



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 29

Date Authorised for Publication: 17 May 2022



Ginninderra Catchment Group
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Submission addressed to;

The Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity
ACT Legislative Assembly
LCommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au

RE: Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

The Ginninderra Catchment Group welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission for this inquiry and extends our thanks to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity, within the ACT Legislative Assembly, for recognising the importance of Environmental Volunteering across the Territory.

The Ginninderra Catchment Group [GCG] is both a community-based natural resource management organisation and a Landcare network, operating primarily in the northwest ACT Region. This community-driven organisation supports over 20 Landcare Groups (including Parkcare, urban, rural, junior, and Aboriginal Landcare Groups) and coordinates numerous community engagement and landscape-scale restoration programs. GCG also facilitates citizen science and community education programs. GCG's mission is to 'connect, support and lead local communities to maintain and improve the health of the Ginninderra Catchment and surrounding environments'.

This submission is made on behalf of the GCG and its current 29 member groups, as listed below;

Budjan Galindji (Franklin)
Crace Landcare Group (Crace)
Croke Place Lions Landcare Group (Evatt)
Emu Creek Landcare Group (Belconnen)
Friends of Aranda bushland (Aranda)
Friends of Gossan Hill (Bruce)
Friends of Harrison Wetlands (Harrison)
Friends of Mt Painter (Cook)
Friends of Mulligans Flat (Forde)
Friends of the Pinnacle (Hawker)
Friends of Wangara Parks (Aranda)

Friends of Yerrabi Pond (Gungahlin)
Flea Bog Creek Landcare Group (Bruce)
Giralang Pond Landcare Group (Giralang)
Hall Landcare Group (Hall)
Hawker Community Landcare (Hawker)
Holt Micro-Forest (Holt)
Jarramlee Park Landcare (Dunlop)
Kuringa Woodlands Landcare Group (Fraser)
Landcare of Lawson (Lawson)
Macgregor Landcare Group (Macgregor)
Maribyrnong Community Climate Action Group (Kaleen)
Mt Rogers Landcare Group (Flynn)
Mulanggong Traditional Aboriginal Landcare Group (Various)
Native Grassland Restoration Landcare Group (Various)
North Belconnen Landcare Convenor (Evatt)
Umbagog Landcare Group (Latham)
Wallaroo Landcare Group (NSW)
Sutton Landcare Group (NSW)

GCG looks forward to the positive outcomes from this Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism, with greater benefits to our on-ground volunteers and the wider environmental values of the ACT.

The key recommendations from the Ginninderra Catchment Group, regarding environmental volunteering, in relation to the Terms of Reference, are detailed below.

1. Adequate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations

1.1 Environmental Volunteering Funding

This feedback is based on the history of extensive lobbying required by the ACT Catchment groups, to obtain consistent funding from the ACT Government. GCG extends our greatest appreciation and thanks to the current CAT Government for securing 4-years of confirmed funding for the three catchment groups in the ACT - Ginninderra Catchment Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group and Molonglo Conservation Group. In addition, we appreciate the confirmed multi-year funding for both the ACT Region Waterwatch and ACT Region Frogwatch Programs.

Whilst we acknowledge that the current core funding is confirmed for 4 years, there is no certainty of our organisations' funding after this period. This is similar to previous situations in which the ACT Catchment Groups were left without confirmed funding, therefore requiring significant resources to lobby for funding opportunities. This diverts critical resources away from supporting community Landcare groups and on-ground NRM works.

RECOMMENDATION 1 - For a permanent budget allowance to support ACT Catchment Groups, and Waterwatch and Frogwatch programs to allow for adequate support for community Landcare and associated stewardship programs

2. Increased recognition of volunteer contributions

Every year, thousands of volunteers across the ACT, through Landcare and other organisations, undertake conservation work that saves the ACT Government a significant amount of money. Environmental volunteers contribute over \$21.5 million annually to ACT Government in volunteer hours. Landcare volunteers are a key component of this. While there is some acknowledgment of these contributions made by volunteers, this is often inconsistent and not backed by supporting actions and behavior towards volunteers.

In addition, many active volunteers are highly skilled and qualified experts in their relevant fields from ex-CSIRO Ecologists, Botanists, and Wildlife Experts as well as engineers, project managers and policy experts. Despite this extensive knowledge and experience held by these volunteers, many acknowledge engagement with members of ACT Government or employed contractors who do not recognize the expertise held by these volunteers.

