



30 March 2026

# NPA ACT submission on Nature Conservation Strategy

The National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT) is a community-based conservation organisation with more than 60-years' experience in working to protect the natural environment through a program of walks and outings, work parties, participation in Parkcare activities, publications, public meetings and conferences, advocacy, and support for scientific research. We currently have 450 members and over 13,000 social media followers.

NPA ACT welcomes the Nature Conservation Strategy 2026 – 2036 (NCS) and the proposal to establish a National Conservation Network (NCN). We note that the new strategy has addressed some of the issues we raised in our submission to the 10-year review of the previous Act and strategy, but some pressing concerns still need to be addressed.

## 1. Missing data: how much of the ACT is currently 'managed for nature'?

The Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) manages nearly 70% of the ACT in parks and reserves and Crown land. This figure does not appear anywhere in the NCS: it should – and be upfront.

This should be the baseline figure, as this is the area/percentage of land we currently manage for nature conservation. Will the NCS and the proposed NCN improve management of this large area of the ACT?

In its current management of parks and reserves, PCS is dealing with all the issues raised in the NCS, including engagement with the Ngunnawal community; climate change; biosecurity; pests and animals; and the protection of conservation values.

## 2. Funding and staffing.

NPA ACT is concerned that there is no commitment to securely fund this NCS.

Although we commend and fully support Recommendation 1

*That the ACT Government: a. resource the implementation of this Strategy, including additional funding for the Parks and Conservation Service to manage the new NCS. b. finalise the NCS Investment Model as soon as possible. c. finalise the Restoration Contributions Policy as soon as possible.*

Will establishing a new NCN make a difference to the available funding? NPA has serious concerns about whether funding will be available to manage the NCS under the NCN.

In our submission to the 2026 – 27 Budget Consultation Process, we raised concerns that, in 2026, PCS has insufficient funding to meet its current legislative obligations under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. These obligations include:

- *promoting and supporting the management, maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity of local, regional and national significance*
- *encouraging public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of biodiversity*
- *recognising and promoting the role and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the conservation and ecologically sustainable use of biodiversity*
- *ensuring that the public has (i) access to reliable information in forms to that are appropriate to foster understanding of nature conservation issues, and (ii) opportunities to participate in policy development, nature conservation planning and conservation work*

NPA's meeting with Ministers Cheyne and Orr in March 2026 did little to allay these concerns. We were aware of the significant budget pressures on the ACT Government

and of the pressures on all government agencies to reduce or keep expenditure at current levels.

One issue alone – increasing fuel costs– is going to be difficult for PCS.

The current level of funding and staffing for PCS is woefully inadequate. This includes for on-ground staffing (rangers, field staff, fire crews), scientists, and office staff managing policy development. The result is long delays in developing management policies, inadequate levels of research into best-practice management and the inability to undertake much necessary on- groundwork.

Although not part of this strategy, we have raised our concerns with ministers and PCS executives that PCS has no dedicated section to manage and oversee the significant cultural heritage. This is relevant to our response to this strategy in that it is part of our overall concern about PCS funding and staffing levels.

To be effective, the strategy needs stronger statements about future funding for nature conservation and the current and future work of PCS.

### 3. PCS and Workforce Planning

NPA ACT raised this issue in our June 2024 submission on the review of the NCS 2013-23; it has still not been addressed in the 2026 strategy.

We recommend that PCS transition to a professional ranger force and that PCS qualifications and standards be the same as those for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), with mandatory degree-level qualifications. This could be implemented over several years by supporting rangers to upgrade their skills, and by providing a bespoke pathway for Indigenous staff. There are suitable online and onsite courses at the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University.

Opportunities for professional development and requiring qualifications, or progress towards them would help PCS attract rangers from New South Wales and other park agencies.

It is also appropriate that, as in NPWS, positions are available for field officers to undertake manual park management duties.

Upgrading workforce planning, staff structure and qualifications for PCS would also support the implementation of the NCS and help retain experienced operational staff.

PCS field staff who are authorised officers under the Nature Conservation Act should receive certified training in compliance to ensure their work is supported and based on rigour and understanding of the ACT. Credible conservation land-management requires authorised officers who can enforce the rules. This training should be developed in consultation with the Australian Federal Police and frontline PCS staff.

