Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

TIDBINBILLA NATURE RESERVE -
FINAL DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN 1998

Report No.16 of the Standing Committee on Urban Services

November 1998

On 28 April 1998 the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory resolved to establish a general purpose standing committee, called the Standing Committee on Urban Services, to inquire into and report on:

> planning and lease management, road and transport services, housing and housing assistance, government purchasing and public utilities purchasing, electricity industry and regulation, construction industry policy, parks and forests, private sector employment inspectorate, building services, environment, heritage and municipal services and any other matter under the responsibility of the portfolio minister.

Also on the same day, the Legislative Assembly resolved:

> If the Assembly is not sitting when the Standing Committee on Urban Services has completed consideration of a report on draft Plan variations referred pursuant to section 25 of the *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991* or draft Plans of Management referred pursuant to Section 203 of the *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991,* the Committee may send its report to the Speaker or, in the absence of the Speaker, to the Deputy Speaker, who is authorised to give directions for its printing, circulation and publication.
>
> *Minutes of Proceedings* (Fourth Assembly) No.2, 28 April 1998

Committee Membership

Mr Harold Hird MLA (Chair)

Mr Dave Rugendyke MLA (Deputy Chair)

Mr Simon Corbell MLA (appointed on 25 June 1998, replacing Mr Wayne Berry MLA)

Secretary: Mr Rod Power

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LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee recommends that:

recommendation 1: the final management plan incorporate a specific reference to the wilderness value of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, with a commitment to maintain those values - and include a map or overlay showing the specific area of high wilderness value.

recommendation 2: the national park component of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve be incorporated within the adjacent Namadgi National Park.

recommendation 3: the government consider what steps might be taken to remove entry fees to people who do not use the facilities in the special zone but who utilise only the national park component of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

recommendation 4: the final management plan explicitly refer to the importance of maintaining the natural conservation values of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

recommendation 5: the final management plan stipulate that all money raised by entry fees at Tidbinbilla should be allocated to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

recommendation 6: the government institute a variation of the normal approvals process to ensure that the Conservator is not placed in a position where he or she is both the proponent of a development <u>and</u> the provider of what is expected to be impartial advice about the conservation impact of the development.

recommendation 7: the government ensure that sponsorship arrangements are low key in nature, and do not dominate visual or aesthetic values of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

recommendation 8: the government's Environment Advisory Committee examine the implementation plan for conservation areas such as Tidbinbilla Nature Park, and provide advice to the relevant Minister.

recommendation 9: the final management plan for Tidbinbilla Nature Park should be reviewed by an independent environmental assessor every three years, and this review should be tabled in the Assembly and made available to the appropriate Assembly committee.

recommendation 10: the government consider increasing the resources available to the Parks and Conservations Service, in view of its responsibility for the efficient and careful management of a great amount of land including Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

1. BACKGROUND

Management of public land

1.1. Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve is "public land" under the *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991.* This Act requires "public land" to be 'managed in accordance with (a) the management objectives applying to the area; and (b) the Plan of Management (if any) for the area'.

1.2. The Conservator of Flora and Fauna is required to prepare a draft plan of management, which must include (i) a description of the area of public land to which it applies; and (ii) the manner in which the relevant management objectives... are to be implemented or promoted in that area'.

1.3. The Conservator is then required to submit the draft management plan to the Minister, along with 'a written report setting out the issues raised in any written comments submitted to the Conservator in relation to the draft; and a written report about the Conservator's consultation with the public and with any other person or authority about the draft'.

1.4. The Minister is required to forward the above documents to 'an appropriate committee of the Legislative Assembly'. The Minister is then required to 'consider' any recommendation by that Assembly committee before making a decision on the draft management plan. The Minister's decision is a disallowable instrument in the Assembly.[1]

Conduct of the inquiry

1.5. On 8 July 1998 the Minister for Urban Services referred the final draft management plan for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to the Standing Committee on Urban Services.

1.6. In late July the committee placed advertisements in the local media, inviting the public to comment on the draft plan and to attend a public hearing on 14 August 1998 - when government officials would speak to the draft plan. This meeting was subsequently deferred to 21 August and the committee advised the public to this effect in advertisements placed in the local media on 8 and 11 August 1998.

1.7. On 21 August the following persons and organisations addressed the committee:

- Dr Adrian (Executive Director, *Environment ACT*), Mr Underwood (wildlife officer at Tidbinbilla, and acting manager of the reserve) and Mr Baxter (project manager for the Visitor Information Centre at Tidbinbilla);
- Mr Hall of *Friends of Tidbinbilla*; and

[1] *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991* Division 5 - Public Land (Subdivision C and D)

- Mr Scott.

