



National Parks Association of the ACT 1960 – 2010
50 years of conservation, nature protection and education

Ms Katy Gallagher
Treasurer
ACT Legislative Assembly
London Circuit
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms Gallagher

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the 2011-2012 Budget process. The National Parks Association of the ACT is a community-based conservation organisation with a fifty year history of working to protect our natural environment through an active outings and workparty program; participation in Parkcare activities; an extensive publication program; public meetings and conferences and engagement with government policies and programs.

We note that the invitation to comment focuses mainly on the delivery of services to the community and wish to state from the beginning that our interest lies more in appropriate management of the services which the natural environment delivers to us. Namadgi National Park and our nature parks provide essential services such as pure water and clean air as well as recreation, tourism and employment opportunities for the ACT. Their care and protection is as crucial as funding for other essential services such as health, public safety and education.

In addition to the eco-services which our national and nature parks provide, the ACT has a critical role to play in the conservation of Australia's biodiversity. This was clearly evident as at the Linking Landscapes Summit in Kingscliff NSW in September 2009 where a group of Australia's leading environment researchers and reserve system managers called on governments across Australia to adequately fund a landscape approach to protection of our unique biodiversity. The ACT's national park and nature reserves lie at the heart of eco-systems which are expected to suffer severely from the impact of climate change over the next 20 years. Our members fear that a degraded national park, inadequately funded, degraded by feral pests, soil erosion and inappropriate or illegal human use, will witness the local extinction of plants, animals, fish and insects on an unprecedented scale over the next ten to twenty years.

In this submission we would like to address two major problems in the ACT Budget as regards our national park and nature reserves:

1. The lack of proper accountability indicators for the Budget allocations to this area; and
2. The treatment of such funding as a optional service to the community and recreation opportunities rather than the maintenance of natural resources which are essential to the functioning of the Territory.

Our first concern with the current Budget arrangements for the management of Namadgi National Park and our nature reserves is that the only 'accountability indicator' for the more than \$60 million allocated to the relevant program is "Customer satisfaction with the management of nature parks". This reflects the current thinking in the government that our nature reserves and national park are a consumer service provided for recreation and tourism. It is a very poor indicator of management of eco-services critical to our community.

In the Budget documents there should be indicators for maintenance of our region's biodiversity; for the quality of water coming out of the national park catchment; for the effectiveness of weed and pest control; for the state of the heritage buildings and structures; for the control of vandalism and safety of visitors to nature reserves and the national park; and provision for annual public reports on the implementation of management plans for these areas. The lack of such indicators is a poor reflection on the Budget papers and we urge you to ensure that proper and adequate accountability indicators be included for the 2011-12 Budget.

In fact NPA ACT is calling for the publication of this data for all ACT parks and reserves in an annual "State of the Park" report. This annual report should publish a detailed assessment of specific indicators such as those mentioned above as well as those outlined in the park's and reserves' management plans. Rather than being seen as an additional task, such reporting should become an integral part of the park and reserves management system.

Substantial work to develop appropriate indicators for Namadgi National Park has already been done by Roger Good, Graeme Worboys and Andy Spate for their report on the Australian Alps National Parks system for the Federal Department of Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. TAMS have accepted the findings of this work which establishes quite satisfactory methodology for determining the health of Namadgi National Park and estimates the cost of halting catchment degradation; investing in resilient ecosystems; adapting to new climates; investing in management innovation; investing in people and communities; and researching for better catchments. These costs should be included in on-going base-level funding for management of the national parks and nature reserves.

Our second concern about the Budget process in regards to programs for management of our nature reserves and National Park is that it has been categorised as discretionary spending so that any reduction in program funds would merely inconvenience a community spoiled for recreational choices.

During a community consultation process for last year's Budget, the Minister, Mr Stanhope, informed us that there was an overspending in 2010-11 in the (then) Parks, Conservation and Lands program area. He further stated that not only would the program's funding be cut, actual spending would be further reduced to repay this overspend. Our response then - and now - was that the 2000-10 Budget overspend was in fact an indication that the environment programs have been chronically underfunded for some years, particularly with regard to the essential eco-services they return to our community.

For example, the Cotter catchment area of Namadgi National Park is an essential part of our water supply and its capacity to operate as a viable set of ecological systems is dependent on adequate feral pest and plant control, adequate fire management and control of human incursion into sensitive areas among other things. None of these programs can operate effectively without adequate funding and staffing. A failure of soil stability, a reduction in water yield or pollution of the water catchment results in a deterioration of the city's water supply. Yet basic protection for this area from vandals, trail bike riders, illegal shooters and feral horse/goat/pig/cattle incursions mostly rests with a single park ranger.

