



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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ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY INQUIRY INTO MATTERS RELATING TO ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SUBMISSION BY THE COOLEMAN RIDGE PARK CARE GROUP

The Cooleman Ridge Park Care Group (the Group) was established in 1991. It is part of a network of land care volunteer groups across the ACT that works with and is supported by the ACT Government, mainly through that Government's Parks and Conservation Service (PCS).

The Group currently has a mailing list of around 90 volunteers. These range in age and background from students, young professionals, homemakers, family groups, people in full time and part time work and retirees and semi retirees.

Levels of participation vary because of work, study and family commitments. The core of around 15 consistent, ongoing volunteers tends to be, but by no means is entirely, of mature age.

The Group submission refers to the specific **Terms of Reference** of the inquiry.

- **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: ‘**

The Group's work focuses in the rehabilitating and maintaining the Cooleman Ridge Nature reserve. The Ridge runs along the south-western edge of Weston Creek, encompassing Mt Arawang and a series of hills and saddles to its west. The area has a number of walks, including a section of the Centennial Trail.

The Group's work includes:

- Identification and classification of plant species on the ridge;
- Mapping and monitoring plant species of particular interest or concern;
- Removal by weeding or herbicide of invasive weeds and plants;
- Planting and supporting new native growth;
- Monitoring wildlife;
- Monitoring human activity that might impact on plants and wildlife.

This is managed through an ongoing program of activities that includes:

- A monthly half day intensive weeding party focused on a particular issue/issues in a specific area;
- A weekly Friday morning weeding party;
- Individual volunteers choosing a specific patch on the Ridge to look after on an ongoing basis;

- Ad hoc weeding parties convened as needed to deal with specific issues and problems.

The direction of these activities is guided by the Group's committee, which identifies work priorities based on its own observations and research, the assistance and guidance available from the PCS and the availability of resources.

The Group receives some material support from the ACT Government through the PCS, mainly through the provision of plants, tools and associated equipment. The Group receives no other external funds or equipment.

- **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;**

The Group publicises its work through:

- Its website: <http://www.coolmanridge.org.au/organisation.php>; and a facebook page;
- A hard copy monthly newsletter distributed through boxes at entrances to the Ridge and Coolman Court Shopping Centre;
- Corflute signs around the ridge advertising the Group and upcoming activities.

We believe that these initiatives, along with word of mouth, have helped the Group to replace losses – mainly due to age and relocation – and to maintain ongoing levels of membership and participation. Other strategies under consideration that could be helpful include:

- a letter drop in the suburbs adjacent to the Ridge;
- improved signage when we are weeding, informing passers-by of what we are doing and how they can join us.

Any broader campaigns focussing on the general public or on specific communities and demographics are beyond the individual resources of the Group. We are, however, interested in forming links with these communities, both to encourage an interest in environmental volunteering and to ensure the Group's generational continuity.

In March 2021, we joined with the Southern ACT Catchment Group to host a half-day land care event for 14 young people, most of them in their late teens and early twenties. It involved the joint planting of native bushes and grasses around an old dam and was highly successful. Similar /more regular events might encourage young people and other diverse groups to join environmental volunteering. Unfortunately, none of the participants have returned to the Group, so any specific outcomes of the exercise are unknown.

A broader issue is what is actually known, or needs to be known, about attitudes toward and current levels of participation in environmental volunteering by young people, Indigenous Australians and other diverse groups. For example, anecdotal observation might indicate that environmental volunteering is dominated by persons of mature age, but is this a result of negative attitudes or lack of awareness among young people or does it reflect the fact that older people have more leisure time and are less troubled by issues of study and career? The Group believes that these types of issues need to be identified, researched and be taken into account in the development of future volunteer strategies and programs .

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

In addition to the formal channels of information and publicity described above, the Group's committee and its volunteers maintain an ongoing and almost daily dialogue through email. These exchanges focus on consultation and cover information and advice from PCS, activity planning, interesting things observed on the ridge, areas and issues of concern and the overall direction and management of the Group. We believe it provides an effective, robust and open dialogue.

The Group's formal public relations efforts – limited by resources – are described above. Beyond these, our contacts with the public mostly involve people on the Ridge who see out activities. Feedback is always positive.

