



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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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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Dr Marisa Paterson  
Chair,  
The Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity  
Legislative Assembly ACT

Via [LAcommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:LAcommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au)

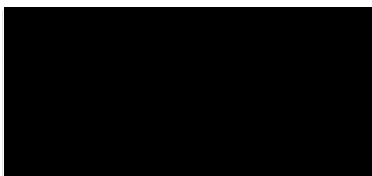
Dear Dr Paterson,

The Australian Association of Bush Regenerators (AABR) welcomes this inquiry into environmental volunteerism.

Bush regeneration practitioners (using 'assisted natural regeneration' techniques) work across the environmental sector bring benefits to land and communities. Many professional bush regenerators work with volunteers and many environmental volunteers across Australia are trained bush regenerators or undertake bush regeneration under supervision. AABR has worked with local and State/Territory run bushcare programs for over three decades and is pleased to be able to engage with you through this enquiry.

We would try to make ourselves available for public hearings and would be pleased to assist the Committee in any way we can.

Kind regards,



Peter Dixon  
President

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF BUSH REGENERATORS (AABR)  
 SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY BY ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING  
 COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY INTO  
 MATTERS RELATING TO ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM IN THE  
 AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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### Introduction and purpose

AABR welcomes the Committee's Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism. Many AABR members are volunteer bush regenerators or coordinators of local or State/Territory Bushcare programs. AABR has a long history in supporting volunteers and volunteer programs. We are interested to learn of the Standing Committee's findings and recommendations on environmental volunteerism.

### About AABR

<https://www.aabr.org.au/about-aabr/joining-aabr/>

AABR was formed in 1986 to support research and education into ecological restoration and to work with the community and government to assist them to effectively manage Australia's native bushland and biodiversity.

Toward this purpose, we have three main strands of activity:

- advocating for the appropriate management of Australian ecosystems by:
  - engaging with communities (including **with** First Nations) and all levels of government to promote the sound ecological management and repair of natural areas
  - promoting and advancing the study and practice of ecological restoration, particularly emphasising the role of 'assisted natural regeneration' (the internationally recognised term for bush regeneration<sup>1</sup>), by qualified people
  - encouraging land managers to develop and implement environmental plans of management and develop and apply ecologically based policies
  - demonstrating publicly the contribution of ecological restoration and bush regeneration to the continuing benefit of natural areas and human welfare.
- Engaging in education and communications to build capacity of land managers to appropriately manage the natural environment of Australia
- Promoting and facilitating appropriate training and skill of all people and organisations engaging in management of the natural environment by:
  - promoting, establishing and maintaining a suitable **standard of practice** by both volunteer and paid practitioners, managers and planners
  - establishing and implementing **an accreditation system for bush regeneration practitioners**<sup>2</sup> and, where needed, practitioners of other ecological restoration activities.
  - developing and promoting **training resources** pertaining to the practice of restoration.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aabr.org.au/learn/what-i-bush-regeneration/> Defined as 'assisted natural regeneration' in the glossary of terms, *National Standards for the practice of ecological restoration in Australia* discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aabr.org.au/about-aabr/accreditation/>

- fostering equitable **working conditions** and **recognition of the skills** and status of ecological restoration practitioners and bush regenerators.

AABR has over 1000 members, including a number in the ACT and many subscribers to our newsletter *AABR News*  
(<https://www.aabr.org.au/learn/publications-presentations/aabr-newsletters/>)

AABR values collaboration, and its ongoing relationships with organisations having mutual purposes.

AABR is a part of the Restoration Decade Alliance, a consortium of 14 of Australia's peak environmental restoration organisations working together to galvanise action by all sectors of society to put their weight behind the **UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration**<sup>3</sup>.

AABR also partners with the Society of Ecological Restoration in Australia, which manages the Standards Reference Group that prepared the ***National Standards for the Practice of Ecological Restoration in Australia***<sup>4</sup>. The rationale for standards – to provide a structured focus for improving the quality of ecological restoration – setting out **six principles** forming standards that can be used in plans and evaluation, and may have useful application in writing and executing contracts, consent and variation conditions and closure criteria. The National Standards are supported by a **glossary of terms** that may be of use to the Committee.

The National Standards relates directly to volunteers

*Where projects involve community volunteers, restoration activity can serve to educate participants and create improved social outcomes including community cohesion and individual welfare.*

AABR believes that volunteering has many social outcomes and also many mental health benefits to those participating.

Many members of AABR working as professional practitioners are engaged in volunteer management as local government employees, parks managers, bushcare managers, Landcare Coordinators, or as private contractors. Many of our members are volunteer bush regenerators, including a number of our Board.

