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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

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**ACT Government Submission to the Standing
Committee on Environment, Climate Change and
Biodiversity (ECCB) Inquiring into Environmental
Volunteerism in the ACT**

March 2022



The ACT Government is committed to supporting environmental volunteerism in the ACT. The Government also recognises the significant contribution and value that volunteers make in conserving nature and the range of benefits that accrue from their contribution. This submission provides an overview of the ACT Government’s commitment and support for environmental volunteerism and responds directly to the first four terms of reference in the sections below.

We thank all our volunteers for the contribution they make to the “nature of our city”.

Environmental volunteerism is important in Canberra, with a strong network of environmental volunteers. Volunteering benefits the environment, but also participants in terms of their physical and mental health, meeting like-minded people, gaining work experience and learning new skills. It encourages people to connect with nature (their natural and cultural environment), actively care for, and look after nature. Their support and expertise also ensures consistency in monitoring and management over and above that provided by Government.

Community stewardship of the environment reduces the likelihood of neglect and encourages respect by others. For example, residents’ groups record plants and animals, control weeds, undertake revegetation, remove rubbish, control erosion and raise environmental awareness.

Volunteers contribute to the ACT economy providing enormous benefit to Government. The Selfless Service: The State of Volunteering in the ACT Report¹ found that volunteers contribute over \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy annually. A 2017 report from the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment estimated the value of volunteer activity in the ACT was more than 22% of total ACT Government expenditure on the environment. In 2015 - 2016 it totalled an extraordinary \$50.5m of value².

ACT Government environmental volunteer programs contribute to community-based delivery of environmental outcomes, stewardship of public assets, citizen science and participation in nature across a number of Government priorities. Volunteering brings people together to build a more active, engaged and inclusive community. It enriches the lives of volunteers themselves, as well as those who benefit from their commitment to Canberra, its people and places.

Volunteering has significant personal benefits, with 95% of individuals reporting feelings of wellbeing as a result of volunteering³. Despite these benefits, there are various barriers to

¹ https://www.academia.edu/9902822/Selfless_Service_The_State_of_Volunteering_in_the_ACT_Report.

² https://envcomm.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Environmental-Economic-Accounts-for-ACT-state-of-the-environment-reporting_Proof-of-Concept-A151125412.pdf.

³ https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/1211205/ACT-Volunteering-Statement-Action-Plan-2018-2021.pdf.



individual involvement in volunteering, such as time constraints and difficulties in learning of volunteering opportunities. Providing a range of volunteering opportunities for members of the community to contribute through a diverse program of initiatives is key to engaging community members for everyone's benefit.

The ACT Government's successful environmental initiatives are supported by a significant community effort that provided in excess of 50,000 volunteer hours in 2017-18 to assist with the implementation of key environment and conservation objectives.

The annual ACT Environment Grants have been operating since 1996 and are important for supporting community volunteer activities and delivering high quality environmental outcomes. Over this period, 288 projects have shared in almost \$4.5 million of funding. The Grants fund community projects that support environmental volunteer activities consistent with the ACT Government's policies and priorities.

In 2021/22 the ACT Government expanded the ACT Environment Grants program and continues support for community delivery of environmental outcomes through volunteer programs allocating \$3.49 million over 4 years. The initiative continues to support the ACT's three catchment groups, which includes the delivery of the ACT and Region Frogwatch (Frogwatch) and the Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch (Waterwatch) following the withdrawal of Commonwealth funding. Funding has also been provided to support ACT Wildlife, and to support the ongoing employment for a second ParkCare Ranger.

In February 2022 the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment released a [website and report](#)⁴ highlighting the diversity of volunteering in the ACT. This resource further demonstrates Government, organisational and community commitment to environmental volunteering.

