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Mr Jon Stanhope, MLA
Chief Minister, Minister for the Environment
ACT Legislative Assembly
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Management of ACT's parks and reserves

This is a joint letter from the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) and the National Parks Association ACT Region, which makes representations to you as the Minister responsible for the management of parks and Government owned lands in the ACT.

At the outset, we wish to stress that overall our Groups have a great deal of respect for the on-ground managers in TAMS who often have a difficult job to do with limited resources. However, there is an increasing view amongst our membership that the ACT's natural assets are being neglected, allowed to run down and become increasingly degraded from a variety of impacts, together with insufficient on-ground resources. This is, we believe, in no small part due to the lack of proper funding for the implementation of various species recovery and conservation plans and insufficient on-ground resourcing, with little capacity for rangers to have a regular presence on-ground. Successive ACT budgets have failed to provide adequate expenditure on the environment.

COG is dedicated to the study and conservation of native birds and their habitats. COG is essentially concerned with better protection for native vegetation which provides habitat for various species of birds, especially birds which are associated with grassy woodlands. The NPA ACT works to support our national parks and reserves, especially in the ACT and to promote interest in and appreciation and enjoyment of our natural and cultural heritage.

Many management issues have been brought to notice by Parkcare groups, NPA ACT and members of COG. For example, we are aware that the Red Hill Regenerators have catalogued a range of unsatisfactory work practices and possibly illegal activities by utilities and contractors in the Red Hill Nature Reserve, a reserve which includes an endangered woodland community. These include inappropriate use of broadscale herbicides resulting in loss of native vegetation, rare and threatened species of plants impacted by inappropriate slashing or machinery, degradation from machinery used after rain periods, works undertaken without checking for special plants/natural values on the site, little attention to vehicle hygiene resulting in the spread of weeds such as Chilean Needle Grass. Overall, there are unnecessary and damaging activities occurring within Canberra Nature Parks (ActewAGL appears to be a major offender), there needs to be an improved impact assessment process, and proper supervision and monitoring of utilities and contractors who access parks and reserves etc.

Further, we believe there is not enough support for Parkcare groups. In particular, there is not enough capacity for rangers to work with Parkcare groups, to be involved in conservation work or to build expertise amongst parkcare workers particularly so as all/some/most park care is contracted out. We have heard that ranger resources are so stretched in some places, that decisions are being taken by managers to minimise or restrict support on the ground to volunteer Parkcare workers who are undertaking important but basic maintenance works such as weeding in parks areas. This is a very unsatisfactory situation and has a demoralising impact on volunteers.

In terms of community education, there is an overall lack of educational emphasis in what signage exists at reserves, as well as a lack of informative signage overall; there is little, for example, about the values to assist reserve users to understand and appreciate the need to treat reserve areas with respect. In some areas, there is no signage at all to indicate what is permissible and what is not. Amongst many people, particularly young people, there seems to be a view that reserve areas are 'vacant land' to be used as they wish.

As background, the following are some issues/case examples reported by our members.

Dogs in Nature Reserves

We believe there is often confusion by the public, as dogs on leashes are allowed in some reserves and not at others. Dogs being allowed to roam illegally in nature reserves is a very under-reported problem, and requires a response including better community education, improved signage at reserves, more regular patrols and more on the spot fines.

An example is Mt Taylor, a dog 'on-leash' area, but there are dozens of dogs observed off leash every day. Mt Majura/Mt Ainslie has also had problems in the past with dogs being allowed off leash. At one time, COG reported problems with dogs allowed off leashes into dams used by Glossy Black Cockatoos as water sources.

A recent example was observed at the Callum Brae Nature Reserve, which has a fairly low visitation rate of the general public compared to some nature parks which abut housing, although it is a favoured area for birdwatchers. In the early morning, a man pulled up in a vehicle and let three large dogs into the reserve for a run in an area where a number of kangaroos had been seen; he claimed there was no signage - the dogs prohibited icon is small and difficult to see from a distance. This example also raises public safety concerns for walkers, birdwatchers etc in that particular reserve. This incident was reported to TAMS and we have been assured that follow up action will be taken in this particular case.

