



Dr Hanna Jaireth
Secretary
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Dr Jaireth

RE ACT AS A UNESCO BIOSPHERE RESERVE

I refer to the request by ACT Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Planning and Environment to the Conservation Council to participate in its inquiry into the proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The Conservation Council supports the concept of the ACT applying to the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB) to have the ACT accepted as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The Conservation Council believes that if the ACT was declared a biosphere reserve, it would:

- Provide international recognition for the ACT's approach to integrating sustainable economic and human development, within a context of preserving landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic resources,
- Attract international tourist interest and investment to the ACT around the themes of sustainability, social equity and healthy environment and natural landscapes,
- Enable the ACT to have a positive influence internationally on issues such as sustainable development, social equity and ecology, and
- Provide a basis for ACT stakeholders to come together to examine how to harmonise and promote the aims and objectives of a biosphere reserve and the ACT as a place of interest, tourism, and investment.

As you are aware, biosphere reserves are internationally recognized within the framework of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB). Their aims, under the *Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves*, include:

- To foster sustainable economic and human development,
- To preserve landscapes, ecosystems, species, and genetic resources, and
- To support demonstration projects, environmental education and training, and research and monitoring related to local, national and global issues of conservation and sustainable development.

Clearly, the ACT fits very comfortably within these aims, especially as the ACT has shown leadership under each criterion. However, the Government's application should be an honest reflection of achievements and short comings. The Conservation Council believes that the proposed nomination of the ACT is particularly significant because the ACT includes a major urban environment which is a capital city. The ACT Government needs to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to environmental and urban sustainability and the protection of native vegetation, especially in the context of urban greenfields spread and incursions into natural areas/reserves for infrastructure and other development.

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The Conservation Council is Canberra's peak non government, environment organisation. As an umbrella organisation, the Council represents the interests of the community and conservation organisations in Canberra and the surrounding region.

The Council's support for the application is conditional on the ACT being committed to MAB and devoting resources to it. At a minimum, the Council would envisage the establishment of a committee representing all stakeholders, including Australian and ACT government agencies, business, education, community and environmental groups which would meet once or twice a year.

The committee should regularly:

- Examine progress made by the MAB programs and the ACT's contribution within that,
- Decide on how the ACT can promote the concept of the ACT as a biosphere reserve internationally, nationally, regionally and locally,
- Examine ways the ACT might reduce the city's ecological footprint, reduce greenhouse gases, and promote a more sustainable city, and
- Make recommendations to government and other stakeholders on how to foster the aims under the *Seville Strategy*.

From the Council's viewpoint, it is important that the contribution of the committee should facilitate achieving greater economically sustainable and human development objectives in a healthy environment, while protecting and restoring our landscapes, ecosystems, species, and genetic resources.

Obviously, some research and secretarial support would be required by the committee. Some funds would need to be budgeted for public education programs about the reserve.

The Council strongly believes that the application needs to receive bipartisan political support and support from all sectors of the community.

Concerning some particular issues raised by you, the Council's answers are as follows:

Management of the nomination process

The Council believes that the nomination process would be best coordinated/organised by the ACT Government, who would have to allocate resources to undertake the process of putting a nomination together, drawing on the large amount of material that has already been assembled, drawing on (or mentioning) many public documents that shows that the ACT meets the criteria, as well as the community's involvement.

It would be necessary to ensure that the nomination has bipartisan political and broad community support. It should attach letters of support from a wide range of stakeholders, especially peak groups including ours.

The status and possible boundaries of the core, transition and buffer zones

There has been some discussion about whether the nomination should be restricted to the ACT or a wider region such as the Capital Region. A broader boundary could have much merit. It would recognise the role Canberra already plays as a regional capital, and much of the material about the region could be obtained by the State of the Environment Reports prepared by the ACT Commissioner of the Environment. However, in the Council's view a nomination based on a broader region would be harder to organise, and so initially at least the outer boundary should stop at the ACT border, but consideration could be given to a cross border enlargement at a later date.

In the Council's view, the core areas ought to embrace all ecosystems and natural landscapes

and should encompass Namadji National Park, Tidbinbilla Reserve, high quality riverine areas, grasslands and woodlands identified in the ACT's grasslands and woodland strategies. Other core areas should include any area of high biodiversity value such as Horsepark Wetland. Buffer and transition zones would include hills, ridges, drainage lines, grazing leases, open spaces etc., and corridors identified in the grassland, woodland and riparian strategies with the higher quality areas being assigned to 'buffer' and lower quality areas to 'transition'.

Funding needs and sources

Funding would be required to scope and prepare the nomination submission and to arrange for its support. The process could include the involvement of one or more community groups in undertaking aspects of the process, such as broad community consultations, scoping or drafting of a nomination. However, funding would need to be provided to the community for this work, eg through grants or other contract arrangements, as community groups do not have spare capacity within existing funding and budgets.

On an ongoing basis, funding would be required for a stakeholder committee and supporting research and secretarial activity. Beyond that, the committee could adopt many projects and seek funding from elsewhere. Possibly, a corporate entity may be prepared to fund the nomination and ongoing core costs.

How local stakeholders should be engaged in (a) planning, (b) education and training programs, and (c) research and monitoring activities

This could be left up to a stakeholder committee to determine. This is why the committee needs to be broadly based.

Communication strategies and activities

The nomination should receive bipartisan political and broad community support. Therefore there would need to be a communication strategy to ensure that the concept is well understood and that that continued support would be required to ensure continuation of the concept.

Timeframe and viability of the proposed nomination

The timeframe for the creation of the biosphere should be based on some date in the relatively near future that celebrates the creation of the ACT in some way. The year 2008 has been suggested as it would mark the centenary of initial investigations of the Yass-Canberra area as the site for the national capital.

The viability of the nomination will depend upon:

- A clear understanding of the concept and a practical strategy/plan to implement it,
- The biosphere reserve being something of substance that (to use an old cliché) adds value (provides tangible benefits to the ACT),
- The biosphere reserve making the ACT demonstrably more conscious of and actively pursuing the objectives set out under the *Seville Strategy*, and
- The concept and strategy/plan having bipartisan and broad community support.

Yours sincerely

Trish Harrup

Director
September 2006