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Mick Gentleman MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
Legislative Assembly for the ACT

Dear Mr Gentleman

Thankyou for the opportunity to participate in the Planning and Environment Committee inquiry into the proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The issues that I wish to address directly are the management and timing of the nomination process; benefits, costs and viability of the proposed nomination; and the engagement of local stakeholders in planning, education, research and monitoring.

This important proposal has been around for some years. The *Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves* in 1995 signalled the shift in focus from pure conservation to sustainable development, reflecting the reports and declarations emanating from the Brundtland Commission (1987) and the Rio Conference of 1992. I recall Barry Jones advocating some years ago, with his close UNESCO connections and referring to the *Seville Strategy*, the nomination of Canberra and the ACT for Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage status, especially given the Territory's unique natural environment combined with a rapidly developing city.

There is an ever present danger of losing ground on environmental commitment and there are at present negative signs in the preoccupation of governments and the community in general with perceived, short term fiscal exigencies. In addition, there is growing momentum behind urban development, tourism and infrastructure investment in Canberra and the Territory which need to be reconciled with natural resources management.

Two examples would be Namadgi Park and the Cotter Catchment. In the latter case, little in the way of ecological planning and management has been achieved since the January 2003 fires, due largely to a lack of goals, urgency and sustainability criteria. At the same time, the report produced in November 2003 by Sandy Hollway and the ACT Non-urban Lands Taskforce, with respect to recreation and rural villages for example, represents prospective compatibility between development and the environment

An equally important example is the character of metropolitan Canberra itself. It is manifestly losing some of its Bush Capital and Garden City appeal, for want of environmental priorities and, consequently, allocation of commensurate resources by both Territory and Commonwealth governments.

I suggest one further example for your consideration. The tensions between development and conservation are understood to be reconcilable through disciplines of sustainability assessment. A vital aspect is the inconsistency between the forces of increasing materialism and per capita consumption, on the one hand, and the imperatives of protecting the biosphere on the other. Along the scale of people's awareness, values, expenditure choices and ethical responsibilities, there is a great need for a significant shift towards a more "bio-sensitive" society, where people of all ages are more conscious of the interdependence of humans and the natural world.

I submit, therefore, that:-

1. the nomination process should be undertaken forcefully and without delay
2. the potential gains are fundamentally important in raising public awareness, strengthening environmental values and setting policy and budgetary priorities
3. sustainability criteria are essential in the nomination process in order to integrate the developmental and environmental perspectives
4. there is a very strong case for the nomination
5. the viability of the nomination is further underwritten by the past work, public discussions and current commitment to the concept by non-government organisations and concerned citizens.

The Territory is a uniquely abundant store and confluence of diverse ecological systems. Canberra has been blessed throughout its history as the National Capital by the presence of eminent scientists drawn to its geology, biology, fauna, flora and ecosystems. Griffith Taylor surveyed the place as soon as it was selected as a site for the National Capital. The CSIRO have been here since the 1930s. The awareness of its unique natural environment by government and the community is well documented, eg. *Guardians of the Bush Capital* (Amanda Caldwell, Conservation Council, 2001). Canberra is also endowed with the design and legacy of Walter Burley Griffin's vision of harmony between nature and a civil society.

This natural environment is evolving with a burgeoning city that has in prospect an ever bigger and more splendid future. The inherent challenges can be more gainfully addressed in the light of recognition as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. It would provide additional incentive and concepts for planning and management; it would furnish comparability with other outstanding cities that are meeting sustainability criteria. It entails, of course, a global responsibility, enshrined in the Man and the Biosphere program and its reflection of global environmental imperatives and standards. Chief Minister Jon Stanhope takes a strong position on our international social and environmental responsibilities.

Given changing conditions and urban needs, continuing research and monitoring will be essential, even more so if the ACT accedes to Biosphere Reserve status.

Whilst a great deal of preparatory work, data and expertise are no doubt readily available for the preparation of the nomination, the issues of governance, policy integration and implementation warrant serious consideration. As with the *Canberra Plan* and sustainability policy, the ACT Administration has been slow to assume new paradigms and values or to apply them consistently across whole of government. In the area of Canberra's *Social Plan*, however, implementation of education, early childhood programs, public health and recreation policies have demonstrated consistency with sustainability and the *Canberra Plan*.

For successful application of Biosphere Reserve principles and values, I believe one necessary adjunct would be to enact the proposed Sustainability statute that would focus and bind the public sector. With respect to the private sector, they will need to be engaged in the nomination process and be partners with the government and the community in working through the implications.

The boundary of the UNESCO biosphere reserve would logically be the whole of the ACT. The management improvements would of course be mainly in non-urban ACT but land use planning in general, urban parks, open space system, fauna and flora, infrastructure and water management would be enhanced.

Public sector costs are unlikely to increase, as the systems and resources of the ACT Administration, the Territory Budget, research and monitoring programs are robust and amenable to more efficient deployment than at present. The logistic costs connected with international information exchange would not be significant, yet can yield considerable benefits.

Canberra has a rich scientific and community tradition of conservation and research of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation. It is vital to reaffirm the commitment and avail ourselves of the advantages of the UNESCO nomination for helping to shift Canberra towards a future of sustainable development.

I would be pleased to provide further detail and discussion on these points and any other aspects of your Committee's terms of reference.

Best wishes

(signed)

Brett Odgers