

ACT Government Response

Standing Committee on Planning and Environment's Report on the Proposed Nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

27/08/2009

Introduction

Biosphere Reserves are areas of land and/or sea that have been recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). They are significant for biodiversity conservation as well as demonstrating sustainable development. They have three main functions, namely to:

- foster sustainable economic and human development;
- support demonstration projects, environmental education and training and scientific research and monitoring; and
- contribute to the conservation of genetic resources, species, ecosystems and landscapes.

The Report by the ACT Sixth Assembly's Standing Committee on Planning and Environment ('the report') is an important document in exploring the issues related to the proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The ACT Government welcomes the Report.

Role of the Biosphere in the ACT

Before deciding to nominate the ACT as a Biosphere Reserve, it is important to fully explore and understand the opportunities and challenges that such a nomination would engender.

Many earlier nominated Biosphere Reserves around the world are focused on national parks or other forms of ecosystem conservation. The ACT would be significant in containing both ecosystem conservation (through Namadgi National Park) and a strong focus on sustainable development of a city and a national capital. This model is not fully developed internationally, and there is a lack of community understanding of how this might work in practice.

The Report identifies a number of potential benefits of a Biosphere Reserve including:

- development of tourism and businesses through a brand linked to the ACT as a biosphere;
- international recognition of Canberra as a sustainable city and knowledge centre;
- greater co-ordination and co-operation of sustainability initiatives, policies, research, monitoring and education; and
- fostering sustainable economic and human development.

The principles of a Biosphere Reserve are already encapsulated in a number of ACT Government policies - *People, Place, Prosperity*; *Weathering the Change*; *the Spatial Plan* and park management plans. ACT Government policy will continue to encourage economic development that is based on the sustainable and wise use of regional natural and human resources and to foster a long-term perspective and strive for sustainability.

Biosphere Reserves require community participation to be eligible for nomination. Community engagement by the Conservation Council of the ACT and South-East Region indicated that there is little general community understanding or interest in Biosphere Reserves. This is echoed in a number of the submissions to the Sixth Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Environment's Inquiry which, while supportive of the idea of the ACT nomination, suggests that great community engagement and understanding is needed as well as a greater understanding of the impacts of a biosphere nomination on the ACT, particularly in relation to land management and planning, conservation and tourism.

The ACT Government believes that the long-term success of a Biosphere Reserve is dependent upon strong support from a wide range of the ACT community. It is clear from the Report that these conditions do not yet exist.

The ACT Government considers the approach to Biosphere Reserves adopted by the Victorian Government has merit because it is comprehensive and has been accepted by the Victorian community as a basis for future biosphere reserves in that State. The Victorian Government approach supports 'in principle' the Biosphere concept on the basis that any new Biosphere Reserve will be community driven, self-funded and based on voluntary participation by individuals.

Should the conditions for a community driven and self-funded biosphere reserve develop then a number of issues would need to be considered in order to progress a formal biosphere nomination. These include:

- a) assessing the potential benefits and costs of establishing a Biosphere Reserve in the ACT;
- b) undertaking a gap analysis to determine whether the ACT already meets the UNESCO conditions for nomination and any additional work that may need to be undertaken;
- c) determining potential issues and plans for community co-operation and management;
- d) testing the claims of benefits for tourism and business; and
- e) outlining implications (if any) of the biosphere on a range of ACT Government policies, plans and strategies (such as *the Canberra Plan* and *the Spatial Plan*).

The ACT Government's response to each of the Sixth Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Environment's recommendations is set out in the table below.

The Government thanks the Sixth Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Environment for its extensive consultation and work in developing the report.

