



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 6

Date Authorised for Publication: 8 March 2022



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Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

Dear Dr Paterson

Introduction

The Red Hill Bush Regenerators Inc group (**RHRG**) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. This submission reflects RHRG's views which may be specific to this group. We note that the invitation to make submissions does not seem to have been sent to the ACT government's volunteer co-ordinators for distribution to environment volunteers. This may result in some volunteer groups being unaware of the Inquiry.

About Red Hill

The Red Hill Nature Reserve is a 375 hectare undeveloped ridge line in central Canberra, forming a visual backdrop to the Australian Parliament House, National Library, Australian National Gallery and other national institutions. It is one of a patchwork of 33 mostly hill and ridge nature reserves scattered across Canberra, and which make up the Canberra Nature Park. The landscape varies from steep and rocky to flatter areas with less rock. This is noted to reflect what can be difficult working terrain.

The Red Hill Reserve has had a history of human use in particular cattle grazing, rubbish dumping and recreational activities which have resulted in soil disturbance leading to weed growth and restriction of native plants, and erosion.

About the RHRG

The RHRG has been working on the Red Hill Reserve since 1989 and has made a significant impact in that time. In recognition of this the group was awarded the 2021 national winners of the Australian Community Media Landcare Community Group Award from all the state and territory finalists.

Initially the hill was so devalued that rubbish dumping along the road in the reserve was a common occurrence. The RHRG has spent 30 years transforming the rubbish bush to nationally significant woodland and today, thanks to the many thousand volunteer hours Red Hill, boasts one of the largest, most diverse, best condition remnants of box-gum woodland in Australia and brims with over 50 regionally rare or threatened species.

The RHRG is largely self-directed and is particularly fortunate to have both expert ecologist and experienced volunteers in the group. The RHRG has monthly and mid-monthly working bees mainly dealing with weed removal and concentrating on areas of both weed density and higher ecological value.

Over the years RHRG has received varying levels of support from both the Department of Environment's Parks and Conservation Services (PCS), and the Parks and Partnerships group (P&P). The latter provides mainly OH&S advice, some training, protective clothing and equipment.

TOR 1

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:
 - biodiversity conservation and enhancement;
 - parks and conservation;
 - environmental protection;
 - climate resilience;
 - wildlife protection; • landcare; and
 - other areas;

The RHRG comprises long-term volunteers and some of more recent inclusion. Many of the volunteers have joined either close to, or after, retirement from paid employment. Occasionally school, scouts and business groups have participated in appropriate projects such as weeding, plantings, plant identification. A few young adults come to working bees as time permits because of their interest in the environment.

Benefits brought by RHRG's activities

All the TOR1 listed areas form the highest priorities for the group's work. The benefits the group has brought to the biodiversity conservation and environmental protection of Red Hill are significant and not confined to just Red Hill. The group has keenly pursued environmental protection both through policy and physical work.

When the group formed in the late 1980s, weeds covered more than a third of the reserve and woody weeds formed massive thickets. Weed removal by RHRG has allowed native plants to regenerate and has encouraged native wildlife. This last year we focused on large infestations of verbasicum control over about 200 hectares. Parks and Conservation staff have valued this effort as equivalent to \$200,000. If this control had been undertaken by weed contractors. In actuality, the Parks and Conservation Service had a budget of \$10,000 for contractor verbasicum control, which could only achieve a small fraction of what was urgently required.

For decades, Red Hill Regenerators have worked to protect the environmental integrity of the Reserve by providing environmental and community input into planning and development decisions that would impact Red Hill's woodlands and wildlife habitat. This has involved many thousands of hours of survey, lobbying, submission writing and community discussion.

The RHRG provides a critical link between government and its under-resourced staff to significantly impact the reserve management. Without a volunteer group the Red Hill reserve would rapidly deteriorate to its former environmentally degraded state.

There have been many development proposals adjacent to the Reserve and in most, if not all, cases the RHRG has taken the lead to ensure the Reserve conservation values are the highest priority for any of the proposed development. The group has relied on our internal expertise and volunteer hours to work constructively with the community, the Federal Golf Club and government, and has negotiated as much as possible to deliver the best possible environmental outcome for the Reserve. It is not too much to say that the RHRG is the only organisation involved in these development processes that has done so much to protect the environment.

The group has also held more than a hundred community events such as guided walks, wildlife surveys, school, club and church group activities, providing the wider community with experience and knowledge of Red Hill and its values.

