

National Parks Association of Queensland Submission to Land Tenure Inquiry

2nd August 2012



The National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ) promotes the preservation, expansion and good management of National Parks and the wider protected area estate in Queensland. As a non-government, non-party political, membership-based organisation, NPAQ promotes the experience of National Parks through a substantial bushwalking program and active coordination of volunteer programs that assist with Park management.

This submission has seven components:

1. Affirmation of the cardinal principle that governs the management of National Parks
2. Recognising that National Park-based tourism and recreation benefit most from preserving and valuing National Parks in their natural state
3. Recommendations to protect Nature Refuges
4. Implications of any loss of leasehold land
5. Balancing and fast-tracking the resolution of third party interests in areas proposed for inclusion in the National Park estate
6. Land for public recreation
7. An ongoing National Park acquisition process

1. Affirmation of the cardinal principle that governs the management of National Parks

Introduced in the *Forestry Act 1959* during a period of coalition government, for over 50 years National Parks have been managed according to the cardinal principle:

To provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition and the protection of the area's cultural resources and values.

The State Government defines *natural condition* as 'protection from human interference - allowing natural processes to proceed'. Other related management principles for National Parks include:

Presenting the Park's cultural and natural resources and their values.
Ensuring that Park use is nature-based and ecologically sustainable.

That is, National Parks are managed for nature first so that they are available for public appreciation and enjoyment.

The cardinal principle is embodied in the Queensland Biodiversity Strategy, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Master Plan (for protected areas), and underpins every action within individual National Park management plans. An activity

that poses a threat to this principle - for example, high impact forms of recreation such as horse-riding, motorbikes and quad bikes - threatens a National Park's natural condition, and the values that have led to gazettal as a National Park in the first place.

This Parliamentary Inquiry should uphold the place and role of the cardinal principle as it applies to National Parks in Queensland. NPAQ is concerned that changes to the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* could erode or lessen the application of this principle. We would expect any review of the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* would include opportunities for interested organizations and the wider public (including NPAQ), to make submissions as part of this process.

2. Recognising that National Park-based tourism and recreation benefit most from preserving and valuing National Parks in their natural state

Unlike the extent of National Parks in Tasmania (24% land area) and New Zealand (11.4%), National Parks occupy less than 5% of Queensland. They are the jewels in the conservation crown of this State, and preserve some of the very best landscapes and natural attractions in Australia.

Six out of 10 people in this State have visited a National Park. These visitors, particularly those from overseas, do not expect to find or come across eco-resorts or lodges in National Parks. Many of the larger US Parks are now starting to remove this type of heavy tourism infrastructure because it directly reduces and detracts from the experience of being in a natural place. This does not mean that new National Parks cannot be sensitively designed adjacent to, or incorporating, a range of other land tenures that allow fixed accommodation.

Heavy forms of recreation pose a fundamental risk to the National Parks brand in Queensland. Put simply, allowing horses, motorbikes and unchecked access to 4WD's to traverse National Parks will introduce weeds, compact tracks, create erosion and increase the risk of bushfire. These types of recreation threaten the very natural values that attract tourists to our Parks, the same values that underpin a large component of the tourism industry in Queensland.

NPAQ recognises the increased interest in motorised forms of recreation and encourages the government to facilitate the development of suitable venues in the 90% of Queensland not part of the protected area estate.

3. Protecting Nature Refuges (NR)

There are 411 Nature Refuges in Queensland covering almost three million hectares of land (DERM 2011). Participating landholders have often managed remnant vegetation on their land for generations, and the vital ingredient in the success of this program is their goodwill.

The lack of legislative security and permanent protection of NR agreements in the face of mining and other extractive industries presents major uncertainty **for all parties** - landholders, government and mining interests. With one third of Refuges currently covered by exploration permits (Taylor *et al.* 2009), losses of biodiversity and landholder confidence in the Nature Refuge program are inevitable.

Bimblebox Nature Refuge, 50km NW of Alpha in Central Queensland, is a case in point. Recent on-site survey efforts have yielded an endangered species (Black throated finch), over 150 other bird species and nearly 300 plant species, including two that they are yet to be formally named. The likely destruction of Bimblebox sends a message to other conservation minded graziers that their efforts are not valued or held in high regard.¹ When the Queensland government signed the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, it agreed to report on lands set aside for biodiversity protection under the National Reserve System. Nature Refuges are a part of this system. If the China First mine is allowed to proceed, it will be the first time that a Queensland property covered by a Nature Refuge Agreement is destroyed for mineral extraction.