Wellbeing benefits

Volunteering has been demonstrated to improve physical and mental health. Research shows that volunteering improves mental health outcomes, and can increase levels of serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins. Research conducted by Volunteering Australia and the Australian National University showed that throughout the COVID-19 health pandemic, volunteers had a higher level of life satisfaction than non-volunteers. "Many volunteers had positive experiences, reporting that their voluntary work helped them maintain a connection with others, kept them active and busy, and gave them a sense of purpose. Volunteers also emphasised the benefits of using or gaining new skills, the opportunity to understand others, and the sense that volunteering became more accessible."⁵

⁴ <https://actenvirovolunteers.com.au/>.

⁵ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/covid-19-research/volunteering-during-the-pandemic/#/>.



The survey also showed that volunteers had a higher level of life satisfaction prior to COVID-19 than non-volunteers. The impact of COVID-19 on life satisfaction and loneliness varied by volunteering behaviour over the period, with those who managed to continue volunteering during COVID-19 faring much better.

Australians who had stopped volunteering since 2019 had a greater loss of life satisfaction than those who continued to volunteer during COVID-19. Loss in life satisfaction appears to have occurred between April and October 2020. Those who stopped volunteering were far more likely to say that they felt lonely at least some of the time than those who continued volunteering⁶.

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

Environment Volunteer Groups supported by ACT Government

The ACT Government supports a suite of non-government volunteer organisations to deliver both community and Government environmental priorities. A summary of the key groups are outlined below.

Landcare/Catchment Groups

The Ginninderra Catchment Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group, and Molonglo Conservation Group operate in partnership with the peak body, Landcare ACT, and are recognised as three of the primary environmental volunteering organisations in the ACT.

The three catchment groups connect, support and lead local communities to maintain and improve the health of the ACT and surrounding environments. The groups are both community-based natural resource management organisations and a Landcare network. They support a large number of environment Groups (including Parkcare, Urban, Rural, Junior, Aboriginal Landcare Groups, Waterwatch, and Frogwatch) and coordinate numerous community engagement and landscape-scale restoration programs.

The catchment groups facilitate public stewardship of Government Healthy Waterways assets and provide educational activities aimed at reducing water pollution that leads to negative environmental outcomes, including algal blooms, in Canberra's urban lakes.

The catchment groups provide a network for member groups and volunteers linking the catchment community with the ACT Government and other stakeholders, providing assistance with project development and implementation, and facilitating community forums for ideas and discussion. The ACT Government has a service agreement with each Catchment Group focusing on mutually agreed environmental outcomes.

⁶ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/covid-19-research/research-briefing-volunteering-during-the-first-year-of-covid-19/#/>.



National Parks Association

The National Parks Association (NPA) of the ACT started in 1960 with the prime objective of establishing a National Park for the National Capital. Twenty-four years later this goal was achieved when Namadgi National Park was proclaimed in 1984. Today, the NPA works to promote national parks, their good management, and the protection of our fauna and flora, scenery, natural features and cultural heritage through activities such as lobbying, education and by hands-on work parties. Outdoor activities include field trips, work parties, day bushwalks, longer packwalks, snow-shoe walks, kayaking and car camps. These enable members to better appreciate and enjoy the natural phenomena and cultural heritage. The quarterly full-colour Bulletin has articles about the environment, related issues and members' experiences in the bush. The NPA also send out a monthly eNewsletter and publish a good range of expert-edited field guides. The NPA monthly general meetings bring members together to talk with the committee informally with guest speakers who address a wide range of topics.

The NPA is directly involved in assisting with threatened fauna surveys, collecting valuable data to improve the knowledge and management of threatened species, such as Rosenberg's Goanna and Greater Gliders. The whole of the Rosenberg's Goanna research project is run by volunteers (Don Fletcher and the NPA) and has been running for over 3 years. They are periodically funded through the annual Environment Grants and supported by the ACT Government with equipment.