The Group's key relationship with the ACT Government is through the PCS, responsible for the overall management of the Ridge. The PCS facilitates and supports the Group, including through:

- providing information and advice on issues and priorities for the Ridge that guide the work of the Group, including through quarterly meetings;
- providing material support, including plants, tools and equipment;
- providing direct support, including labour and transport, for some larger Group activities;
- providing or sponsoring training for the Group;
- consulting with the Group on major activities to be undertaken by the PCS on the Ridge, including blackberry eradication and hazard reduction burning;
- responding to specific concerns and issues affecting the Ridge and its infrastructure that are raised by the Group;

Group members have attended training courses run by PCS, including the safe handling of herbicides and identification of grasses. PCS also sponsors first aid courses run by St John's Ambulance Australia.

In the Group's experiences, these courses are well run, informative and relevant. There is, however, a need for more hands-on training focussing on areas such as effective weeding techniques for the invasive plants that are common in the ACT.

While the Group's relationship with frontline PCS rangers is generally good, there are some areas of concern:

- a continual and rapid turnover of front-line rangers, which not only impedes the building and maintaining of relationships, but does not allow the rangers to develop knowledge of their individual areas, which restricts their effectiveness;
- difficulties, when the Group needs to consult with or seek advice from PSC on broader issues of park care policy and direction, in identifying and; contacting relevant areas and officials within an apparently shifting hierarchy
- failures of communication resulting from personnel turnover and organisational flux. This has been a particular issue when the PCS engages contractors for major works on the Ridge and does not communicate this to the Group.
- the issue of particular concern is that the Group has not been effectively communicated to them.

These concerns may be at least partly a result of resource issues within the PSC. The Group believes that a requirement for any new ranger on the Ridge to meet with the CRPCG Committee as soon as practicable after they begin would be a useful step in improving an understanding of the Group's issues and concerns and a start to improving communication.

A more practical area of assistance from the PCS could be organising contractors to spray weed species on a regular basis and more assistance to the Group in planning and implementing weed control in specific sites on the ridge to best encourage native growth.

- **Current policy or regulatory settings that facilitate and/or impede the work and the involvement of volunteers and volunteer organisations in the ACT**

The Group's main issue here is a lack of clarity about the meaning and purpose of some PCS volunteer policies and delays in decision making about clarifying and amending them.

For example, Volunteer Policy Principle 1.2 "Volunteers will not be used for work that would normally require the employment of a paid employee" would appear to be the basis of a prevention on the use of power tools by volunteers. The Group believes, for instance, that the use of whipper-snippers would be very helpful in controlling weeds and has raised this with PCS. It currently seems unlikely that there will be a timely response.

- **Other relevant matters**

There are a few specific issues in relation to the Ridge that the Group believes would contribute to its effectiveness and enhance Canberrans' interest in the area and in volunteering. These include:

- Placing seats at key viewing spots on Mt Arawang and Coleman Trigs to encourage walkers and others to the Ridge ;
- Identification tags attached to some significant trees;
- A weed chart listing with photos of the weed, how it should be dealt with and at what time of the year.

The inquiry may also be interested in former Canberran, Alan Sargent' s, MA thesis for the Oxford School of Geography and the Environment, '*Developing a Reflexive Care-based Settler Connection to Country: Lessons from Australian Conservation Volunteers*'. A copy is attached.

Recommendations

On the basis of the issues raised in this submission, we would like to put forward some specific recommendations for the Inquiry to consider. These are;

1. Consider options for regular joint activities between park care groups and young people and other diverse groups to encourage environmental volunteering.
2. Consider options for the development of better information on attitudes toward and levels of participation in environmental volunteering by young people, Indigenous Australians and other diverse groups, to better inform policies on volunteers.
3. PCS to provide more hands-on training for environmental volunteers specifically on effective weeding techniques for the invasive plants that are common in the ACT.
4. Newly posted PCS rangers to meet with the area park care group committee as soon as practicable after they begin, to ensure an the ranger's understanding of the group's issues and concerns and to establish open communication;
5. PCS to consult with park care groups to agree the planning and implementation of weed control in specific sites to best encourage native growth;
6. PCS to provide clearer and more frequently updated PCS Volunteer Policies.

10 March 2022