From time to time the RHRG is awarded grants for significant weed removal and new plantings preparation such as hole digging and purchase of plant and plant guards. All grants include substantial in-kind volunteer hours, expertise and experience. The new plantings of approved trees and shrubs are aimed at revegetating the landscape and encouraging native wildlife, particularly birds.

The RHRG has been a leading proponent in the Gang Gang surveys over the past few years. This year the Commonwealth government recognised the importance of Gang Gangs to enhance the recovery and maximise the resilience of threatened species, ecological communities and natural assets within the seven regions identified as most impacted by the 2019-20 bushfires. The recognition provides a grant of \$26,300 with much in-kind value added by volunteers.

RHRG has partnered with the Canberra Ornithologists group to monitor changes in birds over the project area and with other citizen science groups. The group has also been a major supporter and user of Canberra Nature Map, which has resulted in the identification of several rare invertebrate species. The group has participated in the Small Ant Blue Butterfly project which has located all of the world's currently known breeding localities of the Small Ant Blue Butterfly (all in Woden and Tuggeranong) and mapped roosting sites of the Superb Parrot. Over three decades, we have monitored and tracked an expanding population of the nationally endangered Button Wrinklewort daisy.

Volunteers are often the first to report matters of concern to PCS. For example, illegal bike tracks and jumps, fallen trees over tracks and other environmental damage.

Existing or potential challenges for volunteers and for attracting new volunteers

The RHRG does recognise that weekends are 'valuable' for those who work and for those who have children and other family members to spend time with.

Accordingly, there are now two working bees each month, one on the first Sunday of the month and one on a weekday mid-month. OH&S and other clothing, and equipment, are provided. Volunteers are welcome to participate when it suits them. If a potential volunteer should want to participate outside the working bee times they can do so providing they are sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced.

Similarly, young people who are students or in the workforce have significant study and other commitments and interests. Nevertheless, most environmental volunteer groups welcome any participation from once only, to regular attendance.

Red Hill is a steep and rocky ridge and usually requires volunteers who are capable of navigating the terrain. Access usually begins at a spot on the perimeter of the Reserve and then walking to a work site. This can be a challenge for some people.

Volunteers may be reluctant to participate if they feel the task of weed and pest control is overwhelming even given the current government resourcing. To alleviate these challenges where recruiting more volunteers is unsuccessful the best solution would be to allocate more funds to the Parks and Conservation Service so that Rangers can take on more on-ground work.

While environmental volunteers 'value' is lauded by input hours and some support, there is little or no recognition of just how much environmental and conservation benefit has been made by the volunteers. This particularly relates to shifting workload from government bodies to volunteers.

As government funding to maintain its Nature Reserves decreases, much improved integration between volunteers and officials would deliver better efficiencies, outputs and outcomes

Regular changes in PCS personnel and administrative structures can be challenging for us.

We benefit greatly when the PCS rangers have more time available and have appreciated the recent funding increases

Most of the volunteer groups which manage each Nature Reserve have similar administrative and procedural needs which, if documented centrally and streamlined via improved online access would reduce administration and increase on-ground productivity eg plantings (see above), identification of grant opportunities and assistance in applications, maintenance of a panel of approved contractors for use by volunteers for grant funded planting, spraying etc.

TOR 2

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;

We have found it most effective to engage young people through existing youth groups. Some years we have had fortnightly activities with students from either Canberra Girls Grammar or Deakin High, but mainly youth involvement has been via half day activities. Groups with which we have engaged include Red Hill Primary School, Telopea Park High School, Deakin High, Boys and Girls (both Senior and Junior) Canberra Grammar Schools, Marist College, Garran Primary School, Latrobe scout and cub groups, Boys Brigade, Garran Scouts and Red Hill cubs. Students from some of these schools or youth groups have then attended subsequent Red Hill regenerator activities as part of earning Duke of Edinburgh awards or scout environmental badges or occasionally as an individual with a big interest in their local environment. Deakin High and Telopea Park students constructed and inspected nesting boxes as part of their woodwork classes.

Thousands of children have spent tens of thousands of hours involved in the care of Red Hill and its magnificent wildlife.

Supporting the schools and community groups to be able to be involved in on ground environmental works would probably be the best way for the Government to support more youth involvement in landcare activities such as ours.

The group has had the opportunity to be led around the Hill by Aboriginal elders, and has facilitated comments by Aboriginal representatives into community submissions on particular planning or development issues. We would like to see cultural / ecological burning on Red Hill rather than standard prescribed burns but there seems little opportunity for this at the moment.

