



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

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FRIENDS OF MOUNT PAINTER

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY BY THE ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY INTO MATTERS RELATING TO ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Friends of Mount Painter is a small Parkcare group that has operated continuously since the establishment of Canberra Nature Park in 1989. Our vision is to have continuous, biodiverse vegetation cover (trees, shrubs, herbs and/or grasses) over the whole of the Mount Painter Nature Reserve, minimal erosion, and few weeds. We hope that, as a result, we will have a healthier, more sustainable and resilient ecosystem that will provide habitat for more abundant wildlife and more interest and enjoyment of the area for ourselves and other users.

In pursuit of our vision, we undertake five activities: revegetation, weeding, erosion control, monitoring and outreach. Through them, we support, and work cooperatively with, the ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) in its management of the reserve.

This submission is written from the perspective of landcaring by a Parkcare group.

SUMMARY

1. Environmental volunteering benefits the volunteers themselves, land managers and the environment.
2. Many aspects of Friends of Mount Painter's relationship with PCS are good, but there are two challenging aspects of the relationship that need addressing.
 - It has taken 25 years to start the process of producing a plan for the reserve's management that will guide both our and the rangers' work. We look forward to contributing to the Mount Painter Nature Reserve plan from our decades-long knowledge of the reserve.
 - Reserve rangers have too many reserves to manage, and they also rarely spend much more than two years in the position before moving on. As a consequence, they are unable to develop a deep, long-term understanding of individual reserves.
3. A major challenge for volunteers is to develop landcaring knowledge and skills. While PCS provides some training and information-sharing, more is needed to better equip us, particularly in relation to weeding. Demonstrating and documenting landcaring knowledge about the non-herbicidal control of weed species would be very useful.
4. Opportunities to improve environmental volunteering include:
 - Continuing to support new groups, particularly in urban areas;
 - Building relationships with other local institutions, particularly schools;
 - Appointing staff to organise educational activities that link local reserves with schools;
 - Growing the involvement of businesses and other volunteer groups with a non-environmental focus; and
 - Building on people's attachment to their local patch.
5. Volunteers should be allowed to use power tools, such as brushcutters, as they did in the past.

1. *the type and nature of volunteerism in the environment sector in the ACT and the existing or potential benefits and challenges they bring to Canberra's:*
 - *biodiversity conservation and enhancement;*
 - *parks and conservation;*
 - *environmental protection;*
 - *climate resilience;*
 - *wildlife protection;*
 - *landcare; and*
 - *other areas;*

BENEFITS OF ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM

Individuals, the community, land managers and the environment all benefit from environmental volunteering. Individuals benefit physically, emotionally and socially: the calming effects of being in nature, the satisfaction of working to improve the environment and contributing to the community, and the enjoyment of being part of a social group.

Parkcare volunteers represent an enormous addition to the land management work force that is worth many millions of dollars. They value-add to PCS' work by carrying out tasks for which PCS does not have the resources, alerting them to emerging issues, contributing our corporate, decades-long knowledge of our patch to the shorter span of local rangers' knowledge, and bringing in additional resources by obtaining grants and leveraging involvement from others.

The environment benefits from volunteer activity that speeds up the process of improving native biodiversity and habitat structure, and the stability and aesthetic appeal of reserves over and above what would eventuate with only PCS staff involvement.

CHALLENGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM

The relationship with PCS. FOMP's relationship with the reserve rangers and Parkcare support staff is good. They are accessible, very hard working, passionate about their jobs and a pleasure to work with. The quarterly Parkcare Convenors' meetings with PCS staff are a useful way of keeping groups informed about PCS policies and activities and provide an opportunity to raise issues important to Parkcarers. The introduction some years ago of annual planning sessions with relevant staff is also very useful. A number of years ago, PCS organised a series of 'Fringe Forums' that covered various policies that affect reserve management, for example, the Kangaroo Management Plan, the Bushfire Operations Plan, and gave volunteers an understanding of how the local fitted into the landscape context of these policies. It would be good to see them reinstated.

An obstacle in the PCS-FOMP relationship has been the absence of an individual plan for our reserve that complements the Canberra Nature Park Management Plan. It is only now, 25 years after the establishment of the Mount Painter Nature Reserve in its current form, that a plan is to be prepared. With much of the hill having been very extensively cleared, planting has been, and still is, a high priority. As FOMP undertakes self-initiated plantings each year, we have felt it necessary to produce our own plan, with assistance from professional ecologists, for revegetating the reserve. This plan guides the planting proposals we put to PCS for approval.

We welcome PCS' recent initiative to produce individual reserve plans and look forward to contributing to the one for our reserve. We hope it will be embedded in a wider landscape context so that we know how our reserve's rehabilitation will contribute to the mix of woodland and grassland habitats in the ACT.

PCS staff issues. One drawback in developing a fuller relationship with PCS is the rapidity with which reserve rangers move through the role. Two years seems to be the usual time span, which is not enough for them to develop a deep understanding of the reserves for which they are responsible. In addition, each reserve ranger has too many reserves to manage to get to know any of them really well.

