

Submission to the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Proposed Nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve,

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Since 1983 I have been associated with UNESCO and its programs, firstly as a member of the Federal Government Secretariat of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO and since 2000 as a member of the Centre for UNESCO at the Australian National University.

During this time I have come to know and admire the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program and especially its enduring World Network of Biosphere Reserves. The network seems to be a carefully designed program providing a practical response to perhaps the greatest challenge facing humans – how to live sustainably. In the mid 1990s, as a result of the Seville Strategy the network shifted its focus from using biosphere reserves to preserve representative samples of the world's biogeographical regions to biosphere reserves also being used as global examples of how best to promote sustainable development.

Why the Australian Capital Territory?

The Australian Capital Territory seems to be eminently suited to be a biosphere reserve. It has outstanding flora and fauna, especially that preserved in Namadgi National Park. The Park also contains Aboriginal heritage.

Canberra has important national institutions and educational facilities. Education about sustainability is an important function of biosphere reserves. Canberra also has leading scientific institutions. Scientific research into aspects of sustainability is another key elements of successful biosphere reserves.

Canberra is a city in a landscape more than perhaps any other city in the world. Living in a landscape is a key attribute of sustainability.

Canberra has a significant population, unlike most of the world network of biosphere reserves, which are national parks with few people living in them. It is the kind of biosphere reserve well suited to the change of direction in the world network following implementation of the Seville Strategy. The significant population can provide a more realistic model of sustainability for other parts of the world with significant populations.

As perhaps the first National Capital to become a biosphere reserve, Canberra would have a special place in the world network. This will give Australia a position of leadership in the network, helping promote a new image of biosphere reserves. Canberra's image would be promoted both nationally and internationally. I understand that UNESCO would welcome the nomination of the ACT as a biosphere reserve.

Biosphere reserves have proved to be a particularly useful tool in managing land and other resources such as water, which are the responsibility of more than one agency or country. Canberra and environs, with its mix of Territory, Local, State and Federal Government responsibilities and jurisdictions, fits the model well.

A model for an Australian Biosphere Reserve

In a previous email message to the Chairman of the Standing Committee, dated 23 February, I summarised the views on a proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve presented by **Dr Pamela Parker** in her public address at the Australian National University on Wednesday 15 February. In summary Dr Parker said that the ACT was already largely functioning as a biosphere reserve. No new major infrastructure would be needed and the cost would be low. It would not be necessary to establish a new committee with power over the various partners. In fact that could be counterproductive as such a committee would have no power over the use of land and other resources by the private sector. All that would be needed would be a small Secretariat of perhaps a couple of people full-time or part-time and perhaps volunteers. Their job would be mainly to publicise and help coordinate the mutually beneficial activities of the different partners in the biosphere reserve.

Dr Parker spoke against pushing the view that if the ACT became a biosphere reserve large amounts of additional money would be attracted to the ACT, even though that may well happen as a result of the expanded national and international profile of the ACT. The main motivating factor for the ACT to join the world biosphere reserve network should be the additional prestige, respect and international recognition that would come to the ACT and the various partners in the biosphere reserve.

Since the visit of Dr Parker, I have been in contact with key members of the Mornington Peninsula Western Port (MPWP) Biosphere Reserve, including Mr Ian Weir, the founder, as well as Ms Lynette Wilks, the paid Secretariat staff member. Mr Weir participated in a seminar in Canberra several years ago, supporting the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve. MPWP was approved as a biosphere reserve several years ago. It is similar to Canberra in that it has areas of high conservation value as well as a significant population (of about 200,000 people) living within its borders.