1.8. The proceedings of the public hearing were recorded by Hansard. A printed version of the proceedings was produced and is referred to in this report as the *Transcript*.

Appreciation

1.9. The committee extends its appreciation to all those who participated in the inquiry. The committee looks forward to the government's response to this report.

2. THE DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Purpose of the management plan

2.1. The *Final Draft Management Plan 1998* has two purposes:

> [The first is] to set the planning context; identify and describe Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve; identify issues, expectations and constraints; propose direction for management (objectives, policies, actions, and priorities); [and] provide a basis for evaluating management success.
>
> [The second purpose is] to provide a basis for the community to understand and comment on management intent.[2]

Layout of the management plan

2.2. The draft management plan is divided into 12 chapters: an introduction; management and planning context; management zones; management of natural resources; management of cultural heritage resources; management for protection of the environment; management for visitor use; community awareness; management of authorised uses; management of the wildlife enclosures; management organisation and operations; and plan implementation.

2.3. A most useful aspect of the draft plan is the use of shading in those paragraphs which set out policy and criteria for management actions.

2.4. There are two attachments to the draft management plan: a *Report on the consultation process* and a report on the *Issues and responses for the draft management plan.*

The reserve

2.5. Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve covers an area of about 5450 hectares. It contains two types of “public land”. One is “public land (national park)” and the other is “public land (special purpose reserve)”. The boundaries of the latter include the most visited part of the reserve, which is that on the valley floor - including the present visitors’ information centre.

2.6. Under the *Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991* schedule 1, the management objectives for each type of public land are:

- for national park: ‘to conserve the natural environment; to provide for public use of the area for recreation, education and research’; and
- for special purpose reserve: ‘to provide for public and community use of the area for recreation and education’.

[2] *Final draft management plan for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve* (1998) pxi

The two distinct management zones

2.7. The *Draft management plan* states that:

> Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve provides two geographically distinct management zones with different management objectives. They are the valley floor (special purpose reserve) and the mountain range and foothills that make up the national park zone.[3]

2.8. At the public hearing, officials stressed the existence of 'two distinct landscape types, an open valley floor contrasting with the forested slopes and ridges'.[4] They stated that 'the management philosophy seeks to develop the more intensive recreational activities in the open valley floor in an ecologically sustainable manner while leaving the timbered steep slopes as a natural backdrop and for low impact recreational pursuits'.[5]

2.9. The *Draft management plan* states that the special purpose reserve will be managed to provide, among other 'opportunities', for 'commercial activity (as constrained by Section 9.2)' of the management plan.[6] The plan goes on to state:

> The special purpose reserve is appropriate for commercial activity and granting of concessions will be considered in the context of promoting Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve as an educational and recreational facility with a conservation ethos. All development proposals within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve are to comply with the Public Notification requirements specified in the Land Act and... [Territory Plan].[7]

2.10. By way of contrast, the national park zone will be 'managed primarily for conservation of biodiversity and the natural and cultural environment... [and] development [will be] minimal...'[8] Further, 'development must not impact on the skyline of the national park zone'.[9]

Future developments at Tidbinbilla

2.11. The *Draft management plan* states that 'within the special purpose reserve a number of public works developments are proposed' and these are set out in the Public Works Implementation Plan (see the following chapter).[10]

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[3] *Draft management plan* p11
[4] Transcript p1
[5] ibid p2
[6] *Draft management plan* p11
[7] ibid p12
[8] ibid p14
[9] ibid p43
[10] *Draft management plan* p42

2.12. The management plan adds:

> There has been some indication from the private sector of interest in the development of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve including for accommodation for tourists. Any such development will be considered only for the special purpose reserve and will require an assessment of environmental impact.[11]

2.13. In relation to the national park zone, the *Draft management plan* states:

> Some future development may be required in the national park. This may include the construction of additional walking trails and fire trails or the installation of facilities like transmitters. Only low-impact activities and facilities that are considered appropriate will be identified for the national park.[12]

Tourism

2.14. The *Draft management plan* states that Tidbinbilla's 'tourist potential has grown over recent years' - and 'it is accepted that Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve's tourist potential has not been fully realised'.[13] The management plan then states:

