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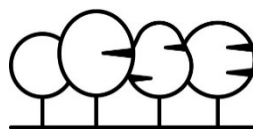
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 5

Date Authorised for Publication: 15 February 2022



OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND
THE ENVIRONMENT

Dr Marisa Paterson MLA
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ACT Legislative Assembly Standing
Committee on Environment,
Climate Change and Biodiversity
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Dear Dr Paterson

Re: Submission to Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

Thank you for your letter of 20 December 2021 advising of the Standing Committee's upcoming inquiry into environmental volunteerism in the ACT, and your invitation to make a submission to this inquiry.

In 2021-22, my Office produced a background report on environmental volunteering in the ACT. This report identifies gaps in knowledge and data relating to community involvement in environmental management and protection, which were first noted during research for the *State of the Environment Report 2019*. Background reports are non-statutory reports designed to fill information gaps on matters relating to the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's functions. This background report takes the form of a website and can be viewed at www.actenvirovolunteers.com.au. This report speaks directly to the specific terms of your inquiry and I would like to refer all members of the Standing Committee to it as the main component of my submission.

The website provides a comprehensive overview of the different environmental volunteering groups, organisations and programs operating in the ACT. It celebrates the work and contributions of our volunteers. My staff were also able to collect some data on the number of volunteers and the hours they work each year, and use this to make some estimates of cost benefits to the ACT Government arising from volunteer efforts. Notably, we found that the equivalent labour costs for volunteers working on land managed by the ACT Government is over \$21.5 million per year. We also used calculations from a 2021 report produced by KPMG Australia on behalf of Landcare Australia to demonstrate that environmental volunteering in the ACT saves over \$13 million in avoided healthcare costs each year. KPMG Australia's report on the wellbeing benefits of landcare-type volunteering can be downloaded here: <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/wellbeing-report/>.

Commissioner: Dr Sophie Lewis

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This Office is independent of, but funded by, the ACT Government.

As explained above, my report on environmental volunteering is not a statutory report and as such does not contain recommendations for the ACT Government. However, in consulting with volunteers and support staff from both community organisations and government directorates during the development of the report, I and my staff heard suggestions for how environmental volunteering in the ACT could be further strengthened. These are presented in the report as opportunities and may be used to inform recommendations in future State of the Environment reports. These opportunities are summarised below, and more detail can be found on the report website.

1. *Review the way metrics about volunteer contributions are collected and held*

Collecting data about volunteer contributions can be challenging, and volunteers themselves need to be able to understand the reasons for this and see the outcomes from it. ACT Government could work to:

- Allow volunteers access to the data they contribute about their own work – currently this is hard for them to access after it has been submitted to ACT Government.
- Ensure volunteers can see how the time they spend contributing data makes a difference to the way that volunteers are valued by ACT Government.
- Report publicly on the contributions that volunteers make to management of the ACT's parks and reserves.

2. *Better recognition of volunteer contributions*

Volunteers save the ACT Government a significant amount of money and that some of what they do is irreplaceable by paid staff. While there is some acknowledgement of volunteers' contributions in some government documents and platforms, this is inconsistent. Some volunteers told us that they felt their contributions were taken for granted. To help with this, ACT Government could:

- Ensure there is clear and specific acknowledgement of voluntary contributions to ACT Government programs, plans and strategies.
- Increase acknowledgement of volunteers through ACT Government publications, websites and social media
- Allow volunteers to claim back money spent on parking or public transport for their volunteer activities, including government consultations.
- Organise a yearly event celebrating all environment and citizen science volunteers to thank them for the contributions to the ACT Government.

3. Appropriate resourcing for volunteer programs and community organisations

OCSE welcomes the ACT Government's announcements in 2020 and 2021 of funding provisions for Waterwatch, ACT Wildlife, the ACT Catchment Groups and Frogwatch. OCSE also welcomes the announcement in September 2021 of a second ranger position to support ParkCare Patch groups. At a minimum, ACT Government should:

- Continue current levels of support for volunteer programs and community groups in the ACT on an ongoing basis.

4. More transparency around government activities and decisions that affect volunteers

Even within a government agency, it can be difficult to determine the best pathway for interaction between volunteers and government staff. Communication between different areas within government, and between government and volunteers, can be challenging. ACT Government could:

- Ensure early and genuine consultation with volunteers about decisions that affect their activities and the way their programs are managed.
- Develop consistent processes for proactively communicating with environment volunteers about what is happening in their part of the ACT.
- Develop a cross-government partnership standards guideline which sets out expected behaviours and processes for engaging with non-government partners, including volunteers and staff for community organisations.

5. Improved processes for using volunteer knowledge

Many volunteers work on their reserves for decades, while rangers may stay in the same area for only a few months. Volunteers also work together closely and naturally pass on skills and knowledge specific to their reserve within their group, providing a level of continuity that is not always possible within government. Volunteer 'corporate knowledge' should be viewed as an asset to the ACT, and to better capitalise on this ACT Government could:

- Develop processes to better manage the impacts of ranger turnover, combining the in-depth site-based knowledge of volunteers and the broader experience of rangers.
- Explore ways of improving relationship-building and knowledge exchange between volunteers, community groups and ACT Government staff, for

example bringing staff and volunteers together at forums, workshops and field trips.

6. *Improved processes for using citizen science data*

Currently there is no clear avenue for trialling new citizen science projects and approaches. More can be done to bring citizen scientists and government scientists together to build mutual capacity and understanding, and ensure that opportunities for new programs are not missed. ACT Government could:

- Develop a process to determine whether ACT Government research projects are appropriate for citizen science involvement, and plan for how citizen scientists will be engaged.
- Explore ways to improve links and exchanges of ideas between government and citizen scientists.

Thank you for considering my submission, and I look forward to providing further information at the hearing in March.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sophie Lewis
Commissioner for Sustainability and
the Environment

7 February 2022