Recommendation	Response	Comment
Recommendation 1 The Committee recommends that the proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve proceed, but that the ACT Government first pursue effective consultations with key stakeholder sectors such as traditional owners, young people and the broader community and endeavour to ensure that those stakeholders support the proposed nomination.	Not agreed	The ACT Government notes that prior to submitting a nomination, a higher level of awareness and support from within the ACT community is required. In particular, the proposal lacks support from the Traditional owners, youth, and the tourism and development industries. Although the Commonwealth's <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> recognises Biosphere Reserves, the submissions from Commonwealth agencies were not supportive. The ACT Government supports 'in principle' the Biosphere Reserve concept on the basis that any new Biosphere Reserve will be community driven, self-funded and based on voluntary participation by individuals. Given these circumstances do not currently exist; the ACT Government does not support nomination of the ACT as a Biosphere Reserve at this time.
Recommendation 2 The Committee recommends that the Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change ensure that a representative of the ACT Government attends the 3 rd International Congress of Biosphere Reserves as an observer, and as host of a side-event promoting the ACT as a future Biosphere Reserve.	Agreed	The then Chief Executive Officer of TAMS and the Commissioner for Sustainability attended the international Congress. As part of the trip they also visited other key Biosphere Reserves in Canada and the USA and reported their findings to the ACT Government and Biosphere Steering Committee (consistent with recommendation 14).
Recommendation 3 The Committee recommends that the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation engage the ACT Ministerial Tourism Advisory Council on the proposal to nominate the ACT as a Biosphere Reserve and particularly concerning eco-tourism and its marketing for the ACT and region.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage, it is premature to consider eco-tourism and marketing aspects of a biosphere reserve nomination.
Recommendation 4 The Committee recommends that the proposed national review of Biosphere Reserves include a proposal advocating the development of a national UNESCO Biosphere Reserve trade mark and accreditation scheme for quality products and services produced within Australian Biosphere Reserves.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage, it is premature to consider trademark aspects of a biosphere reserve nomination.

Recommendation 5 The Committee recommends that, if a national UNESCO Biosphere Reserve trademark is unlikely to be developed, the ACT Government commission a consultancy for the development of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve trademark for the ACT, and licensing arrangements for ACT and regional stakeholders.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage, it is premature to consider trademark aspects of a biosphere reserve nomination.
Recommendation 6 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review and update the ACT Nature Based Tourism Strategy.	Noted	The ACT Government recognises the value of nature based tourism and is working on a number of initiatives to promote the ACT region as a nature based tourism destination.
Recommendation 7 The Committee recommends that, before the nomination documents for the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve are lodged with UNESCO, the ACT Government ensure that culturally-appropriate consultations occur about the proposed nomination with the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.	Noted	The ACT Government recognises the critical importance of the traditional owners of the land of the ACT and agrees that consultation with the United Ngunnawal Elders Council as part of any assessment and/or nomination processes is required.
Recommendation 8 The Committee recommends that a broad range of stakeholders be invited to participate in the development of the nomination document and a co-operation plan for the ACT Biosphere Reserve. Once the Biosphere Reserve has been listed, interested stakeholders should be invited to become ACT Biosphere Reserve partners willing to further the objective of the Biosphere Reserve. A steering committee should be elected from amongst the partnership, chaired by the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.	Noted	High levels of community engagement and stakeholder participation are required for biosphere reserves to be successful. Commitment to this community support is a necessary precondition to developing a nomination. The ultimate aim is for a Biosphere Reserve that is community driven, self-funded and based on voluntary participation by individuals.
Recommendation 9 The Committee recommends that a consultation and communications strategy be developed for the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve and national review of Biosphere Reserves.	Noted	The ACT normally participates in national level activities where resources allow. Should a National Review of Biosphere Reserves occur then the ACT would need to consider how best to participate in light of the governance arrangements for the review, the type and level of consultation, and the resources required.
Recommendation 10 The Committee recommends that particular attention be placed on engaging with young people in the ACT about the proposed ACT nomination.	Noted	The ACT Government notes that the support of the youth sector is critical to both the nomination of a Biosphere Reserve, and the long-term community ownership of the reserve which is an essential precondition for nomination. The ultimate aim is for a Biosphere Reserve that is community driven, self-funded and based on voluntary participation by individuals.