The group has an email list of nearly 200 people and sends emails about working bees and special projects seeking 'citizen science' input such as the Gang Gang projects. This list also keeps 'inactive' subscribers aware of the group's activities so that they may join in when circumstances permit.

The RHR always welcomes additional volunteers who can provide physical, eg at working bees, and knowledge assistance eg ecological and environmental advice as well as encouraging appreciation of the environmental and recreation information relating to Red Hill.

The group also has an excellent up-to-date website with a lot of information and history about the group and Red Hill: <http://www.redhillregenerators.org.au>

TOR 3

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

The RHRG has reasonably good relationships with other organisations with which it needs to work.

- Their organisations: The RHR volunteers' organisation is the RHR group which is an incorporated association with a committee of legislated members and other task specific members. The group's constitution provides the organisation's rules.
- The ACT Government:
 - At times the structure and workings of government can be difficult for volunteers to understand the 'what', 'who', 'why' and 'where'. This probably gets more difficult as internal government arrangements change and these changes are not well communicated to volunteers.
 - The RHRG communicates constructively as required with Parks and Conservation Rangers to complement activities (eg avoid overlap of weed removal), to seek approval for plant species, planting location, to keep advised of activities and relevant issues. PCS provides chemicals for weed control. The most likely area for improvement would be for the Rangers to be better resourced to allow more time for communication. The group's relationship with the Parks and Partnerships group is largely administrative relating to provision of protective clothing, tools, occasional volunteer convenor meetings to share information, some OH&S and weed control training courses, co-ordination of individual volunteers for one-off projects and occasional on-site work such as providing water cubes, mulch etc.
 - ACT Government: The RHRG is recognised by relevant areas within the ACT Government as having valuable 'standing' to provide advice and advocacy regarding broader development issues which may impact on the Red Hill Reserve. For example, The Regenerators successfully provided a focus for consultation on potential developments which led to the adoption of the Integrated Plan for Red Hill and Surrounds
- The public: The RHRG interacts with the public largely through discussions with people stopping to talk during working bees, guided nature walks and involvement with other environmental groups. Community concern about proposed inappropriate developments adjacent to the Reserve has also led many people to contact and seek involvement with the RHRG.
- Other volunteer and not for profit environmental groups: The RHRG consults and liaises with the Southern ACT Catchment Group to secure grant funding and project management assistance.

TOR 4

4. current policy or regulatory settings that facilitate and/or impede the work and the involvement of volunteers and volunteer organisations in the ACT; and

Overall, RHR receives support from PCS and the Parks and Partnerships Program. This support includes equipment and chemicals, liaison for planning work activities, personnel and equipment support for particular activities such as plantings and facilitating interaction with other ParkCare groups.

There are some approval processes required from government, such as for plantings, that seem to be overly time consuming within government possibly due to the high workload of the various agencies involved in the decision and approval process. This results in significant difficulties for volunteers in co-ordinating plant and plant-guard purchases and hole-digging contractors.

Current policy to prohibit the use by volunteers of mechanical equipment eg chain saws, brush cutters etc significantly impacts their efficiency and effectiveness. These policies are inconsistent with NCA policies for work in similar situations.

TOR 5

5. other relevant matters

Most if not all individual Reserves within the Canberra Nature Park have dedicated volunteer groups that put in a huge number of hours, including much which is unrecorded. There is no doubt that the great majority of work that requires 'manual labour' is done by volunteers, with a relatively small percentage by PCS and contractors. The size of most, if not all, Reserves is such that it is impossible for volunteers to deal with the scope not funded by government. Additional resources provided to PCS is the most practical way to manage this. A recent project run by the ACT Government where people were employed for some months to be trained and work in the Reserves on particular projects was generally considered successful in dealing with heavier work or areas that needed a 'blitz'. This may have been similar to the Green Army that was successful but disbanded some years ago.

There needs to be greater clarity on the standard of environmental care the government is prepared to fund, and to what extent it relies on volunteers. For example, volunteers and Park Rangers contribute to many of the same activities such as weed and feral pest control and kangaroo control, but there is a huge shortfall in resourcing Red Hill and many or most other Reserves to keep weeds and pests under control. This leads to volunteers feeling dispirited at best about even maintaining the ecology to a sustainable level.

Yours sincerely

Ross Kingsland

President

Red Hill Bush Regenerators Inc

18 February 2022