the word 'externalities' when it comes to existing economic thinking overlooks the value and worth of all those natural elements of our place of existence on earth which now are destroyed in the name of the profit/cash fetish.

The issue is not only about 'conserved environmental areas', it is about the whole of our community in relation to the core elements of existence by human and other species. It is about a type of economy which eschews the obvious excesses of a capitalist mode of production and upon redirecting all the regulatory settings in support of this new direction. Alternatives are available, they just need to have behind them the power and commitment to give them prominence and implement them and to account for the forgone losses which mark human behaviours as part of this earth ecology.

Geoff Pryor

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