



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

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Jochen Zeil

Convenor, Friends of Mount Majura ParkCare Group (FoMM)

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity new inquiry into topics related to environmental volunteerism in the ACT.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address in particular “existing challenges and the management of relationships and policy and regulatory settings” as they affect conservation volunteers here in the ACT.

I am writing as the convenor of FoMM, which was established in 2003 as a member of the 30-year old ParkCare movement. ParkCare is a grass-roots, self-motivated, largely self-funded, highly experienced, innovative and persistent conservation volunteer program that makes significant contributions to the conservation management of Canberra Nature Park (CNP).

As the EPSDD Annual report for 2020-21 documents on p. 69, the annual contribution of ParkCare volunteers (now rebranded by EPSDD as ParkCare Patch) was 18,144 hours from 153 volunteers, an average 115 hours per volunteer: *“...the (ParkCare) volunteer effort contribution added \$960,603 of value to the work of the ACT Parks and Conservation Service.”*

Summary and Recommendations:

The organisation and administration of the Parks & Conservation Service (P&CS, EPSDD) is not fit for the purpose of managing CNP for conservation, which is severely hampering conservation efforts by ParkCare groups.

This is mainly due to inadequate on-ground staffing levels, clumsy employment conditions and the lack of support for on-ground staff in the form of professionally guided Conservation Management Plans for individual reserves, such as are required for Offset Areas.

- 1. P&CS should invest more in increasing on-ground staffing levels and in employment conditions that strengthen the relationship between P&CS staff and volunteers and that motivate on-ground staff to remain in their position and enable them to engage in long-term conservation work.**
- 2. P&CS should establish professionally guided Conservation Management Plans for each individual reserve within Canberra Nature Park (CNP), modelled after those that are required for Offset Areas, including biodiversity asset inventories, operational milestones and conservation goals.**
- 3. There may also be a need for an independent review into the appropriateness and effectiveness of the structure and organization of P&CS in relation to its main purpose, namely the management of CNP for conservation.**

Background:

The relationship between ParkCare and the P&CS - the managers of CNP - has improved, but significant challenges remain in making this relationship as effective and productive as it should be to achieve optimal conservation outcomes.

These challenges mainly arise because of the ineffectual organisation and administration of P&CS as far as the conservation management of CNP is concerned.

1. ***P&CS is a top and desk-top heavy organisation.*** P&CS has several layers of top and middle management, but inadequate numbers of on-ground staff. Much of the work on-ground staff do appears to be desk-top administrative, such as coordinating contractors, rather than performing on-ground conservation work. This is one of the reasons on-ground staff with an interest in conservation work are frustrated. This said, much credit is due to the efforts of Rangers on the ground who do what they can in responding to and supporting ParkCare volunteers, despite the limitations they face.
2. ***Rapid turn-over of on-ground staff.*** On-ground staff rarely stay more than 1 year in their position. This is primarily due to particular management practices, a lack of job security, lack of *in-situ* promotion opportunities and in particular a lack of long-term conservation work opportunities. We are aware of rangers moving interstate due to lack of on-ground work opportunities or to the Offset Program within the ACT, because it offers professionally structured on-ground conservation work opportunities.
3. ***Ineffectual 'succession planning' and 'knowledge capture'.*** As far as long-term conservation management is concerned, the negative effect of the rapid turn-over of on-ground staff is made even worse by a lack of Operational Management Plans and long-term Conservation Management Plans for individual reserves. There do not appear to be management tools in place that would facilitate the 'hand-over' of knowledge and responsibilities for individual reserves.
4. ***Lack of compliance management.*** The reserves in CNP are increasingly used and appreciated for recreation, as has become very obvious during COVID19 lock-downs. This has also exasperated, however, the chronic absence of effective compliance management. There is little to no ranger presence in CNP reserves, especially during times of high recreational use and there is a lack of education and information campaigns regarding illegal mountain bike track building, dogs-off-leash, garden waste and 'bush on the boundary' responsibilities of residential properties abutting the nature reserves.
5. ***Inadequate communication.*** Conservation work, such as planting, weeding and herbivore control requires coordination between P&CS and ParkCare conservation volunteers. Although regular meetings have now been established, it remains largely unclear what P&CS does what, where and when. Also, Operational Management Plans and lately more ambitious 'Landscape Improvement Plans' have been promised, but status and progress are not communicated.

How this affects the work of ParkCare volunteers:

1. ParkCare rehabilitation and biosecurity control work is not embedded in long-term, professionally guided Conservation Management Plans for individual reserves.
2. It appears that ParkCare volunteers have more knowledge and a longer 'corporate memory' of a given area of CNP than the responsible government land managers themselves. ParkCare volunteers frequently have to introduce new rangers to an area, to the local projects, to the specific challenges, to the history of actions and to the conservation management needs of an area.
3. ParkCare volunteers have little opportunity to form long-term productive relationships with rangers, because they appear and disappear at such high rates that rangers rarely get familiar with an area or are able to develop and maintain long-term action plans.
4. There are certain conservation actions ParkCare volunteers can do (such as monitoring, weeding, planting ect.) and others that would need to be done by P&CSA (such as compliance management, contractor weed control and herbivore control). There is thus a need for complementary conservation actions and compliance management by P&CS in order to sustain the rehabilitation work of volunteers. With the exceptions of kangaroo and rabbit management and some contractor based weed control, there are few or inadequately communicated complementary conservation actions by P&CS in local CNP reserves. On-ground rangers are overwhelmed with some urgent compliance management work (such as the rehabilitation of illegal mountain bike tracks), with apparently little supporting actions by senior management (such as an education and information campaign or the provision of more aggressive monitoring tools).
5. Over the years, ParkCare volunteers have successfully lobbied the ACT Government for a number of improvements, such as ParkCare Support ranger positions and positions for Wildlife rangers to free on-ground rangers from having to be on call and attend to injured wildlife. However, these ParkCare initiatives have often been re-defined and re-directed by P&CS without consultation. For instance, the duties of ParkCare Support rangers have been spread across other P&CS volunteer schemes, thus diluting intended roles and availabilities. Or, to highlight a second example, the establishment of Wildlife ranger positions was implemented by culling on-ground staff, completely negating the intended purpose.
6. A further source of frustration and anger amongst ParkCare volunteers was the use of our ParkCare brand by P&CS when establishing their own commendable volunteer programs, such as Ranger Assist, Wildlife Assist and Visitor Assist. In the course of this initiative, P&CS – without consultation - rebranded the ParkCare movement as 'ParkCare Patch'.

I'd be happy to meet the Standing Committee in person to clarify and elaborate.

With kind regards,

