



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Chair), Miss Candice Burch MLA (Deputy Chair)

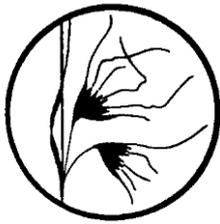
Ms Tara Cheyne MLA, Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

Submission Number: 29

Date Authorised for Publication: 8 August 2018



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems



The Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services,
Legislative Assembly for the ACT,
GPO Box 1020,
CANBERRA ACT 2601.
Email: LACommitteeETCS@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Reference: Nature in our City inquiry

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia, included related fauna species. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

Existence value of the natural environment

Canberra is fortunate in having not only bushland but rare species and ecological communities both in surrounding lands and throughout the urban fabric itself. This also means that Canberra has a responsibility to protect and conserve these species and communities, particularly those that are declared as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered under ACT and national legislation. While not all residents are aware or value these environmental assets, many do and we owe it to future generations to ensure that they also have the opportunity to experience and value these. Their loss would leave all Australians the poorer.

Threatened native grassland and woodland flora and fauna

Natural Temperate Grassland (NTG) and dependent species such as the Grassland Earless Dragon, Striped Legless Lizard, Pink Tailed Worm Lizard and Golden Sun Moth (all listed as endangered or vulnerable) occur and persist in small areas throughout and adjoining Canberra's urban development. It is an ongoing battle to protect these areas from future development and have available the resources to maintain and improve their condition. They are not the high profile attractive areas that the general public might like to visit regularly, but they are an important part of our environmental heritage and deserve committed protection and care. Exchanging them for short term financial benefit (often accrued by the private sector) is not, in FOG's view, appropriate. We acknowledge the reserves of NTG and Yellow Box Red Gum Grassy Woodland (YBRGGW) that have been set aside, and the work being undertaken to care for these. However, there is still continuing development pressure on NTG areas, particularly those within central Canberra.

Development pressures

There is continuing pressure between the best environmental management of grassy ecosystem areas within reserves adjoining urban development, and the requirements of bushfire management on the one hand and the desire to maximize land sales on the other. A constant argument we make is that

bushfire asset zones must be within each development footprint, not within the adjacent reserve, since in a conflict between bushfire and environmental management of an area it is the environment that usually comes out the loser.

Invasive plant pressures

Another difficulty of conservation areas adjacent to urban development is the spread of invasive plants from gardens and nature strip mowing into nearby reserves. To protect our unique biological heritage it is important that ACT budgets for strategic invasive plant control are adequate, reflecting more and more plants invading bushland, adjacent roadsides and rural areas. If incursions are treated appropriately early on, then the burden of controlling that particular species is reduced in the long term. However, if invasive plants are allowed to spread in a low budget year, the resources needed in subsequent years are much greater.

Conservation priorities

FOG's view is that the protection and management of NTG and YBRGGW areas with conservation values in the ACT needs to be given priority over urban development – in legislation, in budgets and in all other considerations. Given the uniqueness and rarity of these ecosystems and some species within them, there in fact should be no need for a group like FOG to undertake advocacy to try and save these areas – this should be happening as a matter of course. Instead, FOG is frequently putting in submissions arguing for the retention and protection of these ecosystems and species, and disheartened to see the losses that continue to occur.

Other benefits of bushland

These and other areas of 'bushland' (that includes native grassland) occur not only in reserves but in city parks, along roadsides and on rural properties. In addition to the biodiversity values described above that FOG urges to be protected, such areas provide many other values, including: amenity and psychological benefits, insulation (heating and cooling enhancement), water conservation, minimization of storm-water run-off and resilience to climate change.

FOG believes that protection of such areas directly and indirectly benefits all residents and visitors to the ACT, enhancing the living experience of all who live and visit here.