The Secretariat of the MPWP Biosphere reserve appears to consist of one paid officer, the Executive Officer, Lynette Wilks. She is paid at an hourly rate by the MPWP Biosphere Foundation. I understand the Foundation's funding comes from contributions from the five Shire Councils involved, together with a little support from Parks Victoria. (Funding for an ACT Biosphere Reserve could also be contributed by more than one Government agency – the ACT Government and the Federal Government through the National Capital Authority (NCA). I understand from meetings between members of the Nature and Society Forum and NCA staff that the National Capital Authority supports nomination of the ACT as a biosphere (please note that for both Bookmark and MPWP biosphere reserves, those involved usually refer to them as biospheres rather than the original names of biosphere reserves. They believe they are more than just reserves and should have a name to match – biospheres – which emphasises the living part of the planet and its importance for

sustainability). A similar change in name for common use could eventually be appropriate for an ACT biosphere reserve.)

In her comments on the MPWP Biosphere Reserve, **Lynette Wilks** said it is essential from the outset that it is clearly understood by all that a biosphere (reserve) is a cooperative/collaborative/partnership venture among governments and their communities –residents, community organisations, businesses. While it needs to be very responsive to community interests and priorities, it is not a community-owned initiative or organisation. It is obvious that UNESCO would and does require the active involvement of relevant authorities, (including government) in implementation of the Man and the Biosphere Program. (UNESCO itself is an inter-governmental organisation.) One of the bones of contention at MPWP biosphere reserve has been that a small number of very committed people, some of whom were involved from the very beginning of the nomination process, believed that the Foundation must be community controlled. Many have been long standing green activists and have had a history of battles with both state and local governments over planning issues. (This may not be such a problem in the ACT where there are good examples of government/community cooperation.)

A biosphere (reserve) is about influence, ideas, support for those doing the right thing, creating awareness and momentum for behavioural change to greater sustainability in the way we live, including the ability to influence and work across the ways both public and private land are managed. It is not about control. It is about change.

Environmental gains have been fostered through participation in what is essentially a social framework in the rapid growth and engagement in the landcare movement in the 1990s. Lynette believes holistic approaches are essential to changing behaviours towards greater sustainability. This means ensuring the social and business sectors need to be involved from the beginning – something MPWP biosphere has not done well. Otherwise the risk is that the biosphere will be seen as just for the greens.

Lynette knows the ACT quite well and agrees that in many ways successive administrations have already been working towards MAB objectives. Lynette also agrees with Ian (Weir) that an ACT planning group would do well to examine in some detail the opportunities and threats that face an ACT biosphere (reserve) before deciding on the management structure. Further, she suggested an ACT planning group include a spectrum of interests, including the social (sciences) and economic/business development sectors. Based on her experience, a small secretariat would have difficulty if the ACT seeks broadscale engagement of the ACT community.”

Supporting documentation about MPWP biosphere that Lynette sent me is attached as follows:

- A. Constitution
- B. Charter
- C. Biosphere Terminology
- D. Mission Values
- E. Nomination

Ian Weir from the MPWP Committee who has been associated with the biosphere reserve since its beginnings has forwarded separate comments.

He said the ACT biosphere (reserve) has tremendous potential perhaps to find or create a sister biosphere in an undeveloped country and provide assistance by drawing on the strengths of the ACT (eg research, education).

Achieving public awareness and communication to provide a genuine understanding of the biosphere reserve concept has been a challenge in the MPWP biosphere.

Identifying the role of the community at large and their need for engagement has also been a challenge.

A further challenge has been to identify the niche that a biosphere has in the community and how it can add value to the many other government and NGO activities that already exist. (Perhaps it can have a coordinating role as well as an international one.)

There is a need to initiate strategic planning that will identify appropriate directions and attract resources.

All of these challenges can be solved. Their magnitude is closely related to the size of the area and its population.

The importance of the management model depends on whether the role of the biosphere is largely passive with international status and recognition the main goal, or is as an active vehicle helping to achieve greater community commitments to conservation and sustainable development. Dr Parker's passive model could be the best solution for the ACT. However Mr Weir believes that the MPWP biosphere management model is designed to achieve active pursuit of project outcomes and cultural change. The (Governing) Board arrangements at Mornington consist of a mixture of government and non-government members. This is ideal as essentially both are components of the community. The next step at MPWP biosphere Mr Weir believes is to create 'across biosphere' interest groups (eg research, education, sustainable communities, sustainable agriculture (and forestry), sustainable tourism, (biodiversity conservation) and foundation (management) development of the biosphere that can help develop and implement the strategy plan. MPWP biosphere has already created individual local community 'round tables' but Mr Weir would not advocate this for the ACT.

