



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

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### **SACTCG submission into ACT Environmental Volunteerism**

Southern ACT Catchment Group (SACTCG) is an umbrella not-for-profit organisation that supports 28 community member groups and rural landholders in the Southern ACT area and works across all land tenures. SACTCG was incorporated in 2002 to plan catchment wide actions and support community environmental volunteers and projects. It has grown strong long lasting relationships with the local volunteers, community groups and government partners and actively engages the community in environmental volunteering and education.

SACTCG welcomes the opportunity to make this submission and has collaborated with its members in its development, particularly volunteers working on Parks and Conservation and Transport and City Services land tenures. SACTCG also supports all the recommendations made by its peak body, Landcare ACT.

SACTCG would also like to refer the Standing Committee to previous contributions it has made in other recent relevant submissions and reports including: the Office of the Commissioner of Sustainability and the Environment recent report 'ACT Environmental Volunteers - Showcasing volunteer environment work', and the Nature in the City Inquiry.

### **Transparency and communications regarding government activities and decision that affect volunteers**

The ParkCare movement in the ACT is over 30 years old, initiated as a partnership between government and the community and focused on encouraging long term stewardship of public places. The recent expansion of the ParkCare program sought to broaden the demographic of community engaged in volunteering. Parkcare as a longstanding program became Parkcare Patch and other programs under the Parkcare banner now caters for irregular and often 'one-off' volunteering.

Our members have been concerned that the redesign of this program was not undertaken in consultation with the Parkcare groups. The appropriation of the program and name to badge the broader program of volunteer engagement has signaled a departure from the strong communication with and regard for the stewards without whom the successful program would not have formed and grown. It has also diluted the value of the Parkcare groups in initiating community land management. Resources to support the core Parkcare groups such as training have also now been spread thinner across all aspects of the program.

Public consultation about ACT environmental strategies and plans are at times found by community groups and volunteers to be brief and superficial and cease to move further into meaningful engagement or collaboration. A more genuine approach in consultations will assist better public policy development and assist results to be well communicated to the public.

Communication with the new volunteer management in PCS has showed a marked improvement in recent years, but remains heavily dependent on the individual employee in public facing roles. Ongoing efforts to build the relationship between the land manager and volunteers is required to strengthen the work of the volunteers and reach the goals of both the groups and land managers.

Across all government land, volunteers often state that with issues related to on-ground activities is difficult to know who to contact and when within ACT Government. Receiving a timely response is ad hoc and can be inconsistent across employees. SACTCG, as a cross tenure organisation, finds that policy and advice across different departments and sections within departments varies, and there is



often a siloing of information. In particular there is inconsistency in relation to volunteer management and policy, and permissions for on-ground activities across agencies. Inconsistent advice hinders volunteer engagement as well as progress in project delivery which is often imperative for grant funded volunteer projects which have tight reporting timelines.

An example given by a member working on TCCS land is when a dead tree was due to be felled, and an undertaking was given by the Operations leader at the time to leave the main trunk on site to remain as habitat/ground cover. The tree was taken down 6 months later and completely removed as the message had not been passed on to the tree removal team.

In addition, when working in an area with multiple interests (e.g. conservation and heritage) approvals can take considerably longer than the project timeline permits, placing pressure on related volunteer work. For example SACTCG volunteers have found it frustrating to work to improve areas of Aboriginal Heritage importance as navigating heritage approval processes has proved too complicated, over bureaucratic and time consuming to proceed. This has left these important areas unprotected and neglected.

Other examples where communications could be improved include:

- Informing groups when contractor and other activities are planned near volunteer managed sites
- Notification of change of rangers in reserves with whom groups have invested time and resources in to develop functional working relationships.
- Changes in plans for reserves.
- The lack of single site/reserve operational plans for all to work from.

A model of better communication between community and government has started to be trialed in bushfire recovery projects in Namadgi National Park. Here SACTCG were able to negotiate co-location of a project officer in the Namadgi National Park office and the SACTCG office to coordinate community engagement events. Open communication between the SACTCG Executive and the park manager have started to build a more functional working relationship and staff of both organisations are seeing the benefits of working closer together. The outcome of this partnered arrangement was the delivery of multiple community engagement events and a \$250K project to help the reserve recover, a reduction in the demand on NNP ranger staff in managing volunteer projects and improved communications between the agency and the community group.

Recommendations:

- Ensure early and genuine collaboration with volunteers and community groups about decisions that affect their activities and the way their programs are managed.
- Develop cross-government communication guidelines which set out expected behaviors and processes for engaging with non-government partners, including volunteers and staff for community organisations.
- Improve clarity and communication with the volunteers regarding current activities, plans on volunteer managed land and consistent advice regarding approvals.
- Improve processes and communication for community groups working in and around heritage sites that facilitate active community involvement.