Challenges for our Parkcare group. Skilling volunteers is a major issue. New volunteers are often enthusiastic and hard working but lack the necessary landcare skills. They usually learn these skills from experienced long-term volunteers rather than from PCS staff. When Parkcare groups were first established, we understand that rangers attended work parties, but this rarely happens now, we presume because of PCS staff shortages. Experienced volunteers from established groups sometimes assist new groups.

Weeding is the most frequent Parkcare activity. PCS provides weed ID and Chemcert training free of charge but other aspects of weeding are little covered, such as how to most effectively deal with different species without herbicides or the principles that groups might adopt to decide on where and how to weed. In the past, groups have arranged workshop visits among themselves to see and discuss weed management on other reserves. Running them again would be useful, as would documenting the knowledge shared on such occasions. Building on the break-out sessions at the Weeds Forum run by Landcare ACT last November is another opportunity to gather knowledge with a view to disseminating it more widely.

2. *opportunities to improve environmental volunteerism in the ACT, including in encouraging the involvement of young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to improve community stewardship;*

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM

ACT government agencies offer and support a considerable number of different volunteering opportunities that provide a range of varied activities. New Parkcare groups continue to form and the number of urban landcare groups and microforests is mushrooming. The latter two bring environmental volunteering right into the suburbs, making it much more visible to the community than more traditional volunteering on reserves. Participation is easier in these spaces and it may be easier to motivate people to get involved when they are beautifying their immediate local landscape. More urban landcare locations, as well as verge improvements, would extend environmental volunteering.

Another way of embedding environmental volunteering in the community is through the involvement of other local institutions. For example, The Cook Grocer is using a Cultural Grant from the ACT Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to establish a bush tucker garden at Cook Shops and will involve the community in its maintenance. The Cook Grocer is also very supportive of FOMP: our reserve brochure is on the shop counter, the 2021 Cook calendar he produced listed our work party dates, and a donation from

calendar sales has enabled us to renew an old interpretive sign on the hill. Items about FOMP appear in The Cook Grocer's newsletter and reach a different audience from our newsletter.

An untapped avenue for increasing community awareness of the environment is through relationships between schools and reserves. Some Parkcare and Landcare groups have developed such relationships, including, over the last seven years between FOMP and Macquarie Primary School. When classes visit Mount Painter and we are invited to accompany them, we have encountered students, especially from other cultures, who have never visited such a place before and find great joy and wonder in the experience. For a recent Year1/2 visit, we helped the teaching staff develop a scavenger hunt for plants used by Ngunnawal people and had the students sow grass seeds. Increasing environmental awareness among children will not produce immediate on-ground results but could contribute to future interest in volunteering for the environment.

Organising educational activities of the kind described takes a considerable time and for fuller development would need PCS and City Services involvement. We understand that a number of years ago, PCS employed someone to develop ideas for educational activities beyond what is done now but we have not heard of any initiatives involving our local schools that resulted from that work.

We have seen a recent example of how raising awareness and appreciation of the natural environment can contribute to growing volunteering. During the Covid lockdowns, people visited Mount Painter much more than previously and some roamed more widely than before. Perhaps partly because of this, we have seen volunteer numbers at our monthly work parties increase from an average of seven to 11.

Opportunities for volunteering with FOMP are advertised in notices placed on the reserve where walkers will see them; this is the most common means of attracting new volunteers to our work parties. We receive the occasional expression of interest from the Parkcare Hub website but these rarely translate to on-ground activity and, when they do, these volunteers almost never return to work with us. We hope they move on to volunteer elsewhere. Volunteers recruited through seeing notices on the reserve, by contrast, are much more likely to return. Attachment to one's local patch is important.

Also important in building and maintaining involvement in landcaring is the social element of volunteering, for example, through sharing food and a cuppa at the end of a work party. A number of years ago, Greening Australia surveyed its ACT volunteers and found that the social aspect of volunteering was rated as the most important factor in keeping people involved, ahead of their interest in the environment which was what had triggered their initial involvement.

Corporate and not-for-profit groups with a principal focus on other targets sometimes partner with Parkcare groups to work on reserves, for example in our case, Telstra and orienteers. Could these partnerships be grown?

3. *managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public;*

Issues relating to FOMP's relationship with the ACT Government are covered above, on pages 2-3.

Relationships between FOMP and its volunteers are relatively informal. We have no constitution or committee. Our activities are run by twice-yearly meetings of regular volunteers, supplemented by email exchanges and discussions over morning tea at our monthly work parties. As we are a small group, this system works well. A quarterly newsletter reaches a wider audience of around 140.

4. *current policy or regulatory settings that facilitate and/or impede the work and the involvement of volunteers and volunteer organisations in the ACT*

The ban on the use of power tools, especially brush cutters, which we were allowed to use in the past, is unfortunate and we would like to see it removed. In the past, a volunteer brushcutting gang substantially reduced the saffron thistle population on Mount Painter. The thistles are now out of control. Brushcutters and whippersnippers are also useful in managing other weed species.

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