> Proposals for future tourist facilities/opportunities will be assessed against the following criteria:
>
> - consistency with overall management objectives for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and ecologically sustainable development principles;
> - ability to complement existing facilities/opportunities;
> - potential for environmental impact; and
> - economic viability and value to the ACT community, including tourism value.[14]

Funding and revenue raising

2.15. The *Draft management plan* states that:

> Funding for management of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve is provided from Environment ACT's annual budget and entry fees. Grants and other appropriate funds are actively sought for special projects. The facilities offered to visitors show there is scope for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to develop its revenue raising potential. The success of revenue raising proposals, however, will depend heavily on the ability to retain the revenue generated for the reserve system, given that such initiatives are expensive in terms of agency resources.[15]

2.16. It appears that revenue raised at Tidbinbilla will go into the general park system rather than to Tidbinbilla, as indicated in the following statements:

> - All revenue raised in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve will be allocated to park management and species conservation activities conducted by Environment ACT... [and]

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[11] ibid p42
[12] ibid p43
[13] ibid p43
[14] ibid p44
[15] ibid p44

- 'revenue raised [at] Tidbinbilla [will be] re-invested in the maintenance and development of the ACT nature conservation estate with a focus on Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.[16]

2.17. The draft plan states that 'park charges for national parks and reserves generally have received public support, especially when levied for the purpose of environmental protection'.[17]

Sponsorship

2.18. The *Draft management plan* states that 'sponsorship from the business community can provide benefits to reserve management and the sponsor'.[18] It goes on to say:

> The wildlife displays at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve have great potential for attracting sponsorships... Other opportunities with potential to attract sponsorship at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve include research, recreation facilities generally, education facilities and interpretation programs.[19]

Concessions

2.19. The *Draft management plan* states:

> There is potential for Environment ACT to introduce commercial activities into Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to enhance visitor use and enjoyment. Concessions may be an efficient and cost effective means of providing services. They can also be a source of supplementary revenue.[20]

Management organisation

2.20. The *Draft management plan* includes the objective of ensuring Tidbinbilla's resources meet the reserve's 'management and development requirements'.[21] The plan states:

> In line with the Government policy of promoting Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve as a major destination for nature based tourism in the ACT, the number of permanent, temporary and seasonal Rangers and other support will need to be managed and reviewed to keep pace with visitor expectations and demands.[22]

Plan implementation

2.21. The final chapter of the *Draft management plan* prioritises management actions into those with high priority (91 management actions), medium-high priority

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[16] ibid p45
[17] ibid p45
[18] ibid p45
[19] ibid p45
[20] ibid p56
[21] ibid p63
[22] ibid p64

(12 management actions), medium priority (33 management actions) and low priority (four management actions). To simplify understanding, each is cross-referenced to the relevant paragraph of the draft plan.

3. THE PUBLIC WORKS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

3.1. The *Public Works Implementation Plan* is dated November 1997 and is sub-titled *Integration of expanded visitor experiences with a three year capital investment plan*. The Implementation Plan is described as ‘a companion document’ to the draft management plan:

> The two documents are released concurrently with the [Implementation Plan] providing an additional level of detail beyond that which is appropriate for inclusion in a management plan... [Release of the two documents concurrently] allows for both levels of detail to be considered together.[23]

Proposed works

3.2. The Implementation Plan describes ‘proposed developments’ at Tidbinbilla as follows:

> Proposed developments include a regional visitors centre at the front entrance to the Reserve, improvements to the legibility of the wildlife enclosure area by establishing a primary and secondary trail system, composting toilets at the nature trails and kangaroo area car parks, upgraded signage, interpretation and visitor brochures and adaptive reuse of the existing visitor centre as a nature education centre.[24]

3.3. The Plan states that:

> A number of legitimate commercial activities need to be developed in order to improve the visitor experience and to expand income opportunities. These include a food outlet and expanded retailing.[25]

3.4. Officials told the committee that, in relation to the restaurant in the new visitors’ centre, they ‘intend to advertise for expressions of interest just to see who in the private sector has an interest in running that concession’.[26]

Existing physical assets

3.5. The new works would add to the existing physical assets at Tidbinbilla, whose replacement cost is estimated to be $10.5m at 1997 prices.[27]

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[23] *Public Works Implementation Plan* for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (November 1997) p2
[24] *ibid* executive summary
[25] *Public Works Implementation Plan* p14
[26] Transcript p5
[27] *Public Works Implementation Plan* p10

