



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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on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity
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RE: Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

Dear Dr Patterson,

Thank you for undertaking an enquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT. Landcare ACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission.

Landcare ACT is the peak representative body for community landcare in the ACT and region. With our members, we represent and support over 70 Landcare groups and thousands of individuals caring for local environments in our region, including rural areas. Our five founding members are Southern ACT Catchment Group, Ginninderra Catchment Group, Molonglo Conservation Group, Rural Landholders Association and Buru Ngunawal Aboriginal Corporation.

This submission has been discussed with our members, the Landcare ACT skills based Board and the Landcare ACT Members Council, which is the representative forum of our organisation, composed of 25 local Landcare leaders. It is also built on previous consultations including Landcare ACT's consultation for the ACT Natural Resource Management Plan development (see xx), the Landcare ACT Weeds Forum (see xx) and xx.

This inquiry builds on other valuable work undertaken, including the Nature in the City Inquiry, the ACT Commissioner of Sustainability and the Environment's recent report into Environmental Volunteering as well as other relevant reports.

The key recommendations from Landcare ACT regarding environmental volunteering include:

- Increase cross-tenure consistency of volunteer support and environmental planning and management
- Increase the partnership approach between ACT Government and community Landcare, including increased transparency and communications regarding government activities and decision that affect volunteers
- Appropriate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations

- Better recognition of volunteer contributions and improved processes for using volunteer knowledge and skills
- Support diversification of landcare volunteer opportunities, including Ngunawal, youth and Culturally and Linguistically diverse
- Increased support for environmental Education and awareness raising

These six opportunities for improved support of environmental volunteers are detailed below:

1. Increase cross-tenure consistency of volunteer support and environmental planning and management

Landcare, includes groups and individuals that work on a variety of land tenures including land owned/managed by ACT Government's Parks and Conservation, City Services (TCCS) and Suburban Land Agency as well as the National Capital Authority and private land. City Services and Parks and Conservation Service have different systems of generating metrics of volunteer contribution and different policies and procedures on issues such as the use of hand tools and insurance. In addition, biodiversity threats and assets are tenure blind and best managed at a landscape scale.

There is a need for more integrated biodiversity management and volunteer support that extends across all tenures. The Landcare movement, and particularly the Catchment Groups, take a leading role in working cross-tenure and take a landscape scale approach to volunteer support and environmental management. The ACT NRM plan discussion paper offers promise in increased integration cross-tenure regardless of the land manager.

Specific recommendations include:

- Develop an interdepartmental committee related to environmental volunteering, which also includes community organisations. Member Consultations have highlighted that Interdepartmental committees are often developed in Commonwealth Government to overcome departmental silos and increase coordination. Landcare ACT has a role to play in this and would like to see the establishment of a high level committee that comprises Ministers and decision makers discussing key issues with the community.

This committee could consider whether it would be appropriate to develop a plan or strategy regarding support for environmental volunteers. The Nature in the City Report *"recommends that the ACT Government develop and implement a strategy that is co-designed with, and supports, volunteer environmentalists to guide and sustain community stewardship of the environment within the ACT"* (Recommendation 32 5.61). While there are numerous plans and strategies that mention environmental volunteers there is not a consistent approach to environmental volunteering across tenure, which needs addressing.

- Increase the integration of environmental volunteer support including, integrate the metrics on volunteer data across TCCS and PCS volunteer programs

2. Increase the partnership approach between ACT Government and community Landcare, including increased transparency and communications regarding government activities and decision that affect volunteers

Environmental volunteers contribute over \$21.5 million annually to ACT Government in volunteer hours. Landcare volunteers are a key component of this. It is clear that volunteers save the ACT Government considerable expenditure and given their strong local knowledge, some of what they do cannot be easily done by paid staff. However, some volunteers do not feel that their knowledge and values are respected and some feel taken for granted.

Environmental volunteers regularly highlight the opportunity for increased transparency and communications regarding government activities. Volunteers express that they often receive conflicting information from different parts of government. There are also a few key decisions or actions that continue to cause concern to environmental volunteers including

- Renaming of Parkcare to Parkcare patch
- Government contractors mowing over conservation listed grassland restoration sites and not ensuring mown grass does not go down the drains into our lakes
- Use of power tools not being authorised on government land.

Specific Recommendations

- Develop governance structures that enable community environmental volunteers input into decision making that affects them. There has not been a governance arrangement that enables broad community input into environmental issues for a couple of years. Prior to that, the ACT Government's formalised structures of accountability regarding NRM was considered to be far from ideal. Over the last few years, Landcarers have called for a review the ACT's governance framework for natural resource management to: • improve clarity and transparency in decision-making on natural resources by government agencies • establish a fully independent ACT Natural Resource Management regional body that advises government and Ministers, considers community-driven initiatives and government priorities, determines expenditure of Australian government funding, and reports annually¹.
- Develop consistent processes for proactively communicating with environment volunteers about what is happening in their part of the ACT.

¹ Ginninderra Catchment Group wrote a comprehensive report – Provision of a Framework for a Regional NRM Strategy for the ACT as part of its funding for 2018-19 financial year. This report included information on various natural resource governance models and analysed the applicability of these to the region. It was provided to the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Directorate as part of the acquittal process for the Group receiving funding. In addition, it is understood that Cinnibar was also contracted by the Directorate in 2018-19 to report on natural resource management governance arrangements. This report is not publicly available and there is interest in the report findings.

