



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

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Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

Dear Dr Paterson

Introduction

This submission is written in the context of a volunteer on a relatively small urban park and the details may therefore vary from other submissions.

The park has existed for nearly 100 years, has heritage status and includes endangered natural temperate grassland (NTG), sightings of the Golden Sun Moth and specific exotic tree species and planting design. These elements require a range of specific scientific management expertise that is nowhere co-ordinated. For the last approximately 20 years, and most likely many more years, there has been little government attention provided apart from mowing and establishment of a conservation zone for the NTG. Ecologists have visited from time to time but arborists have only visited to remove potentially dangerous trees and tree limbs, as reported by volunteers. The exotic trees have shown drought stress, somewhat alleviated by the La Nina rain, and some died years ago or have withered to the stage of needing pruning or replacement. Only when volunteers struck the right time, and were able to contact an interested government agency, has any interest been shown in the treescape. Volunteers are not able to provide arborist services. The analysis and development of a park conservation management plan developed for heritage status was totally driven by volunteers with expertise provided by consultants to the volunteers.

Without volunteers the park would be a mass of weeds and potentially deteriorating to a state of huge loss of environmental and community value.

Overall, this means improvement and maintenance has been left to inexperienced volunteers to determine what needs to be done, how, and how often. While information and assistance is available within and from government it is very hard to access in a timely manner, because of existing stresses on government resources. It is also hard to elicit exactly the right information which often needs to be detailed, timely and nuanced. It is rare for government advice and assistance to be offered without volunteer prompting.

This means management and physical operations are outsourced by default to volunteers with lots of good will but little or no authority or expertise. This 'management' arrangement results in adverse outcomes for the park. In the meantime government budgets have difficulty coping with bare minimum requirements.

Response to Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference 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;

Volunteers have many different reasons for volunteering. These include:

- having time due to changed circumstances such as retirement from paid employment,
- interest in meeting new people and socialising with friends and neighbours
- learning a bit more about their local environment and history
- contributing to the look and feel of their neighbourhood, and
- getting some outdoor activity.

Existing or potential benefits include:

- expertise within the volunteer group. This only occurs occasionally but may be developed to a certain degree over time
- interest in being involved in community events and meeting others
- interest in learning more about the community, past and present
- partially filling a gap left by insufficient government resources

Challenges include:

- finding enough volunteers when there are so many competing interests
- relatively little volunteer expertise given lack of government input
- insufficient government support – volunteers should not be tacitly expected to do what is beyond volunteer resources
- risk of inadvertently doing more harm than good
- little reward except for the 'feel good' factor. This is a challenge when other competing interests occur
- Government training is offered and is generally quite useful but not always at the level of detail or focus each landscape volunteer requires. For example, many volunteers may poison weeds, but do so without knowing about less harmful options.
- Environmental grants, while usually helpful, don't provide a total solution. They require volunteer initiation, development and delivery which are time consuming and difficult for those without the time and appropriate expertise. Grants are also limited in that not all applications are successful.

Terms of Reference 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;

- Indigenous input for advice on native flora assets, including cultural burns, would be highly valued, although such resources may be limited. Young people often have significant school and employment commitments but should always be welcome as the next generation of volunteer stewardship.

Terms of Reference 3

Managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public

- relationships between volunteers and their organisations is probably typical of any volunteer organisation. If the volunteer is satisfied with the arrangement they will continue, if not, they will not continue. Relationships with the ACT Government vary according to actual and perceived volunteer needs and urgency
- relationships with ACT Government work reasonably well. Some protective clothing is provided, as is OH&S training and related administrative procedures. Chemicals and related equipment are also provided. Tools could be provided on request.

Terms of Reference 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

- some policy and regulatory settings such as training and OH&S matters certainly facilitate appropriate work arrangements
- some policy settings need to be changed, for example bans on even the lightest of mechanised equipment like small brush cutters.

Terms of Reference 5

Other relevant matters

- Nil

Yours sincerely

Sue Ross
Parkcare Convenor
8 March 2022