Justification for the new work

3.6. The justification for the new work is said to be:

> With relatively modest capital investment, and only small incremental increases in operating costs, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve can maintain all the values that set it apart from other facilities with similar goals, both in Australian and overseas. The proposed additional works not only serve to enhance the Reserve in ways that are consistent with management philosophies but respond to the changing conditions stemming from the introduction of user charges and the need to better promote nature-based tourism in the ACT.[28]

Competing attractions in the ACT

3.7. The *Public Works Implementation Plan* lists areas of the ACT that might be considered to compete against Tidbinbilla in providing 'nature experiences'. These include Canberra Nature Park (native animals in broadscale setting), the National Aquarium (native animals in enclosures), the city's urban parks, the Murrumbidgee River corridor and ACT Forests (BBQ areas), the National Botanic Gardens, Namadgi National Park and Canberra Nature Park (nature walks on marked trails) and Namadgi National Park (unmarked walks in a national park). The Implementation Plan states:

> This means that existing visitation is sensitive to management changes, particularly the introduction of access charges. Such charges will inevitably result in some traditional visitors deserting TNR in favour of similar recreation experiences for which no charge exists, or for which a greater guarantee exists of enjoying a particular native animal or nature experience.[29]

3.8. The Implementation Plan goes on to state that:

> While the strengths of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve approach to animal displays are laudable from a conservation and animal welfare perspective, there are disadvantages which stem from the preconceived expectations of a 'standard' zoo experience where enclosures are easily accessible and animals are always on display. Viewing native fauna in a natural setting is more subtle than most people realise...[30]

Revenue

3.9. In relation to revenue, the Implementation Plan states:

> An entry fee to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve of $8.00 per car was introduced on 1 July 1997. Revenue raised through fees will be retained at Tidbinbilla and contribute towards implementing the capital works strategy. The enhancement of the wildlife enclosures will create a number of new promotional opportunities on which to expand the visitor base and diversify the array of attractions for visitors. This will provide an improved return on the investment made at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve which in turn will create

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[28] ibid Executive summary
[29] ibid p12
[30] ibid p13

> additional resources to fund ongoing improvements to [the reserve] and the nature conservation estate in the ACT.[31]

Visitors

3.10. In relation to visitors to the park, the Implementation Plan notes that visitor usage since 1970 has not kept pace with the growth of Canberra's population nor the growth in the number of tourists to Canberra. It comments that this partly reflects 'the lack of a common vision [which] has made marketing the Reserve more difficult'.[32] The Plan speculates that the greatest number of visitors use 'structured' activities 'such as enclosure walks', and the least number of visitors use unmarked walks.[33] Further, the Plan states that Tidbinbilla is 'predominantly a local attraction with 80% of visitors [being] from Canberra and surrounding areas'.[34]

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[31] ibid Executive summary
[32] ibid p 3
[33] ibid p6
[34] ibid p7

4. CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMITTEE

Key issues arising out of the public consultation phase

4.1. Environment ACT told the committee that the key issues arising out of the public consultation phase for Tidbinbilla included the following:

- culling of kangaroos[35] - in this respect, the *Draft management plan* states that 'kangaroo management will be guided by the reports of the ACT Government's Kangaroo Advisory Committee and will be undertaken in a humane way employing, where practicable, non-lethal control techniques'[36];

- how to best manage the two zones: 'there were strong views about the different style of management and requirements in those two zones';[37]

- pest plants;[38]

- native title[39] - in this respect; the *Draft management plan* states that: 'There are unresolved native title claims over large areas of the national park zone. It is unknown when these claims will be resolved. This management plan will be reviewed, if necessary, when there is a resolution to determine if there will be any impact on land management';[40]

- entry fees;[41]

- provision of more detailed information about aspects that underpin the day-to-day management of Tidbinbilla; and

- the increase in tourist activity.[42]

4.2. The committee comments on some of these issues, and on certain additional ones, in this section of the report.

The two distinct management entities

4.3. The committee notes that the list of management objectives set out on page 10 of the *Draft management plan* includes: 'to ensure integrated management of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve recognising the concept of two entities, the special purpose reserve and the national park'.

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[35] Transcript p10
[36] *Draft management plan* p20
[37] Transcript p10
[38] ibid
[39] ibid
[40] *Draft management plan* Summary pxi and p14
[41] Transcript p10
[42] Transcript p10

4.4. It is clear that the Implementation Plan applies only to the “special reserve” part of Tidbinbilla. The list of major built assets at Tidbinbilla, included within the Implementation Plan, also covers only the “special reserve” part of the park.

