

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
CONSERVATION, HERITAGE
AND ENVIRONMENT**

REPORT NO. 3

**SPACE TRACKING STATIONS
IN NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK**

OCTOBER 1990

Committee membership:

Dr H Kinloch (Presiding member)⁽¹⁾

Mr B Collaery^{(2) (3)}

Mrs E Grassby⁽⁴⁾

Mr G Humphries⁽³⁾

Ms C Maher⁽³⁾

Mr M Moore^{(3) (5)}

Mrs R Nolan⁽⁶⁾

Mr W Stefaniak⁽¹⁾

Mr B Wood⁽⁷⁾

Secretary:

Mr R Owens

⁽¹⁾ Appointed 14 December 1989. ⁽²⁾ Appointed 16 November 1989. ⁽³⁾ Discharged from attendance 14 December 1989.
⁽⁴⁾ Appointed 28 March 1990. ⁽⁵⁾ Reappointed 28 March 1990. ⁽⁶⁾ Appointed 9 August 1990.
⁽⁷⁾ Discharged from attendance 28 March 1990

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The Standing Committee

The committee was established by the Legislative Assembly on 25 May 1989 under the following resolution of appointment, as amended on 14 November 1989; 14 December 1989; 27 March 1990; and 8 August 1990:

That:

- (1) A standing committee on Conservation, Heritage and the Environment be appointed to inquire into and report on –
 - (a) matters referred to it by the Assembly; and
 - (b) other matters considered by the committee to be matters of concern to the community.
- (2) The committee shall consist of 5 members.
- (3) A majority of members constitutes a quorum of the committee.
- (4) The committee be provided with necessary staff, facilities and resources. ⁽¹⁾

Term of reference

On 23 November 1989 the Assembly agreed to the following resolution, referring the question of the two disused tracking stations to the committee for inquiry and report:

That the following matter be referred to the Standing Committee on Conservation, Heritage and Environment for inquiry and report –

The future use of the tracking stations in Namadgi National Park. ⁽²⁾

¹ MoP No. 4, 25 May 1989; MoP No. 32, 14 November 1989; MoP No. 40, 14 December 1989; MoP No. 50, 27 March 1990; MoP No. 66, 8 August 1990.

² MoP No. 37, 23 November 1989

1. Historical background

1.1 Both the Orroral Valley and the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations were part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) space exploration program. The Orroral Valley Tracking Station was part of a satellite tracking program. The first satellite tracked by this station was 'Pegsat', a weather information satellite; the station was also involved in the Apollo 3 mission. The Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station was part of the Deep Space Network (DSN); and was involved in the Mercury, Gemini, Ranger and Surveyor projects. The station itself was identified as DSS 44.

1.2 More importantly, as part of the DSN the Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station played an integral part in the United States' Apollo Moon program. When astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon in July 1969 Honeysuckle Creek was the ground receiving station, and Armstrong's famous words 'That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind', were broadcast to the world via this station.

1.3 With the wind down of the US space exploration program in the early 1980's, the increasing significance of the US space shuttle program and changes in space communication techniques, decisions were made in the US to decommission both stations.

1.4 The Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station was closed down and handed over to the then Commonwealth Department of Territories in December 1984.

1.5 The Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station was closed down and handed over to the same Commonwealth Department in March 1985.

1.6 The 210 foot antenna and some other equipment from the Honeysuckle Creek station were transferred to the Space Tracking Station at Tidbinbilla. The main tracking antenna and some other equipment from the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station were transferred to the University of Tasmania in Hobart.

2. Historical significance

2.1 The committee is aware of the historical significance both space tracking stations played in the exploration of space, and the prominent role played by Australians, particularly the scientists and technicians who worked at both stations.

2.2 For these reasons the committee believes it is important that such a major Australian contribution to space exploration should not go unremembered or unrecorded. Appropriate steps should be taken to document fully, and record the history of, both sites.

2.3 In evidence before the committee the Senior Australian Representative of NASA informed the committee of the wealth of historical material, written and photographic, held in NASA's archives which could, on request, be made available for the purposes of historical documentation.

2.4 The committee is also concerned that the role of the Australian Tracking Stations in the Apollo Project be properly acknowledged by NASA at major space centres in the USA, and believes the Government should request NASA to make that acknowledgement.

2.5 The committee, therefore, recommends:

- . That the ACT Heritage Committee, in consultation with the National Aeronautics Space Administration, fully document the sites, and history, of the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station and the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station.**
- . That suitable plaques be placed at the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations to commemorate Australia's involvement in space exploration.**
- . That the Government ask the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to recognise and acknowledge the role played by the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station in the Apollo Moon Project at such sites as Cape Kennedy and the Aeronautics and Space Museum, Washington, DC.**

3. Publicity

3.1 The committee is concerned that publicly available displayed information concerning both space tracking stations be accessible to interested members of the public.

