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Mick Gentleman MLA
Chair Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020,
Canberra ACT 2601

Submission of inquiry into proposed the designation of the ACT as a UNESCO biosphere reserve

Honourable Member,

The Chief Minister's Sustainability Expert Reference Group (SERG) is pleased to provide a brief submission to the inquiry on the designation of the Australian Capital Territory as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The submission provides comments related to the items listed in the terms of reference for the inquiry. Other matters outside the terms of reference have been included in the submission.

Subject to availability, I or another member of SERG would be happy to appear before the inquiry committee to answer any questions related to the submission.

Thanks you for requesting SERG to make a submission to the inquiry.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "B. H. Roberts".

Professor Brian Roberts
Chairman
ACT Governments Sustainability Expert Reference Group

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED THE DESIGNATION OF THE ACT AS A UNESCO BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The submission by the Chief Minister's Sustainability Expert Reference Group (SERG) provides information and comment on matters listed in the Terms of Reference for the inquiry into proposed the designation of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Other matters outside the Terms of Reference have been included in the submission.

Biosphere Reserves

A Biosphere Reserve is a special type of reserve that is declared over an area of land and/or sea in which people live and/or work. The Biosphere reserve program has been developed by the United Nations to encourage the use of natural resources in an environmentally and socially sustainable way.

Biosphere Reserves have three main aims:

- to protect and enhance the environment
- to encourage and support economic development that respects the natural environment and social equity, and is financially viable
- to provide logistic support for environmental education, training and research.

Sustainability in the ACT context

The ACT Government has already made significant commitment and implemented a number of powerful initiatives to guide development of Canberra towards being recognised as a Sustainable City:

- It has been implementing a sustainability policy titled *People Place Prosperity* since 2003 to provide for its people, protect its place and create prosperity,
- It predicates its social and economic development on the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) through the *Canberra Plan: the Social Plan, the Economic white paper and the Sustainable transport plan.* ,
- It made its first 'state of sustainability' report in 2004, with the release of *Measuring our Progress*
- It is strategically advancing towards sustainability through a procurement program that is based on ESD principles.
- It has set targets to achieve sustainable water and energy conservation strategies and make its contribution to greenhouse gas abatement.
- It is making commendable progress on its zero waste policy.

These are significant and leading achievements. All are based on the strategy of lifting government performance and leading by government example. But this is not enough to achieve sustainability for Canberra.

A link still needs to be forged between the ESD philosophy that is guiding government action and the personal knowledge base that guides the community's actions.

The Chief Minister has been urging the SERG to provide advice on the next vital step; how to engage members of the broad Canberra community in recognition of the risks and opportunities associated with choosing to live and work according to ESD principles.

The difficulty is that *Sustainability* is an abstract concept. Therefore next challenge is to find a mechanism that effectively translates the abstract concept into a clear and simple common language and behaviour patterns. Without this it will be impossible to demonstrate to the community tangible risks and benefits so it can also play its part by making well informed choices.

Declaration of Canberra as a Biosphere Reserve could be one effective mechanism to translate the ESD principles into the language of everyday life. Living in a Biosphere Reserve is easier to comprehend than an aspiration for sustainability.

As a result of the work it has already done on sustainability, Canberra is well qualified to fulfil its obligations as a Biosphere Reserve. With the Biosphere Reserve brand attached to its identity, Canberra would become a tangible demonstration of how a sustainable city needs to function. This in turn would guide the behaviour of residents of Canberra, its visitors and the Nation for which the city performs the role of Capital City.

Management of the Nomination Process

The management of the nomination process should be undertaken. Strategies for the nomination process should be assumed by a Steering Committee of the ACT and Commonwealth governments, and include representation from professional, education and public interest groups. The establishment of the committee should be preceded by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the ACT and Commonwealth governments outlining a commitment to the process and resource sharing arrangements. Direct consultation with UNESCO will be required before entering into an MOU between the two governments in order to establish a lucid process and the requirements for making the submission for Biosphere listing.

The approach adopted by the Mornington Peninsula provides a useful framework for preparing the application for the ACT to be designated as a biosphere reserve. The Steering Committee would be advised to consult with those responsible in the Victorian and Mornington Shire local governments, and other local governments such as the City of Rome to seek advice and information on the listing process.