4.5. It seems to the committee that the scale of the proposed developments in the special purpose reserve is likely to widen the existing differences between the two parts of the reserve - leading to increasing problems in ‘integrating’ the two areas.

4.6. Mr Scott (a member of the public) provided two examples of this difficulty. The first was in relation to the wilderness values of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve:

> The western part of the national park zone, including Tidbinbilla Mt and Tidbinbilla Park, has high wilderness values and rates as equal to or above Wilderness Quality 12 on the National Wilderness Inventory wilderness quality scale, the level above which land is generally considered to be wilderness.
>
> However, the plan does not make any mention of managing specifically for the protection or enhancement of wilderness quality or wilderness values.[43]

4.7. Mr Scott suggests that the final management plan:

> should include specific requirements for the protection of those values and should also include a wilderness zone on the map, perhaps as an overlay to the national park zone.[44]

4.8. The committee notes that the National Parks Association and Conservation Council also suggested there was a need to clearly delineate the two zones and to consider establishing a Tidbinbilla National Park (under the same management as the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve).[45]

4.9. The response by Environment ACT to a suggestion that the plan should acknowledge the ‘wilderness’ as a value of the reserve was as follows:

> Wilderness is not listed as a value of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve as the national park zone is only a part of the reserve and contains development such as fire trails and walking tracks. This portion of the reserve acts as a buffer to the wilderness area identified in the Namadgi National Park.[46]

4.10. The second example provided by Mr Scott related to entry fees. He stated that:

> My main interest in the area is as a bushwalker. I feel there may be case for fees for people to use the facilities in the special purpose zone and so forth, but I do not use that zone. I do not go into it... [Generally] I just drive through and walk in what is known as the national park zone in the reserve, and I do not believe I should be required to pay a fee to do that when the adjacent area, Namadgi National Park, is not subject to entry fees... it seems to me there is a bit of a contradiction here, in that the sorts of services that I want from public land in the ACT are the same in Tidbinbilla and

[43] Submission by Mr Scott dated August 1998
[44] Transcript pp21-22
[45] *Issues and responses for the draft management plan* p4
[46] ibid p7

> Namadgi, but in Tidbinbilla I have to pay to get to them, and I think that is unjust and unreasonable.[47]

4.11. The committee carefully notes the fundamental difference between the two zones at Tidbinbilla. Arising out of the above points, the committee has come to the following conclusions.

4.12. The committee considers there is merit in incorporating a specific reference to the wilderness value of Tidbinbilla within the final management plan. It may be appropriate for the management objectives for the national park zone to include something like: ‘to be managed specifically for the protection or enhancement of wilderness values’.

4.13. The committee recommends that:

- **the final management plan incorporate a specific reference to the wilderness value of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, with a commitment to maintain those values - and include a map or overlay showing the specific area of high wilderness value.**

4.14. The committee considers that the conservation and protection of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve would be facilitated by separating out the national park component and incorporating it within Namadgi National Park - for it is indisputable that the increasing commercial emphasis in the special purpose zone is highlighting the difference between the two zones.

4.15. The committee recommends that

- **the national park component of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve be incorporated within the adjacent Namadgi National Park.**

4.16. This recommendation would appear to overcome the problem of entry fees identified by Mr Scott in relation to people using only the national park component of Tidbinbilla. Until it is implemented, however, the committee considers that the government should examine ways to remove the imposition of an entry fee upon people who use only the national park zone.

4.17. The committee recommends that:

- **the government consider what steps might be taken to remove entry fees to people who do not use the facilities in the special zone but who utilise only the national park component of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.**

4.18. Mr Scott drew the committee’s attention to one further aspect of the national park zone. This concerns telecommunications towers:

> There is nothing in the management plan that specifically prohibits telecommunications towers and other such structures within the national park zone. There is no doubt that such structures would have a very major negative impact, not just on wilderness values and the recreational experience of bushwalkers, but potentially also on the scenic value of a very important backdrop to the national capital.[48]

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[47] Transcript p21
[48] Transcript p22

4.19. Environment ACT expressed confidence that the existing wording in the management plan will ensure that future telecommunications towers do not detract from 'the integrity of that zone'.[49] The committee would appreciate the government's assurance on this point.