Acknowledgment of voluntary contributions to ACT Government programs, plans and strategies should be meaningful and include detail about the work that volunteers did and the difference it has made. It should cover everything from volunteer input at planning workshops through to on-ground outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 2.1 - Increase acknowledgment of volunteers through ACT Government publications, websites, and social media. Currently, both the [PCS](#) and [Parks and Places](#) web pages largely present their volunteer programs as a service they provide to the community.

RECOMMENDATION 2.2 -Allow volunteers to claim back expenses for attending government meetings or for on-ground work where appropriate

RECOMMENDATION 2.3 - Organise a yearly event celebrating all environment and citizen science volunteers to thank them for their contributions to the ACT Government. This should be free for volunteers to attend and be open to all volunteers, regardless of which program or group they are involved with.

3. Increase partnership and support for Community Environmental Volunteering

3.1 NGO - ACT Government Partnership

Currently, the Ginninderra Catchment Group and other Catchment Groups, have a supportive relationship with several sections of ACT Government, including; ACT NRM, UPP in TCCS and areas of PCS. However, stronger supportive relationships between both the land managers and program managers across the UPP and Parkcare programs could greatly benefit on-ground volunteers.

In relation to the specific programs run across the ACT, there are some issues that are unique to each program. Issues raised by volunteers across the Parkcare and UPP programs are detailed below, with recommendations proposed.

3.2 PCS - Parkcare

GCG recognises and strongly supports the recent hiring of two new Parkcare rangers under PCS, to assist with on-ground land management, as well as the strong support provided by the current Parkcare team within PCS. However, there have been concerns raised by Parkcare volunteers about the lack of resourcing, staff and funding, for land management across the Canberra Nature Park. In addition, there has been a culture shift within PCS since the rebranding of “Parkcare” to “Parkcare Patch” which was initiated by the ACT Government, as a forced change to a community-run program with limited consultation with on-ground volunteers.

Additional issues have been raised, as listed below;

- *On-ground management is inadequate, new rangers are required (this is been partially addressed)*
- *Staff Turnover is an issue for long-term effective land management*
- *PCS needs an independent review of PCS management of the reserve estate*
- *Restrictions for on-ground volunteers regarding power tools and other tools (detailed further in section 4.1 below).*

RECOMMENDATION 3.2.1 - Newly posted PCS rangers to meet with the area park care group committee as soon as practicable after they begin.

RECOMMENDATION 3.2.2 - Increased resourcing – rangers' time is split with other responsibilities and can't dedicate good time to do conservation work

RECOMMENDATION 3.2.3 - A CNP education program- run with schools to educate youth and help with succession planning for PC groups. This could be devolved to CG's to deliver.

3.3 TCCS - Urban Parks and Places (UPP)

GCG recognises the support provided by key TCCS staff through the UPP program coordinator, as well as Northside Operations Manager and staff within the Urban Tree Unit. However, there are current policies and practices implemented under the UPP and broader TCCS land management that are negatively impacting the works of on-ground volunteers, as well as border conservation land management.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3 - Additional resourcing should be made available to the UPP program to facilitate the current program manager to adequately manage this program.

Note: Currently over 60 groups across UPP are managed by ONE ACT Government staff member, GCG recognises the high level of support provided by this position, despite the lack of appropriate support.

3.3.1 Off reserve grassland restoration

One of the key issues for Urban Land Management across the Ginninderra Catchment is the excessive mowing regimes across urban open spaces. The current regimes including areas that are or should be listed as remnant Natural Temperate Grasslands (NTG) which is a critically endangered plant community under the EPBC Act.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3.1 - Reduce excessive mowing, especially in areas dominated by natural grassland species. This includes reducing the frequency, increasing grass mow height and ensuring mows are undertaken at the correct time of year.

SEE RECOMMENDATION 5.2 below.

3.3.2 TCCS Biodiversity Management

It has been evidenced by ecologists and volunteers that have seen an increase in weed distribution, with current mowing and land management increasing the spread of weeds. In addition, the current urban forest strategy encourages the planting of exotic species or non-endemic natives. There are also issues with a lack of contractor and staff training around issues of Ecological or Biodiversity significance (eg. limited red-flowering plants to promote greater bird diversity).