3.2 The committee also acknowledges that both sites are out of the way, not being on the major tourist drives around the ACT, and that publicly displayed information at the sites would be subject to serious threats of vandalism.

3.3 The Tidbinbilla Space Tracking Station, however, is on a major tourist drive, is an operational space tracking station and does have a constantly updated public display area. This tracking station is also well frequented by visitors.

3.4 The committee considers it to be a suitable place at which to display information concerning the roles played by the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration.

3.5 As both tracking station sites are located within the Namadgi National Park the committee believes it would also be appropriate for the Namadgi Visitors Centre to publicly display information on the role and history of both tracking stations. Information should also be available at other appropriate tourist information centres.

3.6 The committee recommends:

- **That, in consultation with the managers of the Tidbinbilla Space Tracking Station, the public display at the Tidbinbilla Space Tracking Station include information on the involvement of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration.**
- **That the Namadgi Visitors Centre publicly display information on the history and role of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration.**
- **That tourist information on the history and role of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration be made available at appropriate tourist information centres.**

4. Private use of the sites

4.1 The committee received a large number of submissions seeking, or suggesting, some private use of the tracking station sites.

4.2 The committee has given these submissions serious consideration, and has discussed the issues raised in some depth with officers of the Department of Urban Services and the Rangers responsible for the management of Namadgi National Park.

4.3 Three major issues confronted the committee:

- . physical infrastructure at the sites;
- . the provisions of the *Nature Conservation Act 1980*; and
- . the provisions of the Namadgi Policy Plan.

Physical infrastructure

4.4 Both tracking stations were constructed independently of the Territory's physical reticulation infrastructure. As a result neither station was connected to the ACT electricity grid nor connected to the ACT water and sewerage network.

4.5 Electricity was provided on site by means of diesel powered generators, and the electrical reticulation system conformed to United States requirements as all of the electrical equipment used at the stations was of United States origin.

4.6 Advice given to the committee by officers of the Department of Urban Services suggests that to provide electrical power from the ACT electricity grid to the tracking stations sites would be in the order of \$1 million for each site.

4.7 Water supplies for each site were pumped from the local creeks and each station had a minor sewerage treatment facility. The committee was also informed by officers from the Department of Urban Services that, because of prolonged disuse and the severity of winter frosts, none of the systems are operable or capable of repair.

4.8 The committee is satisfied that it is impracticable to provide, at a viable economic cost, acceptable reticulation services to either of the sites.

Nature Conservation Act

4.9 Under its present provisions the *Nature Conservation Act 1980* does not permit the issuing of leases or licences in areas that have been gazetted under the Act. The gazettal of Namadgi National Park appeared in Commonwealth Gazette No. S394, dated 3 October 1984.

4.10 Without amending the Act, therefore, it is not possible to alienate, from the public domain, part of the national park by the granting of a lease or licence; and the committee is of the opinion that the Act should not be amended.

Namadgi Policy Plan

4.11 The Namadgi Policy Plan comprises general and specific policies. The general policies are broadly based and define the basic planning and management objectives within the Park and the adjacent areas of the Cotter and Gudgenby catchments.³ Specific policies relate to the activities designated within particular parts of the planning area.

4.12 The Plan, at page 14, proposes a list of non-permissible activities for the Park as follows:

- . prospecting and mining
- . off-road use of vehicles
- . commercial grazing
- . swimming and other body contact water based recreation
- . use of chemicals
- . hunting and shooting
- . residential accommodation

4.13 The Plan, at pages 19 and 24, makes the following specific reference to the Orroral Valley and to the tracking station sites in the National Park:

Orroral Valley Existing ecological and cultural values to be maintained and protected for public appreciation, research and education. To be used for low-level bushland recreation with provision for public access for bushwalking, orienteering, camping, public appreciation, research and education. (p. 19)

Honeysuckle Creek and Orroral Valley Tracking Stations Sites and building to be used for park purposes associated with public appreciation of Namadgi National Park including possible overnight accommodation and minor management use, compatible with related nature conservation areas. (p. 24)

4.14 Further, the certified draft National Capital Plan, at paragraph 8.6.4., has the following special requirement:

Development within the Namadgi National Park and adjacent areas in the Gudgenby and Cotter catchments shall be in accordance with the General and Specific Policies of the Namadgi Policy Plan, published by the NCDC in June 1986 and incorporated as part of the National Capital Plan.

4.15 In view of this evidence the committee is not able to recommend that the two disused tracking station sites be made available for private purposes. The committee is also of the view that there should not be any alienation of any part of a public or national park for private use.

4.16 Therefore the committee recommends:

- . **That the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations not be made available for private development.**

³ See Namadgi Policy Plan, chapter 4

5. Public or Government use of the sites

5.1 On reaching the decision not to recommend private development the committee turned its attention to what public uses the Government could make of the two tracking station sites, either for its own purposes or for public purposes.

