



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

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# Submission to the inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

From

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I thank the Assembly for considering this issue as there is clearly a need for more care for our natural environment in the ACT. You just have to look at the invasive weeds which are all over the ACT. My submission will be brief as reflects the resources of the volunteer sector.

I am the convenor of a new group, Friends of Mawson Ponds, you can see us on facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-Mawson-ponds-109748211153890/> . We are a subcommittee of Woden Valley Community Council (WVCC). This submission has been circulated amongst the group, but I take responsibility for any shortcomings and omissions. Some of the group would be able to talk to the committee during public hearings. I am also a former member of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

Looking at the issues the committee is concerned with.

**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;

Our group came into being because of a desire to improve our local environment. During the first covid lockdown the ACT government did a number of employment schemes, one of which was removing a contoneaster forest along the fence line between Power St Mawson and Mawson drive. This forest was just above the main

shared path from Tugeranong to Woden and onto Civic. The path is also used by many pedestrians, often locals going for a walk but also people accessing Woden and Mawson centres.

The site was left with piles of mulch, and some spread mulch. WVCC and many local residents tried to find out the government's plans for the site without success. WVCC had a 'music at the pond' event

([https://www.facebook.com/WodenCommunityService/posts/2228710847261795?\\_cft\\_\\_\[0\]=AZX7PIYjvBbbNN1UE22vpO36JmZArBXMK470FpzQ1BpyjCqBeLHYDJ2\\_41y5XcCMZMZEeea14TEXV\\_iKU7vGn3ydAFFLI1-fP\\_99pF\\_dRXW8FAyv9PwkN1z14TiB5uVnZsOG9B0P9\\_UyyPn9ouBQFsZxjS7mHEygXI8qcqsl8qci9A&\\_tn\\_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/WodenCommunityService/posts/2228710847261795?_cft__[0]=AZX7PIYjvBbbNN1UE22vpO36JmZArBXMK470FpzQ1BpyjCqBeLHYDJ2_41y5XcCMZMZEeea14TEXV_iKU7vGn3ydAFFLI1-fP_99pF_dRXW8FAyv9PwkN1z14TiB5uVnZsOG9B0P9_UyyPn9ouBQFsZxjS7mHEygXI8qcqsl8qci9A&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)) in 2021 in the middle of the area and we wanted tree planting in that area to be part of it. This was very hard to organise, although it did happen.

As a result of the clear desire of the locals to improve the area and the difficulty of working with the ACT government Friends of Mawson Ponds was formed. The other reason it was formed was that as a recently retired person I had the time to take a new project on. However when I started I had no idea how much work it would be.

We applied for an environment grant and were granted \$7,000 and most importantly this gave us permission to work onsite.

Given the state of the site probably the first aim was local amenity as 40 or 50 decaying mulch piles was not very pretty. Also the neighbours of the site had lost a lot of privacy and wanted big plants back again. Due to the electricity line they are only getting large shrubs.

Mawson Ponds is connected to woodland on Farrer Ridge ( south), Mt Taylor ( west) and Isaacs ridge (east) nature reserves. So looking more broadly our project is designed to enhance habitat connectivity through urban areas and manage these urban wetlands to support implementation of the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy (Strategies 1 and 4). Migratory species recorded at Mawson ponds include the Meadow Argus and Macleay Swallowtail butterflies, Olive-backed Oriole and Superb Parrot. There are also hundreds of moth and beetle species that are expected to utilise the proposed corridor.

Some of our volunteers also volunteer at other sites such as Mount Taylor, Red Hill, Jerrabomberra Wetlands and the arboretum.

So in terms of your list our long term aims are biodiversity conservation and enhancement and climate resilience.

We look at our plantings and the ACT government plantings a 100 metres or so away, on the grasslands which is now largely imported weeds, in particular African lovegrass. We have the major constraint of electricity lines above the site which means that we cannot plant anything tall. We can see that the ACT government massed plantings are based on large shrubs/small trees, basically bottle brush. We also have bottle brush as our key plant but we have a lot of other species. It's clear that the ACT government does not have the resources to plant and maintain diverse areas that will support a large range of plants and wildlife.

Environmental volunteers are essential if the environment is not just to be what is sometimes called 'industrial landscape planting'. These plantings are managed with mowers, mulch and weedicide. Even then, they may become havens for imported weeds. To try and preserve and restore a native natural environment takes considerable work over a long period of time. For many of us, this work can be inherently satisfying and it is, in our opinion, very beneficial to biodiversity conservation and enhancement as well as climate resilience.

## **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;**

Our group is largely female and retired. I understand that makes us typical of other urban parkcare groups. I believe that other demographics are interested but often either don't have the time or are not aware of the opportunities. This is somewhere that government or other community bodies could help as existing groups tend to recruit similar people as members.

It does take a lot of resources to involve the wider community. We have an annual party by the ponds, run by WVCC. This is our major outreach event.

Our project is basically 100% community and as a subcommittee of the relevant community council, the community stewardship is very high. We have reasonable involvement of the neighbors as well. Unfortunately all but one neighbor has a high fence, originally put up when it was a cotoneaster forest, so they don't see the planting area from their block.

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

This is a very vexed issue in environmental volunteering as well as other issues. I understand that the ACT government has a number of issues with environmental volunteering:

- **Long term maintenance.** It is one thing to build, plant or otherwise create something. In the long run it is often more work to maintain it. The ACT government understandably does not want to do a lot of things to maintain that are in the general scheme of ACT government are low priority. Our group has started to realise that we have to plan for long term maintenance and how to coexist with large mowers.
- The **possibility of a significant inquiry** to a volunteer. The ACT government offers insurance cover to its parkcare and urban volunteer groups. This is very good and they are to be thanked for it. Their rules say that any activity must have a first aid trained person on site. This is quite onerous for small groups and small activities. Groups such as ours have many events, often with less than 5 participants. Often it could be one or two people weeding at a time that suits them. Unless a core volunteer who has a lot of time is first aid qualified this makes it almost impossible to have small onsite events that meet government guidelines.