RECOMMENDATION 3.3.2.1 - Ensuring sufficient training for TCCS mowing operators and land managers

RECOMMENDATION 3.3.2.2 - Enforcing proper mowing hygiene to reduce weed spread weed

4. Adequate resourcing and allowances for on-ground volunteers to enable BEST PRACTICE Land Management

4.1 Environmental Volunteering Restrictions - Power Tool Use

This feedback is relating to the current restrictions imposed on volunteer groups within the ACT, both across the Parkcare Parks and Conservation Service Program and the Urban Parks and Places volunteering program within Transport Canberra and City Services.

Whilst there are many issues raised by volunteers, the core issue is there are current restrictions placed on all volunteers (PCS and TCCS) which expressly prohibit the use of power tools, including whipper snippers, as well as some hand tools like scythes. This is a significant issue across both land tenures as it forces volunteer groups to undertake EXTENSIVE manual weeding works, which IS NOT in line with best practice nor is it in line with appropriate WHS guidelines and actually puts these volunteers at greater risk of injury and strain

The majority of community Landcare volunteers are older people aged 50+, with many volunteers over 65yo. Current ACT Government restrictions mean that these volunteers are forced to undertake hours of intensive weeding with mattocks, or hand pulling, rather than these works being undertaken by suitably trained and qualified volunteers in much less time. Alternatively, groups are forced to apply for costly grants with the majority of funds going to over-priced weed management contractors.

In addition, the “hard labour” method of weed management excludes some members of the community who are not physically capable of undertaking these works. It also reduces community engagement and volunteer numbers and many potential regular volunteers are not comfortable, nor willing, to turn up every month to hand-pull weeds for 2 hours.

It should be noted that local catchment and Landcare groups across other jurisdictions in Australia are granted permission to use power tools, like whipper snippers, to undertake land management activities. It should be noted that Landcare in SE Queensland would not be possible without the use of these tools.

RECOMMENDATION 4.1 - ACT Government develop, in consultation with Catchment Groups, PCS and TCCS, a suitable policy to allow trained and qualified volunteers to utilise powered tools and hand equipment in-line with best-practice land management.

4.2 Environmental Volunteering Restrictions - Herbicides

In addition to the power tool restrictions raised above, there are restrictions placed on TCCS Urban Landcare groups that prohibit the use of herbicides for weed control, with volunteers only permitted to use Glyphosate. This restriction is only applied to Urban Landcare groups, with all Parkcare Groups under PCS allowed to use other herbicides where suitable. Currently, ACT government does allow qualified Weed management Contractors to use other herbicides in Urban parks, the restriction is only for volunteers, regardless if they may be suitably experienced and qualified.

As with the restrictions on power tools, this herbicide restriction forces volunteers into a method of sub-standard land management practices where they cannot effectively control weeds in their sites. It is widely documented that many invasive species cannot be successfully controlled with

Glyphosate. This forces volunteers to undertake repetitive and ineffective manual removal, OR to repeatedly use glyphosate with more applications and higher concentrations required, rather than a single application with a more suitable herbicide. Alternatively, groups are forced to apply for costly grants with the majority of funds going to over-priced weed management contractors.

It should be noted that the issues with this restriction are limited to larger Urban parks, for example, Umbagog District Park and Mount Rogers Reserve, which are of a scale and ecological complexity similar to many PCS Reserves. It is proposed that there should be allowances made for UPP groups working in larger reserves, and the option to seek approval to utilise additional herbicides as required.

RECOMMENDATION 4.2 - ACT Government, specifically TCCS to develop a policy to allow Landcare volunteers working in large, Reserve-scale Parks to seek approval to use additional herbicides to control weeds, in line with best-practice land management

5. Support for Ngunawal leadership in Caring for Country

GCG recognises the need for more support for Caring for Country activities. It is important for Ngunawal people, especially youth to get out of the country - to ensure cultural knowledge is handed down to the next generation of youth. It also needs to be acknowledged that while we are in the ACT, the Ngunawal footprint is cross-border, therefore Ngunawal programs and initiatives need to work across ACT-border in Ngunawal boundaries. Education is key, with need for greater primary, secondary, and all levels of schooling.

RECOMMENDATION 5.1 - ACT Education needs to include cultural compliance and welcome to country, artifacts and local resources, caring and sharing cultural heritage.