5.2 In assessing the possible outcomes of these options the committee was mindful of the Government's environmental policy, which states, at paragraph 2.20:

Nature Conservation areas such as National Parks can be very sensitive to the impacts of tourist developments. To protect these areas substantial tourist facilities will be excluded and **only minor facilities** that are sympathetic to the objective of nature conservation will be allowed. Any proposed facilities will be subject to the environmental impact process to ensure that there will be no detrimental effects on the environment. (emphasis added)

5.3 The committee inspected both sites on two separate occasions and was dismayed at the level of vandalism at such isolated sites.

5.4 The buildings are in a state of decline and disrepair, and are substantially gutted and vandalised.

5.5 In its submission the Government stated that the buildings, in their present state, are an unacceptable public safety hazard and a potential source of liability and litigation for the Government.

5.6 It appears that building rehabilitation is not an economical viability for the following important considerations:

- . advanced state of disrepair;
- . non-Australian electrical system; and
- . non-operable water and sewerage reticulation systems.

5.7 From evidence given before, and collected by, the committee it is not feasible, in the opinion of the committee, to turn the current buildings into useful public or governmental assets, without a large financial input.

5.8 Therefore the committee recommends:

- . **That the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations be demolished in accordance with the recommendations contained in chapter 8.**

5.9 The committee is of the view that this work would be most economically carried out through a process of tendering.

6. Environmental issues

6.1 In recommending the demolition of the tracking stations the committee was also aware of the possible presence of environmentally dangerous materials at both sites. There is a significant possibility of asbestos at both sites; at Orroral Valley, and possibly at Honeysuckle Creek, the committee was concerned at the presence of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs); at Orroral Valley, when the committee visited the site, there was a cylinder of Halon gas; at both sites there were oil spillages; the one at Honeysuckle Creek has the potential to soil the creek.

6.2 The committee is concerned about the leaching of PCBs and oils into the soil at both tracking station sites; and strongly believes that, as part of the rehabilitation of both sites (see chapter 7), corrective measures be taken to render damaged soil sites environmentally safe.

6.3 The committee is firmly of the opinion that the removal of all other environmentally hazardous material should be completed during the demolition of buildings and physical infrastructure at the sites.

6.4 Therefore, the committee recommends:

- . That all environmentally hazardous material be removed from the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Tracking stations.**

7. Site rehabilitation

7.1 In concert with the recommendations contained in chapters 6 and 8, the committee wishes to ensure that both tracking station sites are properly rehabilitated with the National Park.

7.2 As part of the rehabilitation of the tracking station sites, measures must be taken to render soil sites, damaged by the leaching of PCBs and oil, environmentally safe. (see para 6.2)

7.3 The actual work of demolition will necessarily cause floral damage to the sites, therefore, the calling of tenders must include a requirement not only for site rehabilitation, but also for revegetation.

7.4 The committee recommends:

- . That, following demolition, the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations be rehabilitated and revegetated.**

8. Future of the sites

8.1 Throughout this inquiry the committee has been aware of the historical importance of both tracking station sites; and that that importance was of both national and international significance. As was stated earlier (see paragraph 1.2) Honeysuckle Creek was the operational downlink when foot was first placed on the moon.

8.2 Because of this importance the committee was concerned that the sites should be available, in some easily recognised form, to future generations, and that the placing of plaques at the sites (see paragraph 2.5) would not, of itself, achieve this end.

8.3 After some deliberation the committee considered the possibility of turning the sites of the tracking stations into what might be called 'archaeological' sites without intruding on the integrity of the National Park setting.

8.4 Such a rendering of the sites would show quite visibly the lay out of the stations and the location of the antennae; would be much easier to interpret; and would preserve their history in a substantially permanent form.

8.5 The committee considers that, in demolishing the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station, the walls could be left standing to a limited height above the ground level. This would enhance the historical importance of the tracking station site without detracting from the integrity of the National Park.

8.6 The committee recommends, therefore:

- **That, wherever possible and in consultation with the ACT Heritage Committee, the walls of the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station be left standing to a height of twenty centimetres above the ground level, for historical purposes.**

8.7 Because of the special significance of the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station to the Apollo Moon program, the committee is concerned to see something more substantial in terms of an 'archaeological' site.

8.8 The committee, therefore, gave some consideration to the possibility of part of the main building at Honeysuckle Creek being left standing as a shell devoid of internal structures; and thus a more prominent 'archaeological' remain.

8.9 The committee is aware, however, that there would be engineering and structural problems to be addressed. The feasibility of leaving part of the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station standing as a shell should be investigated by the Department of Urban Services; and no action should be taken to demolish the tracking station buildings until that feasibility study has been completed and referred back to this committee for further consideration.