Conclusion

To conclude, we believe the challenge to retain the natural environment by ensuring it is integrated into further development is achievable and should be the ultimate aspiration promoted by the ACT Government. FOG wishes to nominate a set of issues that we see to be central to not just retaining but improving the value of our natural environment in urban ACT. Details are given in the attached appendix, but our key points are:

- Tourism - better promote the assets of ACT's natural environment to visitors
- Home Gardens - promote the use of indigenous plants and encourage small fauna to use our gardens
- Invasive plants - better funding for weed control and encouraging ACT residents to play their part
- Feral Animals - some introduced species, now major pests, need more resources to reduce their impacts
- Community Engagement - can new groups draw more people into active care for the environment in their neighbourhood?
- Traditional Values - indigenous land management and conservation support many of the same values

- North Mitchell Grassland Reserve - in an urban area that has rapidly grown in recent times, can this become a good example of ways to simultaneously protect the environment and engage the community?

Yours sincerely



Geoff Robertson
President

15 June 2018

Appendix: Value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra

Canberra can be proud of its grasslands and woodlands reserves. It is little appreciated that in 1788, eleven percent of south east Australia was occupied by Natural Temperate Grasslands (NTG), naturally treeless areas with a rich diversity of grasses, small flowering plants, unique fauna and other biota. Likewise grassy woodland (e.g. Yellow-box Red-gum Grassy Woodland (YBRGGW)), magnificent scattered trees whose understory is similar in composition to our grasslands, occupied a somewhat larger area. However, these endangered ecological communities occupy less than one and five percent, respectively, of their former area. In Canberra they fare somewhat better, about seven and thirty percent, respectively, remain.

The Canberra community has played a large role in the preservation of NTG and YBRGGW through performing many advocacy and education roles and through tireless hours of weeding, planting and restoration activity. Areas once overgrown with weeds have emerged as more open spaces and with indigenous plants recovering. This has been accomplished through a partnership of government and community, and through education, research and on-ground activity.

While development and conservation have to some extent always been opposing ends of a spectrum, there is much anecdotal evidence and personal observation suggesting that, even within different directorates and agencies in government, there is pressure on those responsible for biodiversity management not to pursue the best conservation policy. FOG is concerned that this results in under-recognition of grasslands and woodlands. The Government and Legislative Assembly need to ensure that there is a whole-of-government support underpinning of our biodiversity.

Tourism

More emphasis in tourist promotion should be given to Canberra nature reserves and open spaces. Many who live elsewhere and who understand the importance of our grasslands and woodlands are envious of Canberra's management of its grasslands and woodlands. With little and inexpensive effort, people with a mix of tourism promotion skills, ecologists, and informed community conservationists could come up with a strategy to promote Canberra, as the "Grassland and Bush (or Woodland) Capital".

Indigenous home garden

Canberra was once a city that prided itself as a garden city. Short-sighted, cost-cutting measures by the Government undermined that culture, and it is now time to revive the concept of a garden city but this time with a focus on indigenous plants. There is an increasing number of home gardeners growing indigenous plants, especially plants that are found in our local grasslands and woodlands. These plants are becoming more available and cheaper.

The advantage of these plants is that they attract insects and other invertebrates which form the bottom of the food chain on which small reptiles, frogs, and small birds depend. Growing such plants will have many conservation spin-offs. In addition, gardeners could be encouraged to create niches and habitat in which invertebrates and small animals would find a home. Imagine the impact on children if they grew up in gardens that were full of beautiful indigenous flowering plants and small fauna. The ACT government could at small cost adopt policies that would encourage such developments and extend it to capture suitable plantings in open space gardens, around commercial buildings and along our roadsides. It would be fantastic to live in a city known for its valuing of Australian plants and fauna.

Good gardening strategies should also address soil hygiene, weeds and good gardening practice.

Weeds

The Weeds and Pests managers within the ACT government perform an outstanding effort on a shoe-string budget. Using the latest and most innovative tools including drones, active gps mapping, extensive community engagement and citizen science, this team has performed an outstanding task of suppressing outbreaks of new weeds and controlling weeds in our reserves. However, there it stops. Our roadsides are overwhelmed by African Lovegrass, Chilean Needle Grass, Serrated Tussock and other

high-risk exotic plants. In Gungahlin, residents have watched as these unwanted plants have been spread by mowers - interestingly similar machines do not spread weeds in reserves to anywhere near the same degree because wash-down protocols are mandated there.