**Term 1 - 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's :**

- **biodiversity conservation and enhancement;**
- **parks and conservation;**
- **environmental protection;**
- **climate resilience;**
- **wildlife protection;**
- **landcare; and**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Prepared by Standards Reference Group, Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia (SERA) in consultation with key partners. Edition 2.1, September 2018. [www.seraustralasia.com](http://www.seraustralasia.com)

- **other areas.**

Ecological restoration is not confined to wilderness or nature reserves, but rather all of the environment issues listed above, and more. As the National Standards put it: *Urban landscapes including public parks can contain important natural and semi-natural areas and provide opportunities for ecological restoration , particularly for improving indigenous habitat connectivity at the urban/natural area interface. Local and state governments, statutory bodies and NGOs—and many thousands of community Bushcare and Coastcare volunteers across Australia—are involved in controlling the causes of degradation and actively applying ecological restoration to these areas, supported by rehabilitation of adjacent lands and waterways.*

AABR considers that volunteers play critical roles in the management and restoration of Australian ecosystems and driving community opinion regarding investment into environmental management. AABR concurs with Submission 018, Friends of Mt Painter:

*The environment benefits from volunteer activity that speeds up the process of improving native biodiversity and habitat structure, and the stability and aesthetic appeal of reserves over and above what would eventuate with only PCS staff involvement.*

AABR applauds the suggestion in Submission 019 National Parks Association ACT that:

*Land stewardship scheme for ACT be adapted for the leasehold nature of the ACT's land tenure and draw on principles of existing programs – and, we add, standards for the practice of ecological restoration.*

Activities for any aspect of the environment sector listed above would require a management plan for good environment management practice. Thus, volunteer programs should be integrated with land/waterway managers' core environmental management programs.

Environmental Management plans are likely to include monitoring to facilitate review and revision, and some may include experimental or research components. To strengthen capacity of volunteers, herein lies the opportunity for 'citizen science' programs. Volunteers can, and should be encouraged to participate in these components. ACT Region Landcare Gateway website provides a good welcome to becoming an environmental volunteer, leading with an invitation to become a citizen scientist: <https://actlandcare.org.au/volunteer/>

AABR supports the proposal by Friends of Grasslands (FOG), Submission 003, that the ACT government look to: *Providing help to landowners and grassy ecosystem managers by way of informal assessments of their sites and a small grant program* (p. 2).

By offering voluntary work that contributes to environmental management of the site, volunteers can obtain greater satisfaction for their time and labour. The report of the Bragg St Park swales project describes how the small groups of volunteers managed their time on site, referring to measures during the Covid pandemic and implicitly curtailing sociability of the group after completion of tasks on site. This project also illustrates community stewardship – volunteers actively carrying out the plan to conserve, restore, rehabilitate, or enhance a local natural area in their own residential neighbourhood.

AABR notes that fulfilling experiences for environmental volunteers is conducive for volunteers to communicate their enjoyment to others, to undertake environmental education and possibly even toward a career in environmental management or bush regeneration.

This is a respectful use of the unpaid labour and commitment of volunteers – see under Reference 4 below.

From experience, AABR is concerned that many governments only support community volunteer programs that undertake low value, unsophisticated, non-strategic works. AABR encourages the ACT Government to integrate volunteers wherever possible into their land management programs, including sophisticated activities.

## **Term 2 - 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**

In principle, AABR of course supports improving environmental volunteerism in these directions – encouraging involvement of ATSI and young people and improving community stewardship (as mentioned above).

AABR notes an observation by Friends of Grasslands (Submission 003) for increased participation in environmental volunteering: *We have seen a recent example of how raising awareness and appreciation of the natural environment can contribute to growing volunteering. During the Covid lockdowns, people visited Mount Painter much more than previously and some roamed more widely than before. Perhaps partly because of this, we have seen volunteer numbers at our monthly work parties increase from an average of seven to 11.*

One ACT AABR member commented to us that many Canberrans use the nature park network. Yet there is little communication in the parks about

- activities that volunteers do
- active bush regeneration sites and the aims of the work
- welcoming enquiries and participation as volunteers.

Signage and pamphlets could be used for **better communication** and to increase community support, awareness, and inspire people to join as volunteers. Volunteer coordinators could be resourced for better communications and encouraging new volunteers.

Considering the limited availability of volunteers' time, this member also suggested the use of **buddies or mentors** for volunteers, both initial **on-site training and on-going education** in aspects of ecological restoration.

For First Nations people, the connection to country is to be honoured, and AABR shares this aim of encouraging greater involvement. We note the contributions made by botanical gardens and the ABC's Gardening Australia to widening interest in this area.

AABR members recognise that many volunteer programs do not attract volunteers from CALD, ATSI, Disabled and other minority communities. It is suggested that the

ACT Government liaise with program managers from other jurisdictions in Australia where there are many good examples of engagement of these groups.

ACT Landcare's website has fine welcoming pages for getting involved, with clickable tiles including for Junior Landcare and Aboriginal landcare for the Ngunawal community and to learn about Ngunawal cultural heritage; and its downloadable pamphlet *Volunteering for the Environment – ACT and Region*. <http://www.landcareact.org.au/get-involved> This is an impressive resource. We would expect ACT Landcare would have some interesting experiences to share.

AABR endorses the proposals in Submission 003 Friends of Grasslands (FOG) for improving environmental volunteering:

- *conversion of large areas of feral grass by using indigenous grass and wild flowers*
- *resource a program of First Nations land management principles and practices in the management of our vegetation.*

FOG observed that there are existing First Nations programs that could be the basis for extension, especially with dedicated staffing and resource inputs.