### **Increase the partnership approach between ACT Government and community Landcare**

SACTCG has strong partnership with the NRM unit and the Volunteer and Visitor Experience in EPSDD and with the Urban Parks and Places Volunteering in TCCS. However a higher level partnership, would greatly assist project implementation and volunteer engagement.

Whilst SACTCG has relationships with some senior ranger staff this remains ad hoc and personality dependant. A partnership with both higher level and individual reserve management in the Parks Service will facilitate a consistent working relationship across reserves. Devolving community engagement programs to the Catchment Groups will assist delivery of programs driven from the community with a greater opportunity for success than from within government. For example, citizen science programs such as Bioblitz coordinated from SACTCG would facilitate broader community interest and buy-in for the long term.

At an on-ground level Parkcarers often state they want a partnership with the land managers rather than be 'managed'. This culture change within ACT Government has occurred since the legislation change to redefine volunteers as workers and is marked by a 'top down' approach. Many have not seen or collaborated in reserve level operational plans (beyond the overarching Canberra Nature Park Management plan) and would like to coordinate their activities with the rangers to ensure all are working towards the same conservation goals effectively.

Recommendation:

- ACT Parks to develop partnerships with Catchment Groups to streamline volunteer management and support
- Improve the devolution of funding for community engagement programs and citizen science programs to community groups
- Undertake reserve level annual planning with volunteer groups to guide community-government prioritizations
- Develop a partnership approach to working with long-standing volunteer groups

### **Appropriate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations**

SACTCG is grateful for the 2021-2024 funding to support volunteers and community engagement. This consistency over four years will assist long term program development and support for volunteers. Security of funding beyond this grant will reduce the vulnerability of these organisations to political cycles and build on the long term partnerships with the community and Government agencies.

Volunteerism in the urban landscape has shown a strong spike in interest in recent years. At a neighborhood level, communities increasingly wish to improve natural areas for both amenity and plant and animal biodiversity in the living environment. Programs that engage community in on ground environmental activities (such as plantings) have shown high levels of engagement. However, funding to support ongoing care of these environments by local communities is limited. Base funding to Catchment Groups in 2019-2020 by TCCS saw a sharp increase in stewardship groups with ongoing support offered for set-up and recruitment to groups, opportunities for training, promotion and project based activities. An example of this was the establishment of the Holder Wetland volunteer group initiated by SACTCG. This group has continued to gain local membership, deliver projects and provide information and training through SACTCG resourcing. As a SACTCG member group this group can apply for competitive grants through SACTCG's NFP, charity and DGR



status. SACTCG continues to support the formation of new member groups and can target local parks that require ongoing care to drum up community engagement as required (eg. SACTCG is gathering community interest at the native grassland area at Isabella Pond to improve its ongoing maintenance and condition). While TCCS has a volunteer support program the scope of support required is beyond what this team can provide. A partnership model with SACTCG has proven beneficial for both community and Government.

The ParkCare program provides a Parkcare ranger specifically charged with supporting volunteer activities of PCS land. This position is invaluable to support community priorities, however is limited in support it can provide the large number of groups. Members note that more clarity regarding the responsibilities of this position is needed as the role also undertakes other duties that aren't Parkcare related. A long awaited second ranger position has now been advertised and is welcomed by the Parkcare community.

Recommendations:

- Provide certainty in ongoing stable funding for Catchment Groups to support environmental volunteer groups and community engagement. This is as this is key to planning for future success, staff retention and long term programs.
- Provide identified Transport and City Services ongoing funding for funding for Catchment groups to support the growth and functioning of neighborhood level care groups in urban open space.
- Ensure the recently advertised second ParkCare ranger is permanent to carry on strong relationships that will be built with Parkcare groups.

### **Increased consistency of volunteer support and biodiversity management across ACT Government tenures**

The Parkcare program is 30 years old whilst the volunteer support program on urban open space is relatively new. The volunteer management program in TCCS responds to groups wanting to form from community interest, however with the rapidly growing interest in urban parks the TCCS team can only facilitate some aspects of what volunteer groups require to function effectively and maintain volunteer numbers. This is an example of where we have seen that a strong relationship with the Catchment Group is essential for ACT Government to continue to build this community interest on this land tenure. The Catchment Group supports volunteer recruitment, work planning, information brokerage, tools, promotion and a range of other member services. Specific funding from TCCS will ensure these services are maintained for the community into the future.