ACT Wildlife

ACT Wildlife was established in 2014 and provides volunteers to care for injured wildlife. During 2018, ACT Wildlife took 1591 injured animals into care (55% increase from 2014) and received 9,427 calls for advice (570% increase from 2014). Volunteers also operate a 24/7 hotline receiving calls from the community and Access Canberra reporting on incidents of injured wildlife or for general wildlife care advice. They are the only wildlife care group registered to work in the ACT. In 2021/22 the ACT Government supported ACT Wildlife with additional resources to support their ability to care for injured wildlife and respond to phone calls.

Canberra Ornithologists Group

The Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) is committed to the study and conservation of native birds to ensure they persist for future generations. From small beginnings 50 years ago, COG has grown into a large, effective, and influential organisation that supports research and promotes conservation issues. As a truly interactive community group, COG supports functions of the Conservation Council ACT Region, regularly supplies vital bird sighting information to open-access platforms, such as Canberra Nature Map (CNM) and *eBird*, produces the *Canberra Bird Notes* journal, and maintains a community 'Chatline' where bird enthusiasts can share their passion and knowledge for Canberra birds.



COG make exceptional contributions in the field of monitoring, which includes the provision of sightings and survey data to programs like the *Atlas of Australian Birds*, the *Action Plan for Australian Birds*, and their own [Canberra] *Garden Bird Survey* and *Woodland Bird Monitoring Program*. The latter is considered one of the strongest long-term woodland bird datasets in Australia, and forms the basis of multiple statistical reports that provide robust trend assessments for this nationally recognised vulnerable fauna community.

Based on the collective knowledge and experience of their committee and volunteer members, COG consistently contributes ecological advice to the ACT Government to advance conservation policy and inform recovery planning, particularly for threatened and 'at risk' bird species. COG achieves this through the direct supply of empirical data, but also by regularly reviewing draft strategies, policies and plans produced by Government.

Friends of Grasslands

Friends of Grasslands (FoG) is a non-profit community group run by volunteers dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. FoG members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers, and interested members of the public, who collectively undertake extensive field restoration work, while also advocating, educating and advising on matters to do with the conservation of grassy ecosystems.

FoG achieves a wide breadth of positive conservation and education outcomes across the ACT and NSW grassland regions through hands-on projects (including survey work), working parties, outreach and education, and diverse partnerships. These include the National Capital Authority, Conservation Council ACT Region, Environmental Defender's Office, Bush on the Boundary groups, National Arboretum Canberra (Southern Tablelands Ecosystem Park), and Kosciuszko2Coast.

FoG is a key partner with the ACT Government for grassland conservation and restoration initiatives. FoG contributes to the monitoring of ACT Government actions undertaken for grassland management, and regularly provides comment on draft or amended legislation and policy and planning to ensure that they are adequate and appropriate to protect grassy ecosystems. For example, in 2021, FoG provided specialist and scientific input on the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan, Threatened Species Action Plan, Natural Resource Management Plan, Regional Fire Management Plan, Franklin Grasslands Landscape Plan, and listing assessments for Monaro Grassland Earless Dragon and Golden Sun Moth.

ACT Government volunteer programs

In addition to supporting volunteers and volunteer organisation, ACT Government directly delivers a range of volunteering programs <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/about-us/volunteering>.

These opportunities are expanded upon below.



ParkCare <https://www.parks.act.gov.au/get-involved/parkcare-volunteering>

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) facilitates and supports over 1,700 registered volunteers. ParkCare Volunteers work alongside PCS staff to protect, enhance and promote the work of PCS. The ParkCare Program celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2019, and is critical to the effective management of Parks, Reserves and Forests in the ACT.

ParkCare has four key program areas:

1. **Patch Groups:** Volunteer groups working as custodians of a particular patch of PCS land, involved in weeding, revegetation, and surveying works. There are currently 26 Patch Groups operating across the PCS estate.
2. **RangerAssist:** Volunteers working directly with Rangers on one-off or irregular projects, including weeding, planting and other works.
3. **VisitorAssist:** Volunteers delivering visitor services and interpretation at the Namadgi Visitors Centre, Tidbinbilla Visitors Centre and Tidbinbilla Sanctuary and Eucalypt Forest helping to engage the public in the work of PCS.
4. **WildlifeAssist:** Volunteers assisting with threatened species recovery programs, including in food preparation and Ranger rounds.