Programs should try to develop meaningful volunteer activities that are relevant and attractive to all potential volunteers, most probably this would be most effective if it were a collaborative project requiring dedicated staff and funding.

We also note the availability of older people, working part-time or retiring for whom outdoor, social activity in the environment is attractive. Therefore, volunteer programs can be effective inter-generationally, rather than being seen as separate opportunities for different demographics in the community. AABR appreciates ParkCare's welcoming words: *All levels of fitness can be catered for with activities like weeding, tree planting and morning tea to get you moving, chatting and having fun in the great outdoors.*

Volunteer programs can facilitate participation by considering needs of volunteers to access and return home safely, and conditions on site – including transport access to sites, and supervisors can assist with advice about public transport access and car-pooling. Aspects of volunteer involvement are addressed in the national standards – see Term 4 below.

Volunteer programs, and their supervisors, should aim to be inclusive and community building – introducing volunteers to each other, and being sensitive to range of motivations and potential for development among volunteers on a program. Participating as a volunteer can be a pathway into a professional career and it is also a pathway for environmental professionals to give back to the community. AABR supervised fieldwork is an essential component, with formal education, for recognition as an AABR-accredited Bush Regenerator. On education, see below at the end of Term 3.

### **Term 3 - managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public;**

AABR considers that program managers and volunteer coordinators need to be supported with their organisations. We understand that ACT Parks and Conservation Service has a Volunteer Coordinator and Rangers who meet with groups about work on the site management plans. AABR believes that volunteers should be

meaningfully involved in the development and decision making of their support programs.

AABR is pleased that grants are available to community groups for environmental management on many categories of land. Comments from some practitioners have raised concerns that different ACT agencies have quite different contractual requirements for similar grant projects (e.g. insurance cover). This technical aspect creates avoidable burdens for project supervisors, and it seems contract design could be streamlined and simplified, using standard clauses, with considerable benefit. It's been suggested too that this issue of contract streamlining could benefit grants in sectors other than environment where project supervisors may also engage other volunteers.

Some groups we note are concerned that Rangers have responsibility for too many reserves, and this detracts from developing in-depth knowledge and understanding of the reserves and the management plans and building effective relationships with their volunteers. We suggest that the Standing Committee obtain input to this inquiry from the Parks and Conservation Service and from Rangers themselves to identify optimum staffing levels.

AABR encourages the Standing Committee to consider funding, increases for programs, grants, and evident need for animal welfare and biodiversity reported by ACT Wildlife in its Submission. AABR applauds subsidies to meet the cost of educational fees. We also note that, so far, that submissions have not been published from educational organisations (aside from NGOs like FOG and ourselves).

AABR is aware that environmental volunteers may face a challenge to develop their landcaring knowledge and skills, particularly on a structured pathway.

AABR supports the recommendations by Friends of Mt Painter, Submission 018, for greater investment in land-caring knowledge, in effect bush regeneration ('assisted natural regeneration').

One AABR member described the educational offerings to environmental volunteers. We understand that ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) is aiming this year to run four courses of each of Chemcert, First Aid, weed and grass ID, and bush restoration – this course a new offering. Groups expressed particular interest in a course demonstrating and documenting the non-herbicidal control of weed species.

AABR would encourage that the bush restoration course be aligned to the competencies in the Nationally recognised Conservation and Ecosystem Management course.

AABR suggests that the Standing Committee may be able to foster relationships between the Parks and Conservation Service and ACT schools – to encourage fieldwork and visits, for education on ecology while being physically active, and to help create materials that provide understanding and experience to school students about bush regeneration while also meeting curricula needs.

**Term 4 – current policy or regulatory settings that facilitate and/or impede the work and the involvement of volunteers and volunteer organisations in the ACT**



AABR supports the proposal from Friends of Grasslands (FOG), Submission 003, for the long term protection of conservation sites to underpin the commitment of environmental volunteers and interest of the local community. To achieve this outcome, AABR would expect some legal protection of the land, such as a conservation covenant.

AABR appreciates that Volunteer ACT was a contributor to *The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement and Self-Assessment Tool* (2015):

<https://www.volunteering.com.au/national-standards-for-volunteer-involvement/>

Assistance is offered in preparing and assisting 'volunteer involving organisations' across eight standards.

ACT Region Landcare website via Have an Eco Adventure links directly into Volunteering ACT's website: <https://actlandcare.org.au/volunteer/have-an-eco-adventure/>

Guidelines and manuals for bushcare and environmental volunteer programs outline specific requirements and mutual obligations. Typically, they have been produced by many site managers, and no doubt in the ACT. For example, local councils in NSW and Queensland typically produce guidelines for bushcare programs with volunteers, and the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority in NSW has published its guidelines. Their principles for good practice include points already emphasised here and in AABR's experience to be of mutual benefit to the land manager and volunteers alike:

- meaningful work to be offered within the physical capacity of the individual
- beneficial to the volunteer
- integration of volunteers with paid practitioners, especially bush regenerators – facilitating mentoring/ buddying for education and developing interest
- expect to work in a safe and healthy environment, and safe transport to and from the site.