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ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Planning and the Environment
Inquiry into the proposed nomination of the ACT
as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Dear Chair and members

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Standing Committee's July 2006 Issues Paper produced by the inquiry into the proposed nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Nature and Society Forum has the following comments on the nine issues on which further public input is sought.

- 1. Should the Committee advise the Assembly that 'by December 2008' should be the timeframe for the lodgement of the nomination form for the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve with UNESCO?**

Nature and Society Forum believes that a nomination to UNESCO for Biosphere Reserve status can feasibly be brought forward from December 2008 to December 2007. There are the skills and resources within the ACT to enable us to submit our nomination in 2007.

- 2. What additional environmental, social and economic benefits could be delivered to the ACT and region following the designation of the proposed UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, beyond those being pursued or delivered under existing laws, policies and programs?**

Nature and Society Forum wishes to emphasize one critical aspect of the Biosphere proposal which might have been given more prominence in the Issues Paper. This is that the ACT's application for Biosphere Reserve status will be, at its heart, about the interactions between humans and the rest of the environment, as well as about the non-human environment in its own right. The essence of the ACT's application should be that our human population is a part of the environment; it should not be seen as implying any necessary conflict between them.

A successful Biosphere Reserve will be a healthier, happier place for our population; not merely a place where humans care for the natural environment at arm's length, but where they interact with it, learning from it, experiencing it and enriching their hearts and minds and drawing physical health and well-being from a healthy, thriving ACT environment in the process. If the ACT is managed well as a biosphere reserve ACT residents will become better informed about the ways humans may (and do) impact on the natural environment and will be willing to use that knowledge to protect the environment and the eco-system services it provides each and every one of us.

Some of the process of becoming better-informed will occur in the normal course of public affairs, but a significant part will happen formally within the education sector, in both schools and the post-school sector. Being educated within a biosphere reserve – with the many opportunities to study human individuals and human society in the context of the environment – will facilitate many new and rewarding approaches which may well be missed elsewhere.

It is relevant to mention at this point that once the ACT is a member of the family of 500-odd biosphere reserves, we will be able to draw readily on the experience of other reserves in the ongoing management of our own area.

3. Should the proposed Biosphere Reserve include negotiations with NSW about possible cross-border zonation?

Ideally, the ACT will, very early in its Biosphere Reserve nomination process, advise the NSW government and the surrounding NSW shires of its intentions and invite them to support the proposal. It is possible that there may be shires bordering the ACT that wish to support the ACT's proposal; the New South Wales Government may also be so inclined. Such collaboration should be advantageous.

However, the ACT's nomination process should not be impeded or delayed by negotiations.

4. If there is broad community support for the proposed nomination, should the ACT Place Names Committee invite stakeholders to participate in the process of selecting a name for the proposed Biosphere Reserve?

Nature and Society Forum does not have a view on this matter, except to express the hope that such a process would not delay the nomination process.

5. Should the issue of a Biosphere Reserve nomination be raised with the City of Nara, Japan, with a view to forming a thematic sub-network relationship with the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve?

Nature and Society Forum supports this proposal in the same way as it supports the involvement of New South Wales in our nomination – that is, the city of Nara should be advised very early on of the ACT's intentions and invited to support our proposal. As to whether Nara might take any further steps we would express the hope that those steps would not delay the ACT's nomination process.

6. Should the Committee recommend to the Assembly that a Biosphere Reserve nomination is viable?

Nature and Society Forum believes that the nomination is, without question, viable. It will require minor and manageable changes in administration, the development of

consultative arrangements and adjustments within the existing governance arrangements in the ACT – none of these should present major issues, controversy or difficulties; quite the opposite, both the nomination process and the management of the Reserve will provide a new opportunity for our people to work together.

7. Which stakeholder groups and/or range of expertise should be represented in an organisation established to progress the nomination of, and/or to manage the proposed ACT Biosphere Reserve?

Nature and Society Forum believes that stakeholder involvement should be invited from across the community and a framework established to enable this to be effective from the very early stages of the nomination. Nature and Society Forum expects to join with the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra and other groups, representatives from government, the education, tourism, health and media sectors and a number of the national institutions in Canberra throughout the nomination process and beyond.

Nature and Society Forum believes that the Inquiry need not specify the representation at this early stage, but should focus on making the opportunity available for wide participation and recommending that adequate funding and human resources be provided for that participation to be effective and well governed.

8. Should stakeholder groups establish an incorporated association to progress the proposed nomination?

Nature and Society Forum does not have an opinion on this directly, but would hope that expert advice can be sought as to the most effective method of progressing the nomination. This advice may point to an incorporated association or it may indicate that another arrangement would be more effective in making our nomination process successful. The important thing is that the body driving the nomination be inclusive with willing and active participation from both the government and non-government sectors.

9. Should governments and the private sector be asked to support the holding of a national meeting of volunteers supporting Biosphere Reserves in Canberra before July 2007?

Nature and Society Forum does not have a strong opinion on this proposal, but is supportive of any move to enable the experience of communities and individuals who have successfully achieved Biosphere Reserve status, and others who are contemplating doing so, to be made available to support the ACT nomination. However, the ACT, with its relatively large urban population, will be making a unique application, not one that merely draws on the best of what has gone before in other areas.

Nature and Society Forum believes that a national meeting of volunteers (and paid employees) should assist in the ACT's nomination and be well received by those with an interest in our population's biosensitive living in a healthy environment. However, the development of the ACT nomination should not be dependent upon any national meeting; it should proceed at its own pace. There is adequate time to bring forward the suggested national meeting to January or February 2007; indeed a January meeting may well suit many volunteers.

Yours faithfully,

Keith Thomas
Office Manager
On behalf of the NSF Management Committee