Government could devise strategies of educating home gardeners to watch out and remove unwanted plants from the home garden, nature strips, etc.

Feral animals

Government needs to lift its game when it comes to feral animal control, including control of deer, rabbits, foxes and cats. Programs that aim for pet cat management should also be promoted. A simple message is that cats are killers but have a longer life expectancy if contained.

Control of non-native birds should be increased. Programs to manage Indian mynas, starlings, blackbirds, sparrows and pigeons need to be pursued. These out crowd and outcompete native species and pose a threat to biodiversity.

While kangaroos are not strictly feral, in large numbers they certainly create issues so FOG supports Government policy of kangaroo management. More effort should be made to bring the community on board with the indisputably good ecological reasons behind culling. Also, some native birds may also impact negatively on native flora and fauna. Currawongs and native miners are amongst bird species that should receive priority in this regard. Corollary policies of not feeding birds and leaving pet food lying around should be emphasized.

Community engagement

While community involvement in conservation is much applauded it is likely not well understood. FOG is now one of many groups that supports grassy woodlands through community engagement, advocacy, on-ground work, commitment to good science, individual training and an ethic of respect. Nevertheless FOG's example is instructive.

FOG organizes conferences, forums, workshops, etc., workshops-in-the-field, visits to public and private sites, on-ground projects, publications, publicity and sales, campaigns and submissions, community involvement, provides advice when requested, and receives and makes grants. Its efforts are underpinned by good governance, sound financial management and health and safety procedures, with all work being done on a voluntary basis.

FOG's on-ground projects include its work on National Capital Authority (NCA) lands where it organizes working bees at Stirling Park, Scrivener's Hut, Attunga Point, and Yarramundi Reach - some 85ha. Also FOG's support to the NCA includes some supervising of contractors and running education activities. At Hall Cemetery, FOG is largely involved in weeding and some planting. At Cooma grasslands it supervises the Monaro Golden Daisy Project, including supervising spraying, working with Conservation Volunteers, and conducting a formal monitoring program. At Scottsdale, a Bush Heritage property, it is involved in monitoring the impact of weeding on the recovery of NTG.

In 2017, FOG organized 19 working bees, 16 field trips, and numerous meetings of its management committees. It made 21 formal submissions, published six newsletters and many eBulletins, administered two grants it received and provided four grants through its supported projects scheme. It also made presentations and gave advice to agencies and other groups. Conservatively measured, FOG volunteers contributed 7,800 hours valued at over \$300,000.

Indigenous values

FOG members through its various projects and activities have come to appreciate the synergies between conservation best practice and Indigenous land management practices, values and culture. There is a strong case to be made that the land, nature, or an experience of biodiversity (call it what you will) provides spiritual and physical well-being and only through such an experience can we find true reconciliation between First and Immigrant Australians and with one another. In any case we believe

that humans need to have a closer affinity with nature and that we should endeavor to promote this value throughout the Canberra community.

North Mitchell Grassland Reserve

In recent years much has been learnt about grassland and woodland conservation and restoration and community engagement in same. Much of this new learning may be found in books such as *Land of Sweeping Plains, Managing and restoring the native grasslands of south-eastern Australia* by Williams, Marshall and Morgan published by CSIRO in 2015. Chapter 13 *Designing and planning for native grasslands in urban areas* by Adrian Marshall provides guidelines and many examples of involving the neighboring community in grasslands management.

FOG has taken this on board by working with Ginninderra Catchment Group and others to devise a strategy that would facilitate the realignment of the North Mitchell Grassland Reserve as a place for conservation, education and recreation, and one that incorporates recognition of our Indigenous people. FOG would be pleased to provide more information on its current approach for this site.