8.10 The committee, therefore, recommends:

- **That the Department of Urban Service investigate, and report back to this committee on, the possibility of leaving a part of the main building at the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station standing as a shell devoid of internal structures, for historical purposes; and that, wherever possible and in consultation with the ACT Heritage Committee, walls at the station be left standing to a height of twenty centimetres above the ground level, again for historical purposes.**

- . **That no demolition work proceed at the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station until the Department of Urban Services has reported back to this committee, as provided for in the preceding resolution, and the committee has considered that report and made further recommendations concerning it.**

9 Commonwealth financial assistance

9.1 In evidence given before the committee, the Senior Australian Representative of NASA informed the committee that, when a decision was made to decommission and evacuate both the space tracking stations, NASA made an offer to the Commonwealth Government to demolish the buildings and rehabilitate the sites. According to the NASA representative the Commonwealth declined this offer.

9.2 It is the committee's view that the state of decline in, and the destructive levels of vandalism to, the buildings are due in major part to the inactivity of the Commonwealth Government during the four and a half years the sites were under its direct control.

9.3 It is also this committee's view that the Commonwealth, having chosen not to accept the offer from NASA to demolish the buildings and having done little or nothing to preserve them, should be called on to bear the cost of its own inaction.

9.4 Therefore, the committee recommends:

- . That the Commonwealth Government be asked to fund the cost of the demolition of the buildings at the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations.**

(Hector Kinloch)
Chairman
October 1990

Recommendations

1. That the ACT Heritage Committee, in consultation with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, fully document the sites, and history, of the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station and the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station.

(Paragraph 2.5)

2. That suitable plaques be placed at the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations to commemorate Australia's involvement in space exploration.

(Paragraph 2.5)

3. That the Government ask the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to recognise and acknowledge the role played by the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station in the Apollo Moon Project at such sites as Cape Kennedy and the Aeronautics and Space Museum, Washington, DC.

(Paragraph 2.5)

4. That, in consultation with the managers of the Tidbinbilla Space Tracking Station, the public display at the Tidbinbilla Space Tracking Station include information on the involvement of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration.

(Paragraph 3.5)

5. That the Namadgi Visitors Centre publicly display information on the history and role of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration.

(Paragraph 3.5)

6. That tourist information on the history and role of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations in space exploration be made available at appropriate tourist information centres.

(Paragraph 3.5)

7. That the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations not be made available for private development.

(Paragraph 4.16)

8. That the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations be demolished in accordance with the recommendations contained in chapter 8.

(Paragraph 5.8)

9. That all environmentally hazardous material be removed from the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations .

(Paragraph 6.4)

10. That, following demolition, the sites of the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations be rehabilitated and revegetated.

(Paragraph 7.4)

11. That, wherever possible and in consultation with the ACT Heritage Committee, the walls at the Orroral Valley Space Tracking Station be left standing to a height of twenty centimetres above the ground level, for historical purposes.

(Paragraph 8.6)

12. That the Department of Urban Service investigate, and report back to this committee on, the possibility of leaving a part of the main building at the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station standing as a shell devoid of internal structures, for historical purposes; and that, wherever possible and in consultation with the ACT Heritage Committee, walls at the station be left standing to a height of twenty centimetres above the ground level, again for historical purposes.

(Paragraph 8.10)

13. That no demolition work proceed at the Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Station until the Department of Urban Services has reported back to this committee, as provided for in the preceding recommendation, and the committee has considered that report and made further recommendations concerning it.

(Paragraph 8.10)

14. That the Commonwealth Government be asked to fund the cost of the demolition of the buildings at the Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek Space Tracking Stations.

(Paragraph 9.4)

LIST OF WITNESSES**Formal witnesses**

Mr P Davies	Parks and Conservation Division Department of Urban Services
Mr R Colonna	Senior Australian Representative National Aeronautics Space Administration

Informal briefings

Ms C Parson	Parks and Conservation Division Department of Urban Services
Mr P Davies	Parks and Conservation Division Department of Urban Services

APPENDIX 2**LIST OF SUBMISSIONS**

Mr G Abbott
ACT Government
ACT Heritage Committee
ACT Orienteering Association
Mr C Bloomfield
Mr E B Britten
Buddhist Society of the ACT
Conservation Council of the South-East Region and Canberra
Mr K Frawley
Mr J Haiblen
Ms C Kneen
Ms M MacKay
Mr P W Moore, Moorbrand Pty Ltd
Mount Stromlo and Siding Springs Observatory
National Capital Planning Authority
National Parks Association of the ACT
National Trust of Australia (ACT)
Capt T Nurio
Mr R L Simpson
Department of Transport and Communications (Commonwealth)
United States of America – Embassy
Mr T Walsh and Mr N Esau