Friends of Mawson Ponds, as a subcommittee of WVCC have access to the WVCC public liability insurance. That insurance does not require a first aid qualified person on site. Incidentally I regularly volunteer at the Canberra City Farm and their insurance cover does not require a first aider on site.

The ACT government is prepared to pay for some volunteers to be first aid trained, which again is commendable.

My suggestion would be to remove the requirement for first aid person onsite, at least within the urban areas of Canberra. In a real emergency an ambulance should be able to attend. A mobile phone and ability to describe the location are probably the main requirements.

- A considerable issue can be **who gets to plan what happens?** The government who after all owns the land or the volunteers who will be doing the work. This can be an ongoing source of tension.
- The ACT government **volunteer coordinators seem to be under resourced**,. Catchment groups are also under resourced and cannot provide support.
- A lot seems to depend on the attitude of the convenor/ key volunteers as to how they relate to the government.

Generally what is needed is a positive welcoming attitude by the relevant government officials. Often this happens, but not always.

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

Interacting with the government is very time consuming and bureaucratic. I think this is largely due to lack of resources on the government's part and severe risk

avoidance. I am trying here to make practical suggestions rather than just a general comment.

- Trust local volunteers. For example during the lockdowns we were all told that we were not allowed to do anything. This was despite government health rules allowing one hour, then two hours, of vigorous local exercise. Environmental volunteering would fit that description perfectly but we were told not to do it. In our area, a few people still worked on the site in a very social distanced manner. However we could have done a lot more and also kept peoples spirits up if we had been allowed to use our own judgement to follow health orders.
- Reduce the record keeping expectations. I am currently at least a couple of months behind in recording working bees in the government's 'Better Impact' program. I can appreciate why the government wants the information it does, but there does not seem to be any reason why people would want to fill it in. Very few of our volunteers have registered with Better Impact. Periodically I ask them to, but really why should they bother.  
Things that might make it easier would be empowering someone else in the group to register volunteers. All they would need to do so in that instance would be name and a contact method, email or phone. But that would be a lot of work for the group. Making the app smart phone friendly so people can register on site. The government did it with check in CBR, maybe we could get a QR code to register.
- More funding for catchment groups. They are not able to meet demand for help from the volunteer groups. Another couple of additional volunteer coordinators, could employed by the catchment groups rather than the government. These people could be informed and empowered navigators of the system as well has having relevant environmental knowledge.
- More funding for the relevant parts of government and more coordination of the government. We have had meetings onsite with government where different parts of the government clearly had no idea what the other was doing. While it is good for this to happen, its not the responsibility of volunteer groups to facilitate this. There also seems to be a bureaucratic division between trees – over 2 or 3 m – and smaller plants. This is weird and unhelpful.  
Government funding should increase so that it can provide support in particular for heavy machinery when needed. It can be very useful to be able to use a bob cat occasionally. Our project would not have gone where it did if there had not been the lockdown which lead to some of the neighbours spreading huge quantities of mulch using there wheelbarrows. I had asked for government bobcat help but it was not available. We have subsequently paid for bobcat work.

- More planting and maintenance guides suitable for local conditions and expected conditions with climate change.
- Increase funding. Grant rounds are always very competitive and a lot of good projects don't get funded. Also there are some larger long term groups which need to continue and always have to compete for grant funding. Fund them separately, so it is clear what is available for the smaller groups.
- Remove or reduce requirement for first aid trained volunteer onsite as discussed above.
- Currently sourcing plants can take a lot of time, knowledge and money. It is especially hard for small groups who cannot make large orders of plants in advance. One suggestion is to expand Yarralumla nursery (or somewhere else, Greening Australia?) to provide a long term supply of plants suitable for regeneration and conservation in the local region. However Yarralumla nursery has a very limited range of plants suitable for conservation work as distinct from attractive gardens.

We have negotiated to buy wholesale from Yarralumla nursery but not all groups even realise they can do that in conjunction with a sponsor who has an ABN. Could be government facilitate that?

- It would be good to have a clearer name for the urban environment volunteer groups. I do appreciate that Conservation areas protect 60% of the total ACT area and continue to increase as environmental offsets are added to the Canberra Nature Park network. Thus they are higher priority. My suggestion would be to call the groups and the volunteers 'urban park care'.
- Encourage cooperation between relevant departmental staff and environmental groups. I understand that some ACT government staff have been told not to volunteer in these areas due to possible 'conflict of interest'. The other way of looking at it is sharing expertise and knowledge.

## **5 Any other relevant matters**

Like other volunteering, there is an important social component in most environmental volunteer groups. Loneliness is related to much unhappiness and even illness and death. I understand that the United Kingdom has a minister for loneliness. Our group, and others like it, provides a valuable social function. We normally end our events with a cuppa and chat.

In these times of despair about the environment they are one way that Canberra residents can make a positive contribution to their local environment and thus are an invaluable part of Canberra and the wider environment.

Environmental volunteering is something that we need to embed in our city if it is to thrive and continue to be 'the bush capital'. To achieve 30% tree canopy cover will

require people power not just planning rule changes. Most people want to help, or at least appreciate others doing it. Often we are working on our site we get positive feedback from people walking past.

Caroline Le Couteur

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