Once the Committee is established a submission process, including the community engagement course of action and discussions with the NSW State government, should

be recorded, submitted and endorsed by the Commonwealth and ACT governments before proceeding with the application.

Boundaries of the Biosphere Reserve

Biospheres have three zones, core, transition, and buffer. The introduction of an urban area in a Biosphere introduces what might be seen as a fourth zone which might be called the urban habitat zone. SERG considers the boundaries of the proposed biosphere can be reasonably well defined geographically and by land use under various planning instruments prepared by the National Capital Authority (NCA) and the ACT government. The core area would include the National Park system in the southern and western parts of the ACT. The buffer zone would contain rural land outside the designated urban areas. There is an issue for discussion between the ACT and Commonwealth governments about areas managed by the National Capital Authority within the urban framework of Canberra. Should these be included as the core or as transition areas, as they provide important, but often isolated, habitats and environmental corridors for wildlife to move around the region's biosystem. The urban habitat zone would be comprised of all built up and future urban designated land within the confines of the Canberra Spatial Plan

The SERG considers there is no need to create a plan for the Biosphere which creates boundaries that overlap or cut across exiting plans used for managing land use in the Territory.

The integration of public open space and areas of high conservation value will be important in supporting the intention of creating the ACT as a biosphere. In many cases, integrating areas of high conservation value through the creation of wildlife corridors passing under or over existing urban infrastructure and development areas will not be feasible.

An important issue for the inquiry to consider is the extent of the biosphere boundaries. Many areas of high conservation value in the ACT extend into New South Wales. The Committee formed to investigate the listing and prepare the application for the biosphere listing should investigate the possibility of integrating areas of high conservation value in New South Wales in the biosphere. NSW government involvement would strengthen the case for listing. Biosphere reserves are defined by habit boundaries and should not be limited by political boundaries. While this may complicate and extend the time required to designate the Australia Capital Territory as a biosphere reserve, is important this matter be considered. Biospheres are of national and global interest.

Costs Associated with the Biosphere Reserve

There are two sets of costs that the ACT and Commonwealth Government must provide relating to the biosphere reserve: establishment and recurrent operational costs. The costs of preparing a nomination are mainly about focus, collation, coordination and efficiency. The preparatory cost associated for establishing a reserve could range between \$100,000 and \$250,000 depending on the information required by UNESCO to support the listing. Most of these costs will involve administrative and professional time of ACT and Commonwealth government staff, possible use of

consultants and costs associated with presentation and visits by UNESCO certifiers. It is impossible to predict the amount of community and business sector time that will be given to support the biosphere listing, but based on the Murrumbidgee Shire experience, this would be substantial.

Cost sharing arrangements for the preparation of the applications to UNESCO by the ACT and Commonwealth Governments should be shared on a 50:50 basis. There is a strong case for arguing that the designation of a biosphere reserve covering the ACT is in the national interest, given that it will include areas under the jurisdiction of the National Capital Authority and the Commonwealth. However, should the ACT Government choose to extend the biosphere to encompass parts of New South Wales, cost sharing for preparation of registration should be apportioned on a 45:45:10 basis.

Operational costs are very difficult to assess. Most of the cost of maintaining the biosphere reserve can be absorbed in line agency budgets, such as those of the Department of urban services and the NCA and federal department of the environment. The biosphere reserve will not require a separate management plan, as existing planning instruments in place under the jurisdiction of the ACT and Commonwealth governments appear to be sufficient to address management issues under the designation. Recognition of Biosphere status in existing planning and management documents may be necessary following the establishment of designation status.

Engaging Stakeholders

Biosphere reserve standing provides a useful framework for engaging with a wide range of stakeholders with interests in managing and protecting an area if it is of environmental significance. There is need for the ACT/Commonwealth governments to engage with local stakeholders especially in seeking statements of support and commitment to secure the designation of the biosphere reserve. There has been consultation by the Office of Sustainability with business, other government agencies and rural landholders associated with proposal. Further consultation is necessary with other public interest groups, such as Landcare Australia and Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra.

However, the SERG considers that there is widespread support in the community for the designation of the ACT as a biosphere reserve, and that an extensive program of consultation is not necessary to win support for the listing. The concept of a biosphere reserve has been floated in the public domain for more than two years and has not drawn adverse comment in the press or in correspondence with the ACT government.

