



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

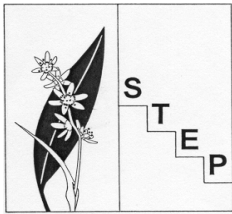
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 4

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Southern Tablelands Ecosystems Park - a regional botanic garden,



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**Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee
on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity
Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism**

The Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity will inquire into and report on matters relating to environmental volunteerism in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), with particular reference to:

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;
 - climate resilience;
 - landcare; and
 - environmental protection;
 - wildlife protection;
 - other areas;
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;
3. managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public;
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
5. any other relevant matters.

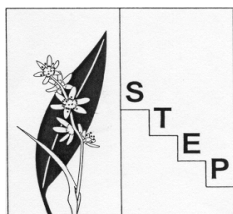
Background

The Southern Tablelands Ecosystems Park (STEP) is a non-profit organisation of about 100 members. It was founded in late 2002, by the Australian Native Plants Society (Canberra Region) and Friends of Grasslands.

In November 2005, the ACT Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Planning & Environment in its Report on Wildlife Corridors & Draft Variation to the Territory Plan No.23 recommended that:

the Chief Minister request the Shaping Our Territory Working Group to assess the feasibility of incorporating key elements of the Southern Tablelands Ecosystems Park proposal into the Canberra International Arboretum and Gardens (CIAG).

In August 2006 STEP entered into discussions with the Chief Minister's Department to locate STEP in the northern part of the Arboretum. In 2007 several landscape sketches for the STEP project were presented to the CIAG Project Group. Lot 100 (later Forest 20) was then the favoured location. A key element of the sketch plans was a series of paths



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suitable for wheelchair access located along the contours, enabling a visit to each of the species to be planted. Representations to the Chief Minister were ultimately successful and STEP became part of what is now known as the National Arboretum Canberra.

In 2011 STEP adopted a Master Plan for Forest 20 (*Telling the Understorey*) and proceeded to implement it. In late 2020 a *Strategic Plan for our second decade (2020-2030)* was adopted. A copy accompanies this submission and can be accessed from: <http://step.asn.au/wp-content/pdf/STEP%20Strategic%20Plan%202020-2030.pdf>

STEP is an active partner organisation of the Arboretum. We are enthusiastic about sharing and promoting the overarching education, research, horticultural, ceremonial and cultural objectives of the Arboretum, with our particular focus being the habitats and plant species of Southern Tablelands region. With the first plantings in 2008, the STEP Forest has developed into a multi-species ecosystem - the only one of its kind within the National Arboretum Canberra.

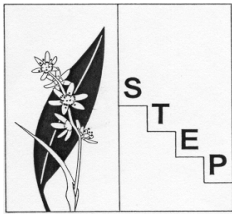
With most of our STEP members still in full-time employment or participating in other volunteer activities the planting, maintenance and development of Forest 20 is undertaken by a smaller group of up to 25 retired members joining our Thursday morning Working Bees. Approximately 2200 person hours are contributed annually towards the STEP project. A number of corporate sponsors assist us, by providing services free-of-charge or at substantial discount, although most funding is provided by member donations and occasional grant from government or other sources.

This submission focuses on the third term of reference: *managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public;*

A reservoir of expertise

A group of retired volunteers (who we dub 'STEPpers') can be a valuable resource given their wide variety of practical and professional experience accumulated over many years (e.g. ecologists, foresters, botanists, natural resource managers, communications, educators). In STEP's experience this has been harnessed in our role in planning, development and management of Forest 20 as a regional botanic garden and as guides to visitors. Apart from delivery of the project's main aims, our volunteers derive personal gains in terms of social contact, physical exercise, outdoor activities and knowledge about the natural environment and the region's flora.

However recognition of this pool of experience and making best use of it can, in our experience, be under-recognised or under-used by the Government agency with which we work. While recognising the overall responsibility that Government has for all



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activities within its facilities (e.g. health and safety of volunteers and members of the public, consistency with Government objectives etc), there are times when we feel that our experience or knowledge is not sought, not fully valued or even ignored. This is not, we hasten to add, a uniform experience but one that recurs regularly and is difficult to understand or resolve.

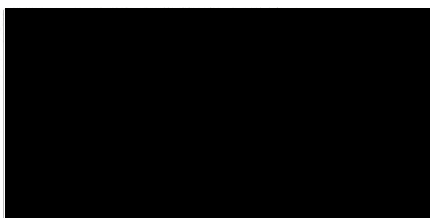
Institutional or bureaucratic impediments

The interface between a volunteer group and a Government agency presents many challenges to both parties. There is a need for both parties to work hard to understand and respect the background or reasons for particular policies or positions taken by both parties. It is very important that this need is understood and demonstrated by a wide range of both employees and volunteers, so that mutual respect for each organisation and their people is maintained and grows.

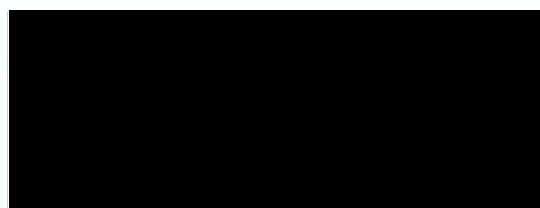
In STEP's experience of this is variable and may lead to less than optimum outcomes, poor communication and disappointment.

Partnership arrangements, such as a Memorandum of Understanding are one mechanism by which understanding and respect can be supported and developed. But this requires regular and meaningful collaboration on projects, policy development and management decisions. When this falls short of expectations from either side, commitment and enthusiasm of volunteers can wane, unity of presentation of the facility to the visiting public can be impacted, and in the worst possible outcome volunteer support could be removed, to the detriment of the agency, visitors and citizens.

Members of the STEP Committee can be available to the Committee if this is appropriate.



Judy Smith
President
4 February 2022



Dr David Shorthouse
Vice-President