Removal of timber for firewood

While the removal of timber may not be a problem at all reserves, eg those areas affected by the bushfires in 2003, there are areas where this does occur regularly. For example, there is evidence that fallen timber has been cut at Callum Brae Nature Reserve, including well inside the reserve (suggesting that vehicles of some kind may be used inside the reserve). The location of these areas has been reported, but we understand the rangers have not been able to detect the culprits. Within the Gungahlin Hill Nature Reserve chain saws have been used to remove eucalyptus burls that have presumably been used to turn into wooden bowls.

Off-path Cycling/mountain bike activities

We are aware that off path cycling is occurring at a number of reserves, including Mt Taylor and Wanniasa Hills, and is creating new paths and potential erosion lines. On Mt Taylor, the old degraded Richmond Fellowship track was replaced by a more sustainable walking track and the old track was rehabilitated; walkers have since removed rock barriers and continue to use the old pathway which is becoming even more degraded.

Bruce Ridge Nature Park has an area of native forest bounded by the Gungahlin Drive Extension, the Belconnen TAFE and Belconnen Way. Over the past five years the wooded area has become intersected with cycle tracks. In early November 2008, around 6.30am, a group of eleven cyclists used the area over a period of about 30 minutes as they weaved in and out of the trees following one of the many tracks. This was then followed 50 minutes later by a single cyclist and again 20 minutes later by another single cyclist; that is 13 cyclists used the area over a period of just over two hours.

The cycle tracks on Bruce Ridge have increased dramatically over the past five years, data and photos of which can be provided. Not only are the tracks cutting into the friable soil but fallen branches are being moved to provide 'jumps'. In addition, rocks have been moved to make paths across the creek lines. There is a complete lack of signage declaring the status of the area or indicating what is permissible within the area and no ranger patrols.

There has also been a report of a cycling track on Farrer Ridge which parks staff have done nothing about.

Over recent years there have been a number of other examples of illegal cycling activity in reserves including the construction of jumps, eg, Mulligan's Flat, Harcourt Hill, other Canberra Nature Parks southside, some of which have been reported in the media.

Trail Bikes

In the Lower Cotter catchment, off-road, illegal trail bike activities have been common since the January 2003 bushfires. Damage has been observed at sensitive sites such as Blundells Flat. Along the Camel back trail within the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve sand plots laid out across the trail to monitor lyrebird movements have detected trail bike activity. Mt Taylor is notorious for trail bikes cutting fences and going where they please. There is a lack of an appropriate place for trail bikers to use for recreation, but this does not excuse the use of nature reserves for dangerous and damaging bike riding.

Weeds Management

While there is a weeds management strategy in place and priority weeds with the highest order of threat such as Serrated Tussock are sprayed routinely, there is not enough overall recurrent funding for weeds management, and therefore the inability to deal with some problem weeds, emerging weeds and seasonal outbreaks of some species of weeds. Money appears to be spent only on the established priority weeds at the expense of controlling emergent weed problems.

For example, Saffron Thistle exploded at Callum Brae Nature Reserve in the 2007 spring/summer and covered large areas in the reserve; if the rosettes had been sprayed earlier on in the year, the impact of this weed would not have been significant. Saffron Thistle is not a priority weed on the list, so no action was apparently taken.

We are aware that weeds are overwhelming TAMS, with resources/capacity only to tackle those of the highest order of threat, little capacity to deal with new weeds or new sites where weeds have become widespread in particular seasons. For example, St John's Wort has been rampant in the current spring/summer season, and is overwhelming some sites with sensitive native species.

It has been reported to us that Canberra's southern nature parks are sadly neglected, several invasive weeds species introduced through poor management practices have been allowed to proliferate unabated, and the 2003 fires and below average rainfall in the last 7-8 years have compounded the unchecked spread of weeds.