In terms of deciding on the model for management, perhaps the starting point is to fully explore the opportunities and threats that might face the ACT biosphere, then develop a model that delivers most effectively. In the case of MPWP biosphere Ian said a company structure was chosen with associated responsibilities and protections. He thought the opportunities for the ACT biosphere could be quite exciting in encouraging and benchmarking sustainable practices – perhaps even becoming an international leader in these areas. However, it would need to be seen, Ian thought, to be coming from other than government.

Leadership is crucial to the future of the biosphere and this is something that should be explored early in the preparation of the nomination. An 'eminent person' could be appropriate and give added status to the nomination.

In summary, Mr Weir believes that the MPWP biosphere has largely overcome earlier difficulties. He also thinks that the organisational structures (provided they are flexible) that may be adopted are of lesser importance than the people associated with the biosphere to create and deliver the programs.

An example of a recent activity of the MPWP biosphere sent to me was a public invitation to a Catchment Health Seminar on the State of Western Port Catchment. The seminar was held on Thursday 18 May 2006 and was a joint presentation of the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority and the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation. (MPWP biosphere has perhaps been a catalyst in enabling this event to proceed.)

A third person associated with the MP WP Biosphere Reserve is **Glen Hyman** who prepared a case study on it. He has also been involved in some discussions about an ACT biosphere reserve and referred to a meeting with Julie Burke in the ACT Office of Sustainability and Jim Muldoon of Parks Australia. He has sent me some comments, which have been copied to Dr Jaireth but they are include here also.

Two specific comments resulting from the meeting are:

1. The special relationship of the ACT and NSW, namely that of an enclave, is significant. As the recent fires have shown, the resource management, development and conservation policies of both NSW and the ACT are interdependent. The BR concept is an excellent tool for bridging intersectoral and interjurisdictional management gaps. Naturally then, an ACT biosphere reserve would have to address trans-border issues in order to function effectively.

(I believe it is best to nominate the ACT alone initially, simplifying the nomination process. Other potential partners such as the Shire Councils in New South Wales adjoining the ACT could be included at a later stage.)

2. To engage residents from the beginning is important, but to give a false sense of ownership over the project is counterproductive. To manage a biosphere reserve is to address the various conflicting policies that affect the area, and through the intermediary of sound science, to help tailor those policies to ensure environmental conservation and sustainable development. One part of this is to facilitate community environmental initiatives.

Mr Hyman said that the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve is an excellent example of this at work: <http://www.escarpment.org/biosphere/overview.htm>. A statutory commission manages the biosphere reserve while community organisations support it: <http://www.escarpment.org/biosphere/bpba.htm>.

He said the MPWP biosphere reserve attempted at first to be community driven and as a result has been hamstrung in its efforts to influence the policies that affect the biosphere reserve area.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Taking account of the above contributions from Pamela Parker, Lynette Wilks, Ian Weir and Glen Hyman, set out below are my responses to the specific subjects raised in the terms of reference of the Standing Committee Inquiry into the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

A) The content of the proposed nomination document generally.

Although content will be different, the nomination document could as far as possible use the format of the nomination document submitted for the MPWP Biosphere as a model. This document was highly commended by UNESCO when assessed. For your ease of reference, the document is at Attachment E.

i) Management of the nomination process

The nomination process could be conducted largely by the ACT Government, working with Commonwealth Authorities such as the National Capital Authority, the Department of Environment and Heritage which through the Parks Sector would have a direct interest, as well as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade has responsibility for Australian participation in UNESCO.