The vision for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve

4.20. Officials told the committee that' the conservation side we see as being paramount'.[50] Environment ACT also stated that: 'The vision is not "to maintain the nature conservation values of the reserve" but that "Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve will be a high quality reserve..."[51]

4.21. Friends of Tidbinbilla stated that the vision for the reserve (on px of the draft management plan) should 'include the importance of the maintenance of the natural conservation values' of Tidbinbilla.[52] Mr Scott noted that:

> The vision refers to the aim to provide a range of experiences for visitors, but it does not actually mention management for protection and enhancement of nature conservation values, although I note that it does appear later on in the objectives section.[53]

4.22. The committee agrees with the essence of these comments.

4.23. The committee recommends that:

- **the final management plan explicitly refer to the importance of maintaining the natural conservation values of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.**

Documents supporting the management plan

4.24. Environment ACT told the committee that:

> In addition to the management plan itself, it is important to note that there is an array of other documents that support [it] - documents such as the nature conservation strategy, the bushfire fuel management plan and the weed strategy and threatened species action plans...[54]

4.25. The *Draft management plan* refers to these documents and places them in a 'hierarchy of documents' relating to management of nature conservation areas.[55] The committee found the reference to these other documents helpful, and commends Environment ACT for the inclusion of this information.

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[49] Transcript p24
[50] Transcript p8
[51] *Issues and responses for the draft management plan* p8
[52] Submission dated August 1998
[53] Transcript p20
[54] Transcript p2
[55] *Draft management plan* pp8-9

Implementation plan

4.26. The final chapter of the *Draft management plan* states that Environment ACT will prepare an implementation plan which:

> will confirm, or re-assess in the light of new information, the priority listings as shown... [in the draft plan], detail the tasks to be performed, set target dates and define performance indicators. Relevant peak community groups will be consulted during the preparation of the Implementation Plan.[56]

4.27. The implementation plan will be produced on an annual basis. It will include details about the 'allocation of moneys to the reserve'.[57] It will also provide information about how management actions 'will be performed and measured'.[58] In the draft plan's appendix, it is stated that:

> There will be a three year rolling program of activities detailed in the Implementation Plan to be produced following finalisation of the Management Plan.[59]

4.28. The committee appreciates the need for the detailed implementation plan - and for close consultation with the public about the detail to go in it.

The number of visitors to Tidbinbilla

4.29. Though the Department of Urban Services cautions that information on visitor numbers needs to be interpreted with care, it acknowledges an overall downward trend in visitors to Tidbinbilla over recent years. The department states that this indicates Tidbinbilla Reserve needs to be revitalised in some way.[60] Officials are considering a variety of methods to boost visitor numbers, including boosting visits by bus groups.[61]

4.30. The committee notes the following statement in the *Draft management plan*: 'The success of current promotion methods for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve can be measured by visitor statistics'.[62] If this statement is meant to imply that visitor numbers are up, it was not substantiated in the evidence provided to the committee. Members consider it is appropriate for the government to provide information on visitor numbers on a quarterly basis, and the committee will continue to monitor the situation.

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[56] ibid p65
[57] Transcript p2
[58] *Issues and responses for the draft management plan* p7
[59] ibid p9
[60] Estimates 1998 (scrutiny of Annual and Financial Reports) Transcript p382 (22 October 1998)
[61] Transcript p12
[62] *Draft management plan* p52

The role of commercial development at Tidbinbilla

4.31. The management plan refers at several places to the role of commercial development at Tidbinbilla (see chapter 2 of this report). Environment ACT told the committee:

> The funding of the visitors' centre is, in part, by loan. I do not see it as necessary in a management plan to spell out any details about those financial arrangements. There may be justification in a sentence or two indicating that, in terms of the developments at Tidbinbilla, funding is from a number of sources, including government capital works moneys, government loans and so on...
>
> [However] there is no intention... for that loan to impact on other aspects of the operations of Tidbinbilla.[63]

4.32. A different view was put by Mr Scott who considers that 'the plan really should be re-worded to say "with an objective of minimising rather than maximising commercial development"'.[64] Mr Scott added:

> I am concerned [that] the new visitors' centre... will dominate the financial management of the reserve. I note from newspaper reports that it is anticipated there would be a need for about $120,000 per annum to be provided just to cover the interest, let alone the capital.
>
> I am concerned about the size of the development, not so much the actual visitors' centre itself but the associated commercial development of a restaurant and so forth. If it turns out to be a failure, the response of governments these days tends to be to sell off proposed commercial operations that are not making any money. If they are a booming success, the tendency is to privatise them. This can skew the management of the reserve in terms of how it relates to the finances and the management time and resources available from ACT government staff...[65]