In 2020-2021 ParkCare Volunteers contributed more than 26,000 volunteering hours to caring for our environment, contributing over \$1 million worth of value to managing and caring for ACT's parks and reserves.

ParkCare is currently managed by four employees, with a fifth to be recruited in early 2022.

Urban Parks and Places

The Transport Canberra and City Services Urban Parks and Places volunteer program includes 'Friends of' groups and Urban Landcare groups. The Urban Parks and Places volunteer program is a community partnership between the local community and the ACT Government. The program allows the community to get involved in a hands-on way to contribute to the conservation, presentation, and maintenance of Canberra's many public urban open space areas.

There are many Urban Parks and Places volunteer groups across Canberra. Some groups meet regularly while others meet on an ad hoc basis. They have undertaken conservation and maintenance activities in urban parks and places formally since the 1990s. These groups care for and maintain an area of urban open space. Volunteer activities include habitat restoration, weeding, tree planting, garden bed maintenance, minor tree maintenance, conservation activities, and litter collecting.



Volunteer Supported Wombat Mange Treatment

ACT Wildlife and Wombat Rescue are two wildlife carer groups that are working collaboratively with the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) to help address the issue of wombat mange in the ACT. Both volunteer wildlife carer groups undertake individual and broad-scale treatment programs, working with rural leaseholders and PCS to treat mange affected individuals.

Recently, EPSDD, ACT Wildlife and Wombat Rescue released a joint initiative, the [Wombat Sightings Portal](#)⁷. This is a publicly available online portal where the community can report wombat sightings, including of mangy or sick wombats, to ensure timely treatment and a coordinated response between carer groups and urban wildlife staff.

The collaboration between EPSDD, ACT wildlife and Wombat Rescue carer groups will continue with the development of a wombat monitoring program. Volunteers within the two carer groups play a core role in the monitoring program, investing many hours to collect data for evidence-based decision making and policy development.

Platypus and Rakali Sightings Public Portal

A new public [Platy and Ratty Portal](#)⁸ was launched in 2020 to support Waterwatch and Platypus Month. The Portal maps platypus and rakali data from a range of sources in our region including Waterwatch and CNM and has results and detailed analysis of eight years of annual platypus month surveys. The portal expanded in 2021 allowing citizen scientists to report incidental sightings at any time of year through the Waterwatch website; 46 new reports were made from August 2021 to January 2022.

The data collected through the portal is not only helping to understand the status, distribution and conservation needs of platypus and rakali in the waterways of the ACT Region, the records are also shared to the national repository of wildlife; the Atlas of Living Australia, and CNM, assisting with ongoing conservation and research of these iconic animals.

Citizen Science Programs

The Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch and the ACT and Region Frogwatch

Waterwatch and Frogwatch are award-winning citizen science programs. Waterwatch and Frogwatch data are considered fundamental resources that sit within an integrated monitoring framework for the ACT region. Both are regional programs and recognise the need to engage with communities at a whole-of-catchment scale.

Waterwatch has been running since 1995 and has over 200 volunteers collecting monthly water quality data at over 230 sites across the region as well as a further 100 collecting other data such as at platypus surveys. Likewise, Frogwatch has a long history in the ACT

⁷ <https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/9bf75df45ef7499ba4a38305b3373d29>.

⁸ <https://actgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/78978bb7af864ff8a7cab04b2c7a5258>.



region, running since 2002 with thousands of volunteers collecting over 20,000 frog species records.

These programs could not exist without volunteers, they successfully build awareness and capacity in our communities through collecting data to better manage the waterways across the ACT region. Through Waterwatch and Frogwatch many thousands of volunteer hours have contributed to the monitoring and analysis of waterways in the ACT, providing invaluable data used to inform management planning and decisions. The programs also empower the community to take a greater part in managing their natural environments.