#### **4. Appropriate fire regimes are maintained across the NCN**

Draft Target 20c is commendable but lacks detail to enable the public to envision actions required over the next 10 years. Many members of conservation groups such as NPA ACT, Park Care and Urban Parks and Places Landcare need a more detail to understand the role of planned and unplanned fire, and the implications for NCN.

We support the research and monitoring required to determine tolerable fire intervals. However, the extent of fire-dependent vs. fire-adapted plant communities should be determined before applying ecological fire. Fire should not be introduced into natural ecosystems without sound ecological reasons. Recent research at the ANU's Fenner School has shown that forests and woodlands develop lower fuel loads with age, so long periods between fires should be an aim for ecological integrity and managing unplanned fire.

Cultural burns by First Nations people in grasslands and grassy woodlands would be preferred in all cases where ecological burns are required because they are of low intensity and high patchiness.

Currently, ecological burns by the Rural Fire Service (RFS) are usually of higher intensity, greater extent, and less patchiness. Efforts should, therefore, be made to mimic cultural burns.

Fire management of extensive natural areas in the ranges in the western parts of the ACT should aim to increase the duration between fires in all communities. There should be no broad-area, hazard-reduction burning to protect life and property assets in urban areas. Limited hazard-reduction burning may be useful to protect ecologically important areas such as high-county bogs and fens, high-altitude snow gums, and alpine ash regeneration.

To limit the area of wildfire, all possible technology should be used to detect fires early and to respond rapidly with fixed-wing-water bombers and remote area fire teams (RAFT), supported by helicopters to minimise the areas burnt. This means more funding to use suitable aircraft throughout the fire season, to train RAFT crews and incident management teams, and for RFS and the Emergency Services Agency to be ready to apply these practices.

The protection of life and property from fire in urban areas should concentrate on fuel reduction on private property and within 40 m of private property on public land. This is the responsibility of urban landowners as well as professional and volunteer firefighters. Wherever possible, this hazard reduction should not involve NCN lands.

## 5. Climate change

As noted in the strategy, climate change is the most significant threat to the ACT's natural environment. There are well-developed forecasts for the effects of climate change on ecosystems and species within the ACT's parks and reserves. While policies and strategies are being developed to mitigate the effects of climate change, much more needs to be done. This is especially true for sensitive areas such as the ACT's threatened high alpine woodlands, wet sclerophyll forests and bogs and fens. The ACT's main water supply is threatened by climate change-induced changes in these ecosystems, so immediate and strong strategies to protect these ecosystems are needed.

## 6. Volunteer support

NPA notes that one of the goals of the strategy is partnerships. The section on resourcing and responsibilities notes:

*Collaboration and strong governance are central. Conservation outcomes will only be achieved through deep and ongoing partnerships that allow for more efficient and shared delivery of actions, avoiding duplication and maximising returns on investment. Government, Ngunnawal community, community*

*groups, volunteers and leaseholders will all play a critical role in aligning local projects with NCS outcomes*

NPA ACT strongly supports this statement, but how will it be achieved? Will community groups be funded to support the delivery of the NCS? Will PCS be funded to support volunteer engagement on the scale and diversity needed to achieve this goal?

NPA ACT does not receive any funding for its conservation work. We have received grants for projects, including our Rosenberg's Goanna research project, but no funds to cover operational costs such as compulsory insurance, IT and office support.

Our submission to the 2026 – 27 Budget Consultation Process included the following information:

*In-kind support provided by NPA ACT in 2024 – 25 for the management of ACT parks and reserves is estimated at over \$300,000 based on nearly 6,400 volunteer hours from members, and on the ACT government volunteer rate for in-kind support of \$50.40 an hour.*

This is not sustainable. If we do not receive operational funding support from the ACT government, it is unlikely we will be able to support the delivery of the NCS.

## **7. Final note:**

NPA ACT welcomes the Nature Conservation Strategy 2026 – 2036, but with the reservations outlined above.

We strongly support the Conservation Council ACT Region's submission and would be willing, as always, to discuss the issues raised in this submission.

**Dr Rosemary Hollow, President**

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