There is also a significant benefit to the landscape from having greater resourcing provided to support traditional Ngunawal land management practices across both PCS and TCCS land. This includes more Aboriginal rangers for land management and more resourcing to support on-ground cool and cultural burning practices.

RECOMMENDATION 5.2 - More funding for Indigenous Rangers across PCS and TCCS lands, and more funding for cool and cultural burning for landscape management.

Note: this also relates to RECOMMENDATION 3.3.1 - Grassland Reserve Management

Another opportunity to support Ngunawal culture should be provided through the ACT Heritage Grants program, however, over the last few years, only a small fraction have been for Ngunawal or Aboriginal projects, with the majority focusing on European heritage.

RECOMMENDATION 5.3 - Ensure Ngunawal and Aboriginal projects can be supported through Heritage Grants.

6. Increased support for community environmental education and awareness-raising

6.1 Broader Education

There is a huge importance for increasing community awareness of the environment, which is largely facilitated by Catchment Groups across the ACT. This includes Broader Community Education and Youth and Junior Education. In addition to engaging youth in Landcare, there is a need for greater environmental education and awareness-raising. Increasing research shows that learning about natural environments generates an ethic of appreciation and valuing of nature. This is likely to increase, likely to lead to greater recruitment of volunteers and greater community support for the work of environmental volunteers.

RECOMMENDATION 6.1 - Need for greater environmental education and awareness-raising, for community education about natural environments.

RECOMMENDATION 6.2 - Develop a targeted program for schools education that includes landcare and NRM.

6.2 Citizen Science

The Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch and ACT Region Frogwatch programs are highly-successful citizen science programs that operate across the ACT. These programs are undertaken in partnership between ACT Government (ACT NRM) and the regional Catchment groups, with huge success.

The combined programs reach thousands of volunteers every year and also provide educational opportunities to schools and the wider community. Many environmental volunteers recognize the importance of these programs and would like to see them expanded to cover other areas of the environment and conservation.

RECOMMENDATION 6.3 - Provide greater opportunities for Citizen Science projects across the ACT. Eg. ACT Region Turtlewatch, ACT Region Vegewatch Program, ACT-Wide annual Bioblitz program.

7. Additional Conservation and Biodiversity Recommendations

The following information has been provided as other relevant matters raised by on-ground environmental volunteers in relation to broader biodiversity and conservation across the ACT.

7.1 Waterways and Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD)

Issues were raised about the methods for urban stormwater management across urban Canberra, based on outdated guidelines and a strong preference for “sterile” engineering solutions to channel water away as quickly as possible, using unnatural mechanisms like concrete channels and underground pipes. These outdated guidelines place unnecessary restrictions on volunteer groups, which prohibits them from doing works to improve and restore urban waterways and wetland areas

It is widely accepted that water retention is critical for soil health and to support vegetation, especially planted trees and this needs to be recognised across all levels of land management - TCCS (Stormwater, ACT Roads, UPP), Suburban Land Agency (through old and new developments) and across ACT Government.

RECOMMENDATION 7.1.1 - Greater emphasis on WSUD - Water Sensitive Urban Design when designing new suburbs, as well as retrofitting older suburbs or converting old concrete channels into natural waterways.

NOTE: This practice of renaturalizing waterways is becoming more common across Australia and Europe.

RECOMMENDATION 7.1.1 - More flexible Land Management policies to facilitate and support Landcare groups and environmental volunteers to undertake projects and works that will establish and improve natural waterways and wetland areas.

7.2 Biodiversity Management

The ACT requires an integrated biodiversity management approach that extends across all tenures, not just focused on reserves and parks under PCS, it should address all land tenures including TCCS and private-owned land. Many areas of biodiversity significance occur on urban lands outside the Canberra Nature Park, with remnant patches of critically endangered communities and rare species.

In addition, issues raised by environmental volunteers (and qualified ecologists) about the ACT Government planting plans which DO NOT promote biodiversity and actually negatively affect it across the urban ACT. One example of this is the increasing support for planting red-flowering bottle brushes, which are proven to significantly reduce Bird biodiversity in urban landscapes. These plant species that affect biodiversity are supported by both TCCS and the SLA through the “*Municipal Infrastructure Standards 25 Plant Species for Urban Plantings*” and the SLA “*Climate Wise Garden Book*”.

