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Report ranks ACT parks system top in Australia

A report released by WWF-Australia today ranked the ACT parks system the top among the eight States and Territories based on protection of biodiversity, area covered and standard of management up to 2004, when the most recent comparison was possible.

The report, entitled *Building Nature's Safety Net*, found that despite adding 31 million hectares of new reserves between 1991 and 2004 across the entire country, governments were still falling short of agreed targets due to "insufficient and declining funding."

The report's principal author Paul Sattler was lead researcher for the Australian Government's 2002 Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment. The report drew on data provided by all parks agencies and data from the Assessment.

Comprehensiveness of the ACT parks system – the percentage of natural ecosystems with some protection inside a reserve—was high relative to other states and had met agreed targets.

All reserves increased from 43 per cent to 54.7 per cent of the ACT's land area from 1991 to 2004, five times the national average of 10.5 per cent of Australia's land area in reserves. Moreover, standard of management was generally high with effective management plans, threatened species plans and monitoring in place.

"The ACT is the stand-out leader for how to establish and run a parks system in Australia," said Dr Martin Taylor, Protected Areas Policy Manager for WWF.

"This reflects foresight and good planning but also shows the advantages of having no freehold land and being the smallest of Australia's States and Territories. Challenges remain in securing high conservation lands as Canberra expands, particularly habitats that are currently poorly reserved."

The report was unable to assess finer scale criteria such as a reserve's ability to maintain natural ecological processes through linkages to other protected areas.

"We are concerned that when we are able to do a finer scale analysis, parks systems in all jurisdictions will be found wanting. This underscores the urgency of continuing to build the reserve system," Dr Taylor warned.

Dr Taylor also expressed concern at recent budget cuts by the ACT Government in investment and personnel devoted to parks management.

"Unless this trend is corrected, a decline in standard of management could occur leading to a lower rating in the next review," he said.

The report also named the 'Top 10' reserves that made the greatest contribution to protection of biodiversity in each jurisdiction. The Gungahlin and Dunlop Grassland Reserves aggregation on the suburban outskirts of Canberra was selected as the Top 10 reserve for the ACT.

"These grassland reserves are great examples of the strategic approach to reserve creation, focusing on under-protected and under-appreciated native grassland remnants," Dr Taylor said.

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