It might be preferable to use paid consultant(s) to prepare some or most of the nomination. This was the case for the MPWP nomination. The Conservation Council or the Nature and Society Forum might be able to assist in identifying suitable consultants.

ii) The status and possible boundaries of the core, transition and buffer zones

The simplest arrangement would be to have Namadgi as the core and rural lessees, river corridors and Canberra Nature Park as buffer zones. The rest of the ACT would be the transition zone. There is a case for moving some areas of particularly high conservation value from the buffer to the core so that there are more than one core areas. This is permissible under the biosphere model although then, ideally, each of these cores should have a buffer zone around it.

iii) Funding needs and sources

The biosphere reserve should be a partnership between Government(s) and the community. The community is likely to be the main source of human resources while Government is likely to be the main source of core funding.

Government could provide the staff for the Secretariat from the Public Service but I believe this would shift the balance in the management of the biosphere reserve too far towards Government at the expense of the Community

In the case of MPWP biosphere reserve, there appears to be at least one person, fully funded by Government, in this case mainly local government. She is paid at an hourly rate. The funding is not direct from government but paid through a Foundation to which local government and the State Environment Department contribute funds.

For the ACT biosphere reserve I believe a sum of perhaps \$200,000 per annum indexed would be sufficient to employ a full time project officer or the part time equivalents and provide administrative expenses for meetings and a contribution to rented accommodation and publicity. The project officer could be co-located with the Secretariat of one or more of the key community groups such as the Conservation Council and/or the Nature and Society Forum. This funding could be in the form of an annual grant to be acquitted. Ideally both the Commonwealth and ACT Governments should contribute, perhaps 50 percent each, to the core funding of \$200,000 per annum.

There may be other sources of funding which develop in addition to the core contribution over time, such as additional grant money for specific projects and perhaps contributions from private sources such as Foundations.

iv) How local stakeholders should be engaged in (a) planning, (b) education and training programs, and (c) research and monitoring activities

Planning

Both Bookmark and MPWP Biosphere Reserves have committees established to engage members of the community. Pam Parker cautioned against establishing a committee in the ACT, especially as such a committee would have no jurisdiction over the use of private land. The MPWP biosphere reserve experience suggests that a committee could be seen by some members as a vehicle to attack Government programs, although as Ian Weir said, in the end it is the people, not the structures, which are most important.

As a compromise I suggest establishment of a network of interested parties. The interested parties would choose their own representatives on the network. This suggests that it is the community group which is the most important, rather than the individual representing it on the network. The ACT Government could appoint the Chairperson of the network for say three-year terms. The Chairperson appointed could be from a community group. This is my preferred model. Alternatively the Chairperson could be appointed by the community. The ACT and Federal Governments should be represented on the network. Local Shire Councils could have observer status on the network, at least initially.

Education and training programs

The biosphere reserve would certainly have a role to play in education and training. The Nature and Society Forum proposal to establish an environment centre on a reserved piece of land on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin to educate about sustainable development could be a key goal of an ACT biosphere reserve.

Canberra is well endowed with education institutions whose international marketing could be assisted under an ACT biosphere reserve umbrella.

Research and monitoring

The proposed environment centre mentioned in the previous paragraph could also be expected to have a role in research and monitoring.

Canberra already has world class research and monitoring institutions. Their international status should be enhanced if the ACT becomes a biosphere reserve. There should be increased opportunities for exchange of scientific data with other biosphere reserves, in fields such as climate change monitoring.

v) communication strategies and activities

Communications can be developed and used as appropriate, both during preparation of the nomination and then for the biosphere reserve. Strategies could include development of a web site, contributions to newspapers, establishment of a newsletter and interviews on radio and TV. There should be regular meetings of the representatives of the community groups on the biosphere reserve network, assuming it is established.

vi) the timeframe and viability of the proposed nomination

Preparation of the nomination should commence as soon as possible. It can take up to 18 months or more to complete the nomination form, have it assessed by the UNESCO assessment panel and then approved at a meeting of the Council of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program. The year 2008 is probably the first feasible option for completion of the application process. 2008 would be particularly suitable for establishment of the biosphere reserve as I understand it marks the start of the search in the Queanbeyan/ Yass area for a suitable national capital site.

vi) other relevant matters

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