To date, there are over 27,000 water quality survey records in the Waterwatch database and 6,000 surveys housed in the Frogwatch database. This data forms the basis of the Waterwatch annual report card called the [Catchment Health Indicator Program](#)⁹ (CHIP). The CHIP report card has been successful at promoting the catchment health issues. It is used extensively by catchment managers including ACT Government, regional councils, universities and community groups and attracts extensive media attention.

Waterwatch also engages volunteers to collect data on platypus through their annual Platypus Month. This is the only monitoring of this iconic mammal conducted in the ACT region and attracts over 100 volunteers every August.

Canberra Nature Map

CNM¹⁰ is a community grounded, innovative, cloud-based citizen science software platform for gathering, sharing and displaying wildlife data across the ACT. Since 2013, CNM has facilitated a large network of citizen scientists to engage in conservation survey, research, monitoring and management. It has enabled 4879 individuals and community groups to provide the ACT Government with 1,274,000 records of 7400 species. Every day, scores of citizen scientists, community groups and schools volunteer their time to collecting photos and data of ACT's wildlife and plants throughout urban, rural and national parks. The platform is supported by a team of 142 local volunteers who between them provide thousands of hours each year in species identification, moderation and site administration. Through CNM volunteers have supported significant outcomes including:

- Approximately one third of the ACT's threatened species have doubled in their known population size or known occurrences.
- More than 70% of all the rare plant recordings over the last 110 years were recorded using CNM and new threatened plant population discoveries and range extensions have been made.

⁹ <https://www.act.waterwatch.org.au/data/chip-reports>.

¹⁰ <https://canberra.naturemapr.org/>.



- Rediscoveries of species thought regionally extinct and the first ACT records of several nationally threatened species such as the Bathurst Copper Butterfly.

The citizen scientists volunteering with CNM create valuable data that informs decision making, policy, research and land management day to day in the ACT. On over 250 occasions, CNM has recorded the first encounter of a high risk weed on leasehold land, in a reserve, the region or Australia which has led to quick reaction in controlling these new incursions. Information resulting from the use of CNM has led to the creation of a new reserve, changed infrastructure routes, altered prescribed burn programs and re-prioritised the weed control program. In 2021 alone, 270 new rare plant and 300 threatened and rare fauna records were recorded on CNM and accessed by the ACT Government to inform management.

The CNM platform was first developed by Aaron Clausen, an amateur naturalist and software developer who volunteered his time to this worthy cause after finding an extraordinarily cryptic Canberra Spider Orchid in Canberra Nature Park. Today, CNM is supported in part by the ACT Government and Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council, which enables a small team to service the site in their spare time and cover storage and infrastructure costs. However, the exponential growth of the platform as an engagement, data collection and land management tool places a heavy toll on these individuals and the business model, and it is likely that future funding models will need to support this growth.

CNM has facilitated scientific research and scientific papers and is increasingly being recognised for its effectiveness and reliability of species information. While the credibility of citizen science is still to be better recognised, its rapidly increasing, and CNM is likely to evolve into a much more important and widely used tool for connecting citizens, academics and government employees through its coordination of studies.

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

This submission highlights the immense effort and support provided by environmental volunteers in the ACT and the significant benefits accrued. One of the primary limitations for increasing opportunities for environmental volunteering is the availability of time. People working and with caring responsibilities, particularly for children, are recognised across all volunteer sectors as underrepresented in volunteer demographics. However, there are opportunities to improve this which include:

- **Diversifying environmental volunteering opportunities** in areas like

- a) nature-based tourism;
 - b) nature-based health;
 - c) nature-based education; and
 - d) corporate volunteering.
- **Expanding opportunities to allow for one-off volunteering** for volunteers who may not be able to commit to regular or ongoing participation. This provides an opportunity to work with groups from various backgrounds to facilitate specialised volunteering days/opportunities. This can help people feel safe when approaching new volunteering opportunities and break down barriers to involvement. This may include school volunteering, university groups, working with LGBTQI+ groups, ATSI groups or disability support groups.
 - **Improved access to and communication of existing opportunities** - EPSDD has developed a volunteer portal and a range of policies and guidance material. Updating and providing more contemporary and accessible information and app-based approaches may lead to increased volunteers in the environment sector.

3. Managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public

The ACT Government has a range of forums and arrangements in place to support the governance and relationships between volunteers and Government. This includes formal service agreements, formal and informal meetings, a volunteer policy, dedicated staff to support volunteers and a volunteer portal to attract new volunteers. A recent initiative has been the establishment of the Biodiversity Conservation Forum.

Biodiversity Conservation Forum

The ACT Government works in close collaboration with its environmental volunteers through a range of networks. In late 2021, it established the Biodiversity Conservation Forum (BCF) as a co-designed initiative with Conservation Council ACT Region.

The BCF is co-chaired by Helen Oakey, Executive Director of the Conservation Council ACT Region, and Ian Walker, Executive Group Manager - Environment, Heritage and Water, EPSDD. The Secretariat is provided by the Conservation Council ACT Region. The Forum held its inaugural meeting in October 2021, with an opening address by the Minister for the Environment, Rebecca Vassarotti MLA. Meetings are scheduled bi-monthly across the year.

The BCF has strong representation from a range of key stakeholder conservation organisations, which includes but is not limited to:

- Conservation Council ACT Region
- Friends of Grasslands
- Canberra Ornithology Group
- National Parks Association
- Landcare ACT
- Ginninderra Catchment Group ACT
- Southern ACT Catchment Group
- Molonglo Conservation Group
- Australian Native Plants Society.

In bringing together key conservation stakeholders, the BCF enables Government and non-government representatives the opportunity to discuss and co-design solutions to address biodiversity conservation, policy, planning and management related issues. The combined expertise, experience and knowledge of members can enhance information sharing, strategic prioritisation, and on-ground biodiversity and conservation outcomes across stakeholder interest areas in the ACT. Through dialogue and ongoing engagement, the BCF will help build a strong community of practice promoting a shared approach to delivering biodiversity conservation outcomes in the ACT.

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 ACT Government has established a range of policy and regulatory tools that support volunteering including:

- The current Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) registration requires those who work or volunteer with vulnerable people to have a background check to determine an applicant's suitability to be registered under the scheme. This provides a clear definition of who needs a WWVP, providing as much assurance and safety as is reasonable to volunteer involvement.
- The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* provides clear guidance as to how volunteers fit and are defined under the legislation. There are helpful resources via WorkSafeACT¹¹ and SafeWork Australia¹² that help guide volunteer involvement.

¹¹ <https://www.worksafe.act.gov.au/health-and-safety-portal/managing-safety/workplace-rights-and-responsibilities>.

¹² <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/managing-health-and-safety/volunteers>.

- The ACT Volunteering Statement Action Plan 2018-2021¹³ is a whole-of-government and community approach to supporting and recognising volunteers. The actions set out in the plan support the four principles of the Volunteering Statement. The Action Plan identifies initiatives and activities that support individuals to volunteer, increase awareness of volunteering opportunities, and provide volunteer involving organisations with access to resources to facilitate effective, safe and sustainable volunteer involvement.

Conclusion

The ACT Government recognises the significant contribution and value that volunteers make in conserving nature and the range of benefits that accrue from their contribution.

We thank all our volunteers for the contribution they make to the “nature of our city”.

If you would like to discuss any of these comments please contact Ian Walker, Executive Group Manager Environment Heritage and Water, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate on 6205 9027.

¹³ https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/1211205/ACT-Volunteering-Statement-Action-Plan-2018-2021.pdf.