As land tenures require different levels of protection for different assets, it can be difficult for volunteers caring for a site to work on land manager priorities. For example groups on TCCS land have interests in biodiversity conservation whilst the land manager prioritizes maintenance of amenity. This can lead to issues such as mowers mowing over native seedlings planted by volunteers with approval of a different part of TCCS. A broader appreciation by TCCS staff of conservation values on TCCS land will assist better prioritization and contract management.

Different ACT Government agencies or sections provide volunteer training opportunities for volunteers working on one land tenure but not another, driven by land manager priorities. Catering volunteer training in response to volunteer needs will better assist the level of volunteer skills across the ACT. The ACT Catchment Groups have been supporting volunteers across all tenures to build



their capabilities and capacity for over 20 years. Devolution of training programs to the Catchment Groups can streamline capacity building services, provide equity for volunteers and improve environmental outcomes, as well as knowledge-sharing between volunteers. For example SACTCG ran a series of small scale solutions for erosion workshops for all its members (ie. those working on rural, urban, PCS, TCCS and other tenures). This has skilled up a diverse range of volunteers who have implemented the approach across different sites in the ACT.

Recommendations:

- Improve consistency in volunteer management policy across government agencies
- TCCS and EPSDD to co-fund capacity building and training opportunities to be delivered by community groups

### **Better recognition of volunteer contributions**

Volunteer labour, knowledge provision and citizen science, contribute millions of dollars per year to the management of public land in the ACT. In ACT Government consultations volunteers and community groups provide time and knowledge to assist the government in their decision making with no compensation and often little acknowledgment. ACT Government communications also provide a strong focus on what Government offers the community and little on the benefits the government receives from its very engaged and informed community.

Further acknowledgment and recognition of the time, knowledge and resources the community contribute is imperative to maintain motivation and interest by volunteers working on public land. This data should also be seen as community owned rather than Government owned. This will highlight the efficacy and strength of community managed data in particular in the areas of citizen science.

Recommendation:

- Ensure there is clear and specific acknowledgment and public reporting of voluntary contributions to ACT Government programs, plans and strategies
- ACT Government publications to provide better recognition of volunteer contributions to ACT Government programs.

### **Improved processes for using volunteer knowledge, skills and information**

In Southern ACT many Parkcarers and Landcarers hold very long-term knowledge and intimate understanding of the ecosystems they steward, with many working on reserves for over 20 years. With rapid 'ranger churn' they find it frustrating to 'reinitiate' new rangers and are required to educate on the history, biodiversity and values of their reserve. Volunteers also spend significant time developing relationships with rangers and these relationships are lost when rangers are moved through to new positions.

Data and information provided by volunteers in the ACT is invaluable to management decisions and is used regularly by ACT Government to guide budget bids and priority setting. Data collected by volunteers, including their hours, is not accessible nor is its use communicated to volunteers themselves. This limits the usefulness of the data for volunteers and trust in partnership with Government.



At an on-ground level members across all tenures are currently prohibited from using powered tools such as whipper snippers and lawn mowers. Whilst SACTCG recognizes training is imperative to achieve OH&S requirements, we support the development of policy to assist volunteers managing conservation area with powered tools to assist better biodiversity management.

Recommendations:

- Develop processes to better manage the impacts of ranger turnover and knowledge exchange between volunteers, community organisations and ACT Government staff
- Improve access for volunteers providing data to ACT Government
- Develop and implement a policy for volunteers working with power tools across ACT Government tenures

### **Ngunawal and youth Landcare**

SACTCG has a strong interest in better engaging local Aboriginal people in both sharing knowledge with volunteers and undertaking on-ground work. Member groups consistently ask to see the delivery of walks and talks to better understand the culture of the areas they volunteer on in order to protect and better manage them. SACTCG has sought to gain funding in Ngunawal interpretation and engagement, but this is limited. ACT Heritage grant for two years running has failed to fund significant Aboriginal Heritage on-ground projects. SACTCG has applied twice to work with PCS, the Parkcare group and archeologist to develop a management plan for a series of scar trees on Isaacs ridge and has not been successful.

ACT historic places in implementing the Heritage ACT have prohibitive processes in place that inhibit volunteer conservation groups seeking to protect historical places.

SACTCG would also like to see funding directed towards the development of a community based, Youth Landcare program, to facilitate the broadening of environmental volunteering into the schools and encourage volunteering youth.

Recommendations:

- Allocate ACT Heritage funding to projects that facilitate Aboriginal people and the community to work together to protect Aboriginal Heritage places with environmental conservation values
- Improve and streamline processes for environmental volunteers and community groups to work on-ground to protect Heritage places with the local Aboriginal communities.
- Resource a community driven Youth Landcare Program

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