Recommendation 11 The Committee recommends that the <i>Commissioner for the Environment Act 1993</i> (ACT) be amended, and that additional resources be provided to the Office of the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment so as to enable the Commissioner to chair the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve Steering Committee and border biosphere partners' associations.	Not Agreed	It is not necessary for the <i>Commissioner for the Environment Act 1993</i> (ACT) to be amended to enable the Commissioner to participate in any Biosphere Reserve nomination and management. The role of the Commissioner is currently under review.
Recommendation 12 Pending the commencement of the proposed amendments of the <i>Commissioner for the Environment Act 1993</i> (ACT), the Committee recommends that the ACT Minister for the Environment, Climate Change, and Water ask the Department of Territory and Municipal Services to continue consulting with stakeholders and begin negotiations concerning the proposed nomination.	Not agreed	The ultimate aim is for a Biosphere Reserve that is community driven, self-funded and based on voluntary participation by individuals. Consultation driven by government does not accord with this preferred model.
Recommendation 13 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government suggests to the Australian Government, in the context of the proposed national review of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserves recommended in this report, that consideration be given to replacing the provisions concerning management plans for Biosphere Reserves in the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> (Cwlth) with provisions concerning co-operation plans for Biosphere Reserves.	Noted	The ACT Government notes that Biosphere Reserves appear to be a low priority for the Australian Government and a review of biosphere reserves is unlikely. Should a national review of Biosphere Reserves be undertaken, the ACT Government will consider whether or not to make a submission, and the content of that submission, as part of its normal policy processes.
Recommendation 14 The Committee recommends that the Commissioner for the Environment and Sustainability be asked to develop, in consultation with stakeholders, a co-operation plan for the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve, having considered Canadian precedents, and with provisions for regular review and amendment as needs arise.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage, it is premature to consider management options such as cooperation plans. The ACT Government notes, however, that cooperation is an essential component of management for a successful biosphere reserve.

Recommendation 15 The Committee recommends that the ACT Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change write to his Australian Government counterpart to suggest that consideration be given to conferring focal point status for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Australia on the national Sustainability Commission once established. If the Commission is not established, consideration should be given to relocating the focal point to the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.	Not Agreed	The ACT Government notes the Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter, including discussions about a Sustainability Commissioner, lapsed prior to an Australian Government response. It would not be usual for the ACT Government to write to another government about its Administrative Arrangements.
Recommendation 16 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government seek Australian Government and private sector financial support for the convening of a national conference on Biosphere Reserves in Canberra.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage it would be premature to seek agreement and funding for a biosphere reserve conference at this time.
Recommendation 17 The Committee recommends that the Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change write to the Australian Government Ministers for the Environment and Water Resources, and Foreign Affairs requesting that a broad-ranging review of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Australian be undertaken.	Not agreed	Information on biosphere reserves was included in a recent issues paper seeking submissions for an Independent review of the EPBC Act. It does not appear that any submissions to that review canvassed issues on biosphere reserves. Given that there was little response as part of that Review, it is unlikely that a narrower review would be supported.
Recommendation 18 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure the provision of about \$400,000 for the proposed nomination and implementation of the ACT Biosphere Reserve, to cover the salary and project costs, with financial and in-kind contributions sought from the Commonwealth and NSW Governments and private sector sources.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage it would be premature to explore funding for a nomination process.
Recommendation 19 The Committee recommends that the nomination document for the proposed ACT UNESCO Biosphere Reserve be lodged with UNESCO by December 2008.	Noted	Should community support for a biosphere reserve increase markedly, then the most appropriate time for a formal nomination would be explored.

Recommendation 20 The Committee recommends that the Minister for the Environment, Water and Climate Change ask the Department of Territory and Municipal Services in the first instance and, following the amendments to the <i>Commissioner for the Environment Act 1993 (ACT)</i>, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, to pursue negotiations with local government in the capital region, the Capital Region Development Board and the Capital Region Area Consultative Committee about a possible Biosphere Reserve for the capital region.	Noted	If there were sufficient community support the ACT political boundaries would initially form the boundary of the Biosphere Reserve. Any extension of the Biosphere Reserve would be contingent on successful discussions and negotiations with neighbouring councils and the NSW Government.
Recommendation 21 The Committee recommends that the Chief Minister consider the desirability of consulting with the Australian Government about the consolidation and rationalisation of regional development bodies such as the Capital Region Development Board and the Capital Region Area Consultative Committee. The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider whether the Officer of the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment and/or the Department of Territory and Municipal Services should be the repository of new collaborative research platforms and databases for the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve.	Noted	Given that there is a lack of critical community support for a biosphere reserve at this stage, it is premature to consider the location of research platforms and databases for a Biosphere Reserve.
Recommendation 22 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government support the pursuit of funding for the development of collaborative research platforms for research relevant to the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve.	Noted	The role and support of funding of research would be developed as part of the management and development of any potential Biosphere Reserve in the ACT.
Recommendation 23 The Committee recommends that the Chief Minister and/or the Minister for Planning initiate a participatory process by which the ACT Place Names Committee would recommend a name for the proposed Biosphere Reserve.	Noted	In the event of a proposed nomination for a Biosphere Reserve, there would be a process to determine the place name.