RECOMMENDATION 7.2.1 - Develop an ACT-Wide biodiversity management plan across all land tenures, with emphasis on areas of significance that need to be protected and areas that need improvement through land management.

RECOMMENDATION 7.2.2 - In addition, review mapping (as listed under ACTMapi) to incorporate new areas of Natural Temperate Grassland and Box Gum Woodland as identified by on-ground volunteers and members of the community, to ensure these areas are recognised and protected.

RECOMMENDATION 7.2.3 - Biodiversity and Conservation should be a measured consideration across ALL ACT Land management policies and initiatives, with positive actions taken to promote native biodiversity as much as possible.

7.3 Weed Management

It has been evidenced by ecologists and volunteers that have seen an increase in weed distribution, with current mowing and land management increasing the spread of weeds. In addition, the current urban forest strategy encourages the planting of exotic species or non-endemic natives. There are also issues with a lack of contractor and staff training around issues of Ecological or Biodiversity

significance (eg. limited red-flowering plants to promote greater bird diversity).

There have been significant issues raised by environmental volunteers (and qualified ecologists) about the ACT Government planting species which are considered environmental weeds and encouraging local residents to source and plant these species on their properties. For example, the *“Municipal Infrastructure Standards 25 Plant Species for Urban Plantings”* includes many species that are known by on-ground volunteers to spread into our reserves and become environmental weeds. In addition, planting of these species is often encouraged to the wider community through materials like the recently published SLA *“Climate Wise Garden Book”*.

RECOMMENDATION 7.3.1 - Develop an ACT-Wide weed management plan across all land tenures, and in collaboration with surrounding NSW regional councils.

RECOMMENDATION 7.3.2 - Provide greater consideration for future weed management by reducing plantings of non-native species where possible, and especially for exotic species with a high potential to become weeds.

RECOMMENDATION 7.3.3 - Bring back the “Weed Swap” program for local residents to bring in weeds to local waste facilities, in exchange for a free native plant.

7.4 Urban Forest Strategy

The Urban Forest Strategy does address the importance of each vegetation layer (eg, shrubs and groundcovers) however, this is not evident in on-ground land management practices. For example, there is too much emphasis on trees, and not enough focus on shrubs and groundcovers.

RECOMMENDATION 7.4 - Develop UFS which considers overall ecological principles, with greater emphasis on soil and water management for increased permeability and water retention. Ensure this translates into appropriate on-ground land management.

8. Summary of Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1 - For a permanent budget allowance to support ACT Catchment Groups, and Waterwatch and Frogwatch programs to allow for adequate support for community Landcare and associated stewardship programs

RECOMMENDATION 2.1 - Increase acknowledgment of volunteers through ACT Government publications, websites, and social media. Currently, both the [PCS](#) and [Parks and Places](#) web pages largely present their volunteer programs as a service they provide to the community.

RECOMMENDATION 2.2 - Allow volunteers to claim back expenses for attending government meetings or for on-ground work where appropriate

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RECOMMENDATION 4.2 - ACT Government, specifically TCCS to develop a policy to allow Landcare volunteers working in large, Reserve-scale Parks to seek approval to use additional herbicides to control weeds, in line with best-practice land management

RECOMMENDATION 5.1 - ACT Education needs to include cultural compliance and welcome to country, artifacts and local resources, caring and sharing cultural heritage.

RECOMMENDATION 5.2 - More funding for Indigenous Rangers across PCS and TCCS lands, and more funding for cool and cultural burning for landscape management. *Note: this also relates to RECOMMENDATION 3.3.1 - Grassland Reserve Management*

RECOMMENDATION 5.3 - Ensure Ngunawal and Aboriginal projects can be supported through Heritage Grants.

RECOMMENDATION 6.1 - Need for greater environmental education and awareness-raising, for community education about natural environments.

RECOMMENDATION 6.2 - Develop a targeted program for school education that includes landcare and NRM.

RECOMMENDATION 6.3 - Provide greater opportunities for Citizen Science projects across the ACT. Eg. ACT Region Turtlewatch, ACT Region Vegewatch Program, ACT-Wide annual Bioblitz program.

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RECOMMENDATION 7.4 - develop UFS which considers overall ecological principles, with greater emphasis on soil and water management for increased permeability and water retention. Ensure this translates into appropriate on-ground land management.