4.33. The committee acknowledges the strong views about commercial development at Tidbinbilla. The committee, too, is concerned that the financial arrangements proposed to fund the visitors' centre may detrimentally affect the management of the whole reserve. The committee seeks an assurance by the government that the loan and interest payments will not, under any circumstances, lead to a diminution of the resources devoted to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

The use of revenue gained from entry charges

4.34. The *Draft management plan* states that 'revenue raised by Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve [will be] re-invested in the maintenance and development of the ACT nature conservation estate with a focus on Tidbinbilla'.[66] Officials told the committee that

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[63] Transcript p14
[64] Transcript p20
[65] Transcript p20
[66] *Draft management plan* p45

this comment may need clarification, as the government has given a commitment 'that money raised at Tidbinbilla will be re-invested at Tidbinbilla'.[67]

4.35. Friends of Tidbinbilla told the committee that:

> We noted the point in the [*Draft management plan*] that there has been support for park charges when levied for the purpose of environmental protection. One can debate whether that is right or not but, given that as the reason for having fees, we wish to be sure that the money from the fees goes towards environmental protection and conserving the natural values of the reserve and related developments.[68]

4.36. The committee agrees.

4.37. The committee recommends that:

- **the final management plan stipulate that all money raised by entry fees at Tidbinbilla should be allocated to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.**

4.38. Friends of Tidbinbilla also expressed concern about spending the revenue from entry fees on the proposed visitors' centre:

> Our concern about the visitors' centre came through reading in the *Canberra Times* a comment that part of the funding for the visitors' centre would come from the entry fees. That seems to be a contradiction.
>
> If there are to be entry fees they should go towards the development of the resources of the reserve rather than towards the visitors' centre...[69]

4.39. At this stage, the committee considers it is appropriate to give more time to see how the whole issue of entry fees, and their allocation to the reserve, works in practise.

Role of the Conservator

4.40. The committee was interested in the curious role of the Conservator in relation to the planning process for the new visitors' centre.

4.41. The committee understands that the view of the Conservator will be sought in the formal preparation of a preliminary assessment and development application (underway as of August 1998). This reflects the fact that the proposed centre is 'certainly the largest development at Tidbinbilla in very many years'.[70] It is normal practice to obtain the Conservator's view.

4.42. However, in Tidbinbilla's case, the Conservator is directly promoting the development - that is, he might be considered the proponent.

4.43. When this was brought to the attention of the Conservator, he responded:

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[67] Transcript p13
[68] Transcript p18
[69] Transcript p18
[70] Transcript p5

> I guess it is fair to say that it puts me in an interesting position in relation to decisions... I am very sensitive to that matter in terms of my responsibilities and powers and also the public's response and the Assembly's view on how I would view it.[71]

4.44. The committee respects this comment by the Conservator. The committee also appreciates that the development application - now before PALM[72] - will be publicly notified and comments/objections invited. If objections are received, the application will be referred to the Commissioner for Land and Planning (an independent body) for assessment.

4.45. However, given the importance of an area such as Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, the committee considers it would be prudent for the government to institute a variation of the normal approvals process to ensure that the Conservator is not placed in a position where he or she is both the proponent of a development and the provider of what is expected to be impartial advice about the conservation impact of the development.

4.46. The committee recommends that:

- **the government institute a variation of the normal approvals process to ensure that the Conservator is not placed in a position where he or she is both the proponent of a development and the provider of what is expected to be impartial advice about the conservation impact of the development.**

Sponsorship

4.47. The committee appreciates that sponsorship arrangements may facilitate a government's difficult task of finding sufficient funds to adequately maintain nature reserves. However, the committee would be concerned if the need to seek, and then to service, sponsors had the affect of diverting the attention of park managers away from their primary task of preserving the conservation value of nature reserves.

4.48. In the case of Tidbinbilla, sponsorship arrangements are obviously more suited to that part of the reserve identified as 'public land (special purpose reserve)'. This is the most widely visited part of the reserve and the part that is geared up to provide a 'recreation and education' experience for visitors.

4.49. Even in this area, however, the committee considers that sponsorship arrangements should be low key and not dominate visual or aesthetic values.

4.50. The committee can see no role for sponsorship in the national park area of Tidbinbilla.

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[71] Transcript p7
[72] *Encounter Tidbinbilla* (newsletter) Issue 4 Spring 1998. PALM is the Planning and Land Management Group of DUS.