Communications Strategies and Activities

It is suggested that as part of the application preparation process, focus group meetings with professional organisations, public interest groups, educational institutions and research establishments meet to address specific management issues related to a biosphere reserve and to promote the value of a biosphere reserve to the community at large. Information collected from the organisations should be compiled in a public document, along with a strategy for preparing the application for UNESCO.

The Mornington Peninsula has set up a series of round table meetings to discuss activities that can support the goals of biospheres. Rather than set up new structures, to support the creation and management of activities in a biosphere area, existing environmental and planning structures, such as the area councils, should be used. This is a more effective and sustainable use of resources.

Timeline

It took more than two years to designate the Mornington Peninsula as a biosphere reserve. This was the first biosphere reserve to include urban areas, so that significant hurdles had to be overcome with UNESCO, as biospheres have been predominantly natural areas. It is expected that a biosphere reserve listing could be achieved within 18 months; however this is the subject to the level of information required by UNESCO and the level of Cooperation between the ACT and Commonwealth governments.

Risks

The SERG considers there are minimal risks associated with the designation of the ACT as a biosphere reserve. The two risks identified are:

1. The designation could be used against the ACT and Commonwealth governments by pressure groups in the future to prevent or slow down developments in the core, transition and buffer zone areas. It may create within the community peer pressures to perform and penalties for failure to 'live up' to aspirations. To overcome these risks, it is essential that planning instruments are sufficient flexibility to enable developments of public interest to occur provided environmental consequences of such developments can be ascertained and properly managed and not undermine the integrity of the biosphere.
2. The designation of the ACT as a biosphere reserve requires Commonwealth Government support. While the reserve does not have the same status as reserves established under the Ramsar or other conventions, an issue arises for the ACT government with respect to powers and responsibilities for the reserve. This raises the issue as to whether the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act could override provisions of Territory legislation with respect to management issues associated with maintaining the biosphere reserve. Legal advice is required on the possible implications of designating the biosphere reserve in relation to Commonwealth Legislation.

Benefits

The SERG considers the biosphere reserve designation would be of great symbolic importance to the ACT. It would also enhance goal-setting for disciplines responsible for natural resources management and integration of development and conservation strategies and provide the catalyst for developing networks and actions by business and community groups. Biosphere reserve status is a unique branding tool, which can be used to market the ACT, just as Far North Queensland uses the Wet Tropics Rainforests to promote the region's tourism industry. The most significant beneficiary

of the designation initially will be the ACT's tourism industry. Biosphere reserves status over urban areas will support the liveability objectives of the Canberra Plan, and help in the promotion of Canberra as an attractive place to live and visit.

The biosphere reserve would help reinforce the existing networks and partnerships within the community paying dedicated to protecting environmental interests and land management. It might act as that "beacon on the hill" for members of the general community because it is a far more tangible concept than the somewhat abstract and complex concept of "sustainability". The Mornington Peninsular Biosphere Reserve according to one researcher¹ has created networks and flows of information among disparate sectors of society that would otherwise never intersect. There are a series of roundtables operating in Mornington Shire which meet regularly to discuss issues. The roundtable has been able to secure grants for implementing small projects which support the goals of the biosphere. The evidence from the Mornington Peninsular Biosphere suggests that the designation has provided an important basis for encouraging more integrated approaches to planning, problem solving and sustainability. Similar benefits could be achieved in the ACT.

Recommendations

The SERG supports the designation of the ACT as a UNESCO biosphere reserve.

SERG recommends the ACT government that it:

1. Establish a joint Steering Committee with the Commonwealth Government in order to prepare and submit an application to UNESCO for Biosphere Reserve listing
2. Write to UNESCO outlining the intention to proceed with an application for listing of the ACT as a biosphere reserve and request the necessary documentation and process required to submit an application.
3. Consult with the NSW government on the merits of incorporating parts for NSW in the Biosphere reserve.
4. Inform the community it intends to proceed with the application and advise on the strategy to involve interested stakeholders in the process
5. Provide an allocation of funds in key agency budgets (based on the advice of the Steering Committees) for sufficient resources to direct and prepare the application.



Professor Brian H Roberts
Chairman
ACT Government's Sustainability Expert Reference Group

¹ Kate Matysek (2004) Theory And Planning For Urban Biosphere Reserves: An Australian Example, Leading Edge, http://www.escarpment.org/leading_edge/LE04/papers/Matysek.pdf