With the move to pump water from Angle Crossing, care and control over the southern part of Namadgi becomes equally essential. Here there may be as many as two rangers on duty at any one time to ensure visitor safety over a large tract of remote country; protect unique Aboriginal and heritage from vandals; patrol public roads; manage wild-dog programs for the protection of neighbouring properties; supervise weed and pest programs and fire trail maintenance; supervise and manage public camping grounds and clean up to eight remote long-drop toilets every weekend.

Proposed reductions in funding will have an immediate and adverse effect on the natural estate because these funding programs have been consistently reduced over the past six years. Long-term catchment protection programs will reduce dramatically in the next financial year as the insurance money from the 2003 bushfires comes to an end. Rangers are already unable to adequately supervise track and road grading so that soil erosion in nature parks is increasing exponentially. Crucial work on a rapidly deteriorating cultural heritage site at Glenburn has been refused for the past four years by the ACT Government and essential stabilisation has only been undertaken with a small grant from the Federal government – an uncertain source at the best of times. Essential work on the Orroral shearing shed has been delayed now for over six years and the structure is in danger of collapse.

Ranger activities have to be spread more thinly over a wider area because staff on leave (including parenting leave) are not being replaced in order to save money. General service positions have been cut as staff contracts expire and rangers are taking on more office work as administrative support positions have also been cut. This cost-cutting approach has become insupportable.

Over the past five years Canberra Nature Park's reserves have experienced an explosion in recreational use, including commercial Boot Camps, fitness training, mountain cycling and weight reduction programs. This has obvious benefits for health and fitness programs in the ACT but requires an increase in ranger numbers to provide adequate supervision of these areas and maintenance of suitable services.

Some of the damage to the natural areas includes construction of illegal mountain and trail bike circuits in sensitive bush areas; cutting fences and breaking down locked gates; private service vehicles driving across endangered and listed species; massive soil erosion from inappropriately maintained service access roads; destruction of signs and barriers to direct foot and cycle traffic away from sensitive areas; unleashed dog activity destroying bird habitats and breeding sites; and deterioration of managed tracks through intensive use. It is some years since Parkcare and Landcare groups have been able to access regular on-ground help and advice from local rangers and their work is becoming less targeted and effective.

The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment is due to bring out a report on Canberra Nature Park in 2011 which will report in detail on the requirements for proper maintenance of these key natural resources. NPA ACT has already made a case in its submission to the Commissioner for increased ranger positions for Canberra's nature parks to reduce vandalism and destruction of native vegetation and to restore areas degraded and eroded by constant use. We would like to see adequate provision made in the 2011-12 Budget to enable immediate implementation of her recommendations.

With all of this in mind, we are calling for the following Budget reforms for 2011-12:

1. Stabilised core funding over the next three years for the National Parks, Reserves and Lands program at the full cost of actual expenditure in 2009-10 for the Parks Conservation and Lands program with the addition of funding recommendations from the Worboys/Good report.
2. Extracting only actual, demonstrable efficiencies from National Parks, Reserves and Lands program budget, not the application of an efficiency dividend as a matter of rote to create artificial savings across the programs.
3. An additional three ranger positions across the Namadgi, Googong and Murrumbidgee Corridor areas to decrease vandalism, increase

feral species control and better manage the cultural precincts within these areas.

4. Additional funding of \$300,000 for specific action against feral pests and weeds including the recent appearance of Hawkweed in the area; to combat the established threat of European wasps to native plants and insects; and to combat the explosion of the rabbit and hare populations in the national park and nature reserves.
5. Additional funding of \$300,000 for essential stabilisation of European heritage buildings and sites such as Orroral shearing shed.
6. A commitment to provide sufficient funds to meet costs arising from recommendations from the Commissioner for the Environment's inquiry into the nature reserves in the ACT. This needs to include sufficient funding to develop, with full community consultation, an ACT Recreational Land Use Strategy which allocates adequate areas for mountain and trail biking, horse riding and other activities and resolves community conflict around inappropriate use of nature reserves for such activities.

It is traditional for Budget managers to demand offsets for 'new' spending proposals even though this does seem to not apply to recent announcements in the sporting and tourism portfolios. We submit that we are not talking about new spending at all but a restoration of some of past spending levels which are required to maintain adequate protection of the eco-services provided by our national and nature parks.

The 2011-12 Budget must not merely repeat the inequities and inefficiencies of past funding regimes. It is an opportunity for a relatively small increase in base level funding to create a much improved environmental outlook for the next decade when so much will be at stake. We urge you to read the report by Roger Good, Graeme Worboys and Andy Spate to get an idea of the science behind our claims and the potential for severe deterioration of our natural areas over the next decade. We need clear judgement and strong leadership if we are to meet these challenges.

Yours sincerely

Rod Griffiths
President
13 December 2010