It has been reported that the weeds on Farrer Ridge are the worst that have been seen in 30 years. The Ridge requires a significant increase in weeds management to deal with St Johns Wort and Verbascum which are taking over native habitats. Fleabane is also spreading at an alarming rate. There are several areas that have tall African Lovegrass (a priority weed) which is also increasing along mown trails. Serrated Tussock is also increasing. We understand that the the majority of actual weeding on Farrer Ridge is done by hand by Parkcare volunteers, most well over 60 years of age, and there is little support from parks staff. It has also been reported that the use of mainly interstate contractors to undertake works in the reserve has contributed to new weed species being introduced.

Apart from a significant boost in funding and resources for weeds management, management plans also need to be more oriented to biodiversity improvement; some woody weeds, blackberries, willows, provide habitat for some native birds and other animals in the absence of native shrubs, so ideally any removal needs to be phased over time and accompanied by plantings of suitable native species to replace lost habitat.

Feral animals

Rabbits are becoming an increasing problem in many reserves with complaints regularly received from members of both organisations. The Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR and adjacent areas are particularly infested with rabbits. An increasing number of active rabbit warrens have also been observed at Callum Brae NR. We are unaware of any government plans to deal with what is a significant and emerging issue of increasing rabbit numbers. This emerging rabbit problem will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of introduced pest species such as foxes.

Dumping of rubbish

Dumping of rubbish and soil is becoming increasingly common at reserves, eg in carparks of reserves and adjacent to reserves. The old Gundaroo Road which runs along the western boundary of Mulligan's Flat NR has become an area for dumping, as has the carpark area of Goorooyaroo NR on Horse Park Drive. The Gungahlin Hill Nature Reserve adjacent to the Barton Highway is also a regular dumping ground.

Other illegal activities

We are aware of reports of individuals including family groups, shooting rabbits with bows and arrows in the vicinity of Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR, particularly in the adjacent Sewage Works grounds (an area commonly visited by COG members). Several months ago, a COG bus group on a Sunday outing came across two vehicles parked in the grounds of the Sewage Works, where teenage children with a parent were using high powered bows to shoot rabbits. Also, arrows have been found at Kama woodland in the Central Molonglo which is proposed to be a nature reserve. This is a public safety issue for people visiting those areas.

Recommendations

COG and the NPA believe there needs to be a multi-layered approach to dealing with these problems, and makes these recommendations for improvements:

- better, more informative signage at reserves and greater community education
- a significant increase in the number of urban rangers for management and conservation outputs
- more rangers providing a regular presence at important reserves, and those with high use such as Mt Ainslie/Mt Majura, Mt Taylor; there should be regular (daily) checks at important conservation reserves such as Callum Brae, Gorooyarroo
- blitzes and patrols by rangers targeted to maximise impact in 'hot spots' (eg at peak times for walking dogs, cyclists etc), and the issue of more on the spot fines for prohibited activities in parks, especially breaches by dog owners and cyclists
- greater monitoring of utilities accessing reserves, and their works, eg ActewAGL
- greater supervision and monitoring of contractors undertaking works in reserves, such as weeds management, bushfire prevention activities (slashing, burning)
- a review of and increase in support for Parkcare groups, a campaign to recruit, train and most importantly, support more people to assist in delivering biodiversity improvements and improved conservation outcomes.

We are aware that in the upcoming ACT budget, there is likely to be little additional monies available, unless savings or offsets can be achieved in other areas. However, what we are talking about here are the basic functions and basic maintenance of the ACTs natural estate, which have already been cut to the bone over the years. The community rightly expects that there should be adequate resources for this, and we are aware there is growing disquiet amongst our members about these issues. If significant improvements are not made on-ground, we are very concerned that there will only be further deterioration in the general state of our reserves.

We believe that the Government has not got the balance right in this area, and needs to provide much more funding and resources for the implementation of its policies, conservation and management plans, for monitoring and enforcement, as well as for community education.

If you wish to discuss this further, we can be contacted as below.

Yours sincerely

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