

CANBERRA CAPITAL CITY

I have been a resident of Canberra since 1970 and an ACT ParkCare volunteer since 2008. I am coordinator of the Isaacs Ridge Mount Mugga Mugga ParkCare Group but my comments are my own and not those of the group or Parks and Conservation Service, though I hope they support them.

I am a contributor to Canberra Nature Map, the community-based record of Canberra's array of plants, birds, insects and other animals, with about 3000 sightings. This has given me an appreciation of the rare plants, common natives and the exotic threats to our environment.

My submission is not laid out in the order of the Terms of Reference because I was unaware of the inquiry until close to closing date for comments and they were put together in a hurry. When the closing date was extended I did not re-order my comments in case I lost anything. Just think that everything is connected in the web of life.

In my remarks I was going to look at Conservation and Connectivity but I realised there were other subjects beginning with the letter "C".

Conservation - protection of our environment and native species and restoration by control or removal of exotic species.

Connectivity – joining nature parks and open space in a nature-friendly network

Climate – recognising the variability of our climate and catering for extremes of heat, cold, rain and drought

City – placing the built infrastructure in the environment to form an integrated living space

Community – involving people in the enjoyment of natural spaces

Commitment – getting the Government on our behalf to provide ongoing resources and funding

Concrete – recognising that concrete, buildings and roads are a major threat to our natural surrounds

Conservation - protection of our environment and native species and restoration by control or removal of exotic species.

We live in the 'Bush Capital' but the Bush is changing. Early Canberra developed a Garden City with many exotic trees and shrubs that have escaped and are pests in the nature reserves and open

spaces. But before that, agriculture and grazing resulted in the destruction of bushland and introduced many weeds.

Reversal of this process is necessary. Trees, shrubs and groundcover should be replaced. Soils have been damaged and efforts must be made to restore the fertility, moisture content and microbiome. Studies have shown that increasing the carbon content of soils is invaluable.

Tree loss is easily noticed but loss of groundcover is a less visible process especially where native plants are replaced by exotic species. Swathes of yellow St Johns wort or purple hillsides of Patersons curse may look pretty but they are the symptoms of a damaged environment.

I contributed to the Report on Canberra Nature Park in 2010/11 and the Review of the Nature Conservation Act in 2011/12. It is disappointing that some recommendations are taking so long to be implemented. The Canberra Nature Park Management Plan is still languishing somewhere, though I have been advised that a draft for public comment is 'imminent'.

The main thrust of submissions to this Inquiry seems to be conservation. The seven-year old documents on Canberra Nature Park and the Nature Conservation ACT should be considered by the Committee and their recommendations reinvigorated.

Connectivity – joining nature parks and open space in a nature-friendly network

CSIRO research shows that birds and other wildlife require large patches of bush every kilometre or so, connected by plant corridors and small groups of plants.

Small parks can be developed as 'natural' areas, not just mowed grass. Roadside plantings should include shrubs and trees, and native grasses and groundcovers should be incorporated.

Private gardens can also contribute to connectivity when there is room for trees and shrubs. Unfortunately, newer houses and smaller blocks reduce this possibility and the suburb design has less green space available.

Climate – recognising the variability of our climate and catering for extremes of heat, cold, rain and drought

Buildings and roads create a heat island effect which should be countered by green space. Trees can reduce high temperatures by 4 degrees but they cannot be used in isolation.

Instead of having large buildings surrounded by carparks it would be better to have underground carparks topped by greenery.

It has been suggested that rooftop gardens would be an environmental offset. These would require roof strengthening and might reduce the opportunity to have rooftop solar panels. Selection of plants would also be important; use of exotic species such as sedum used overseas could allow seeds from high buildings to spread more than would occur from ground level. This might not be as great a problem as already exists, but we should avoid the risk by saying what plants could be used.

City – placing the built infrastructure in the environment to form an integrated living space

Early Canberra was spread out; buildings were surrounded by open space and residential blocks had room for trees. Modern developments have increased the size of buildings and reduced the open space. High rise buildings increase the population density without providing open space.

Open space needs to be provided for pleasure and recreation but also for connectivity, even if some of the greenery is not native.

Recently, comments have been made about the loss of urban trees and the lack of replacement. Some information seems to have been gleaned from submissions to this Inquiry. Replacement trees need to be planted, but it is not just about trees – shrubs and groundcover must be provided.

I imagine the cityscape will continue to have both exotic and native plants and accept that city spaces will also have artificial structures for seating and recreation. Why not bridge the gap with something like Singapore's steel trees to hide the architecture and infrastructure?

Community – involving people in the enjoyment of natural spaces

Residents and visitors enjoy our natural spaces in many ways. Walking, cycling and picnicking are popular. Individual and organised events should be encouraged. The Centenary Trail is a way of using Canberra's natural resources and introducing people to nature.

People also need to be made aware that Nature cannot simply be left to look after itself. Education through schools and community organisations is important. Residents need to be informed that their gardens can be the source of feral plants, which can be as damaging as feral cats. Community volunteering for planting, weeding and tidying can be arranged through the ParkCare Hub.

It is important to have young people involved in nature, including through 'nature play'. This requires trees and shrubs, rocks and logs, not just open areas of mowed grass and pine bark mulch. Water-based nature play requires clean water and this in turn requires restoration of waterways.

In my submission I suggested that some urban space could be used for plant propagation and seed production, possibly by indigenous groups, as a contribution to conservation and education. This is already done in some schools.

Commitment – getting the Government on our behalf to provide ongoing resources and funding

Nature has been damaged from 150 years of settlement and farming and continues to be damaged by the developing city causing splitting and reduction of habitat.

Funding of Environment and City Services needs to be provided and increased for conservation, restoration and weed management. The increasing population and use of natural areas result in increasing pressures that need to be managed.

Additional staff are required to provide monitoring and management.

Concrete – recognising that concrete, buildings and roads are a major threat to our natural surrounds

I have mentioned the heat island effect that occurs in highly built up areas.

Hard surfaces of paving and roads stop moisture soaking into the ground and can lead to flooding. It is good that some concrete drains are being removed and replaced by wetlands.

Roads also split natural areas and are a barrier to wildlife trying to cross. Mown verges make the barrier even worse.

It is disappointing that the light rail 'urban meadow' does not live up to expectation. The Northbourne Avenue median is no longer trees and grasses; sure, there have been replacement plantings of trees and tussocks but there is a five-metre strip of concrete running its length. I have expected that the light rail would be running through low grass and plants like in cities such as Nice. It is noted that recent "artist's impression" for light rail Stage 2 does show the vehicle running through green.

The Government acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal people, so in conclusion, I say we must bring this together into **C**aring for **C**ountry.

Michael Sim

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