4.51. The committee recommends that:

- **the government ensure that sponsorship arrangements are low key in nature, and do not dominate visual or aesthetic values of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.**

Periodic assessment of the final management plan

4.52. The committee appreciates that the final management plan will need to be amended over time and, in particular, that the more detailed implementation plan will pick up changing priorities o an annual basis. Environment ACT stated:

> Particularly when there is significant change... it is important that all aspects of the operation are reviewed regularly...[73]

4.53. The committee also appreciates the effort being made by Environment ACT, and by the Minister for Urban Services, to widen the role of the government's Environment Advisory Committee. This committee comments on all draft management plans[74] - and has made a 'very positive response' in the case of Tidbinbilla.[75] Environment ACT suggested that the Environment Advisory Committee might also 'examine the implementation plan on an annual basis'.[76]

4.54. The committee endorses this suggestion. The committee recommends that:

- **the government's Environment Advisory Committee examine the implementation plan for conservation areas such as Tidbinbilla Nature Park, and provide advice to the relevant Minister.**

4.55. A representative of Friends of Tidbinbilla (Mr Hall) told the committee that:

> there should be an annual report on actions taken to implement the management plan and this report should be subject to an environmental audit by an independent assessor who would report to the Legislative Assembly.[77]

4.56. Mr Hall thought the independent environmental audit was particularly important because of the statement in the *Draft management plan* that 'no actions will be undertaken which are inconsistent with Government policies':[78]

> Of course, when a government makes its directions, they have to be followed. To have an independent look at it later by an environmental auditor would be reassuring to the public that once a plan is adopted the things that are in that plan are kept to.[79]

4.57. Mr Hall also stated that many private companies conduct an annual environmental report on their activities:

[73] Transcript p10
[74] Transcript p3
[75] Transcript p11
[76] Transcript p24
[77] Submission dated August 1998
[78] *Draft management plan* Preface pvii
[79] Transcript p16

> The value as I see it is two-fold... [First] the best way of feeling sure that management decisions taken over a year fit in with [the management] plan is to have a report which is looked at by an independent body... [Second, this will serve to] assure the public that the implementation of the plan is operating in the way it was intended...[80]

4.58. The committee is attracted to the suggestion by Friends of Tidbinbilla for several reasons.

4.59. First, an independent assessment should ensure that the management plan remains topical and relevant.

4.60. Second, it is likely to increase community confidence in the management of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

4.61. Third, it will facilitate community and Assembly scrutiny of how this important area of public land is managed.

4.62. And fourth, an independent assessment should prove of great benefit to the reserve's managers.

4.63. The committee can see problems in such a review being undertaken on an annual basis. This would not give enough time between presentation of the assessment and implementing appropriate adjustments to the management plan. It would also incur considerable expense. On balance, the committee considers that - given the importance of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve - an independent environmental assessment is best undertaken every three years, with the results reported to the Minister for tabling in the Assembly and then made available to the appropriate Assembly committee

4.64. The committee recommends that:

- **the final management plan for Tidbinbilla Nature Park should be reviewed by an independent environmental assessor every three years, and this review should be tabled in the Assembly and made available to the appropriate Assembly committee.**

Staff resources

4.65. Friends of Tidbinbilla expressed concern about the adequacy of staff resources at Tidbinbilla:

> We are quite conscious of the fact that the reserve operates with limited numbers of people, who are very competent. It is an immense task that they have. It is a big reserve. Even just watching over it is quite an undertaking. When we see this plan... [with possibly] 55 specific management objectives and 140 management actions - it seems to me that that will be an additional burden on the management of the reserve. We just feel that it needs adequate staff to do it. I would imagine that means additional staff.[81]

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[80] Transcript p19
[81] Transcript p17

4.66. Whilst appreciating the detailed list of management actions set out in chapter 12 of the *Draft management plan,* the committee is concerned about the limited staff resources available to the Parks and Conservation Service to complete all of this work. This is one of the reasons why the committee considers an independent environment assessment of the management plan is a good idea - it would identify where resources are lacking or deficient and provide guidance on what priorities should be re-ordered.

4.67. While conducting its inquiry into the management plan for Canberra Nature Park, the committee became aware of the limited staff resources available to the Parks and Conservation Service. In that case, the committee recommended that the government consider increasing the resources available to the Service.[82] The committee reiterates its concern about the adequacy of resources available to the Parks and Conservation Service.

4.68. The committee recommends that:

- **the government consider increasing the resources available to the Parks and Conservations Service, in view of its responsibility for the efficient and careful management of a great amount of land including Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.**

Harold Hird MLA
Chair
27 November 1998

[82] *Final Draft Management Plan for Canberra Nature Park* Report No.7 of the Standing Committee on Urban Services, September 1998