- Incorporate environmental volunteers community knowledge, values and priorities into the measurable actions and key performance indicators in relevant plans ie ACT NRM Plan, Biodiversity Conservation etc
- Develop a high level Statement of Partnership between community Landcare and ACT Government. There have been discussions towards this between Landcare ACT and decision makers. ACT NRM could work with Landcare ACT towards the development of this Statement.
- Explore other ways of improving relationship-building and knowledge exchange between volunteers, community groups and ACT Government staff, for example bringing staff and volunteers together at forums, workshops and field trips. This could be outsourced (with funding) to organisations like Landcare ACT or the Conservation Council if required

3. Appropriate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations

Landcare ACT welcomes the ACT Government’s announcements in 2020 and 2021 of funding provisions for the ACT Catchment Groups, Frogwatch and Waterwatch. Landcare ACT also welcomes the announcement in September 2021 of a second ranger position to support ParkCare Patch groups.

Landcare ACT suggests the following resourcing to support environmental volunteers:

- At a minimum, continue current levels of support for volunteer programs and community groups in the ACT. Landcare ACT urges the ACT Government to provide more certainty about ongoing funding for these organisations and programs as this is key to planning for future success, staff retention and long term programs
- Financially support the work that ACT Catchment Groups provide on TCCS land. In the 2019/2020 financial year, City Services invested \$150,000 to the three ACT Catchment Groups (\$50k each group). This relatively small investment had a high return in terms of increased connection between residents with their local environments and improvement of blue and green infrastructure on the urban open space estate. Outcomes of the investment included:
 - Support for 36 stewardship groups who are improving natural assets on the City Services estate
 - Increased the number of stewardship groups operating on urban open space by 14, which included 4 new groups related to Healthy Waterway assets
 - Enabled the delivery of over 45% of the Adopt-A-Park grants
 - Leveraged considerable additional funding towards stewardship of City Services Estate
- Continue to fund TCCS and PCS Volunteer Programs

- Fund a Junior Landcare Program. The Nature in the City Inquiry recommended “that the ACT Government, in conjunction with Landcare and similar groups, identify and implement further opportunities for Junior Landcare and Junior Parkcare” (Recommendation 35 5.64). This was also noted in the Appendix of the Parliamentary agreement. There is strong community demand for more education engaging young people from pre-school through to young adults. Adequate resourcing is required.

4. Better recognition of volunteer contributions and improved processes for using volunteer knowledge and skills

As outlined in the recent report from the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, volunteers save the ACT Government a significant amount of money. Many volunteers work in the same patch for decades and develop strong local environmental knowledge of an area, hence some of what they do is irreplaceable by paid staff. While there is some acknowledgement of volunteers contributions in some government documents and platforms, this is inconsistent and often cursory.

- Ensure there is clear and specific acknowledgement of voluntary contributions to ACT Government programs, plans and strategies.
- Increase acknowledgement of volunteers through ACT Government publications, websites and social media. It is common for government volunteer programs to be promoted as a service they provide to the community. There could be a much stronger focus on the reciprocal benefits that the ACT Government gets from volunteers working on its land.
- Allow volunteers to claim back money spent on parking or public transport from the relevant government agency when they have been invited to attend meetings and workshops run by government.
- Develop and install signs in areas where environmental stewards work - signs increase public awareness and recognition about environmental volunteers working in particular areas
- Newly appointed PCS rangers to meet with the area park care group committee as soon as practicable after they begin, to ensure an the ranger’s understanding of the group’s issues and concerns and to establish open communication
- Streamline training offerings across all environmental volunteers, not limited to specific land manager or tenure
- Develop processes to better manage the impacts of ranger turnover. These will recognise both the in-depth site-based knowledge of volunteers and the broader experience of rangers. It will include development of specific management plans to support rangers.

5. Support diversification of landcare volunteer opportunities, including Ngunawal, youth and Culturally and Linguistically diverse

There is an opportunity to diversify and broaden the current environmental volunteering community. A focus on wellbeing outcomes that occur as a result of environmental volunteering provides a promising approach to broadening engagement. Many Landcare Groups have existing relationships with their local schools and are calling for a more coordinated approach to engaging young people in environmental volunteers. However engaging a broader community requires resourcing, which is limited at present.

- Invest in community Landcare to engage a broader demographic in environmental volunteering.

6. Increased support for environmental Education and awareness raising

In addition to engaging youth in Landcare, there is a need for greater environmental education and awareness raising, in schools and the broader community. Stewardship is closely linked with an environmental ethic and is often inspired by an understanding of, and connection with, the environment. Many environmental volunteers consider that community education is vital to the preservation of the natural environment.

Greater public appreciation of nature is likely to lead to increased recruitment and retention of volunteers, or at least greater community support for the work of environmental volunteers. Landcarers consider that to imbue an environmental ethic and generate positive environmental behaviour change, education needs to include very young children through junior Landcare type programs, school children of all ages including via the school curriculum, and the broader community. Community education in this way would encourage broader appreciation and understanding of important aspects of our environment, promote belonging and shared “ownership” with urban parks and natural environments, as well as inspire specific behaviour change that supports the work of environmental volunteers.

Thank you for considering our submission. We look forward to providing further information at the hearing.

Yours sincerely,



Karissa Preuss
CEO
Landcare ACT

5 May 2022