The *Nature Conservation Act 1992* should be amended to include an additional **class of Nature Refuge that is exempt from mining**. Apart from providing greater conservation certainty to prospective Nature Refuge landholders, such a designation would also prove attractive to individual and corporate philanthropists investing with groups such as Bush Heritage Australia and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

4. Implications of any loss of leasehold land

The opportunity for landholders to move from leasehold to freehold would remove the need for land management agreements, and reduce the oversight the State currently has on land management practices. The Australian Government estimates that weeds cost our farmers about \$1.5 billion/year in weed control activities and another \$2.5 billion/year in lost agricultural production. Any reduction in the size of the leasehold estate in Queensland may create other land management problems that ultimately impact on the State's fiscal bottom line.

5. Balancing and fast- tracking the resolution of third party interests in areas proposed for, or that might be suitable for, inclusion in the National Park estate, or in the wider protected area estate

NPAQ understands that approximately one million hectares of land recently acquired for National Park remains leasehold, unallocated state land, or a lesser form of reserve because of unresolved interests (such as grazing permits or mining licenses). The greatest exposure period for potential protected areas is post-purchase, but pre-gazettal, as the State seeks to resolve third party interests in the land acquired.

Currently, it appears that where resource development interests apply, a range of timelines and encumbrances prevent gazettal until these are resolved or varied by negotiation. The current process appears to be unduly weighted towards resource development interests, with environmental interests, and possibly other interests, disadvantaged. A more balanced process would ensure that significant environmental values are protected, regardless of whether resource development interests exist or not.

¹ Note that 40 Agforce members have Nature Refuges on their properties, covering over one million hectares of land in Queensland.

There may be value in introducing a statutory planning framework that provides strict timeframes for submissions from interest groups before the (DEHP) Minister releases a tenure plan for the gazettal of a new National Park.

For graziers, this would provide certainty with destocking arrangements. For the tourism industry, clear direction on what land *associated with* the future National Park would be made available for commercial ecotourism ventures and different forms of recreation. For the miners, a clear period during which resolution of any mining interests would be expected to occur. For QPWS, identification of priority management actions, and agreement on the level of resourcing required to manage additions to the National Park estate. For conservation groups, clarity on the ultimate size of the National Park, adjacent land uses, and a much better indication of when gazettal would occur.

Also, as leases expire or other lease movement occurs there may well be opportunity to consider the suitability of such areas for a Protected Area category. Other sources might include State Forests no longer required for that purpose, Commonwealth controlled land that might become available, or privately held land that becomes available and that might be suitable for preservation. The requirement is to have processes in place to ensure that any such opportunities come to notice and then can be promptly pursued where warranted.

6. Land for public recreation

NPAQ supports the identification and use of land suitable for various types of recreation, such as a defined Recreation Reserve/Area, in part to remove pressure away from inappropriate uses of National Parks. Provisions and processes should be established to identify, obtain, and retain land for public recreation purposes, with particular regard to:

- The type of recreation in question
- Reasonable proximity to larger urban areas

7. An ongoing National Park acquisition process

National Parks are the heritage and right of the people of Queensland – they are for our grandchildren, and for their grandchildren. Additions to the National Park estate and other forms of protected areas are our legacy to these future generations. That less than five percent of Queensland is in National Park, ongoing population growth, high biodiversity values, diverse and widely distributed landforms, and critical and emerging threats to biodiversity – all underscore the requirement for an ongoing acquisition program.

Consideration of connecting corridors, planned and designated buffer zones, boundary rationalization, protection of refugia areas, and building on existing protected area amalgamations are important components of this process. These considerations require an active ongoing program of acquisition. Engagement of the Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing in this process would build an understanding of future land management issues associated with new National Park/protected area additions.

References

DERM 2010. *Protected Areas for the future: Cornerstone for terrestrial biodiversity conservation*. Supporting document to 'Building nature's resilience: A draft biodiversity strategy for Queensland'. Department of Environment and Resource Management, Brisbane.

DERM 2011. *Estate Statistics 18 December 2011*. Department of Environment and Resource Management, Brisbane.

http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/parks_and_forests/managing_parks_and_forests/principles/index.html

<http://www.gqb.org.au/>

<http://www.weeds.gov.au/weeds/why/impact.html>

Taylor MFJ, Adams VM, Segan DB, Pressey RL 2009. *20 million hectares by 2020: Protected areas, green infrastructure and green jobs for Queensland*. A WWF-Telstra Building Nature's Safety Net Report, WWF-Australia, Sydney.

Taylor MFJ, Sattler PS, Evans M, Fuller James RA, Watson EM, Possingham, HP 2010. What works for threatened species recovery? An empirical evaluation for Australia. *Biodiversity Conservation*, 20, pg767-777.

Taylor MFJ, Sattler PS, Fitzsimons J, Curnow C, Beaver D, Gibson L, Llewellyn G 2011. *Building Nature's Safety Net 2011. The state of protected areas for Australia's ecosystems and wildlife*. WWF-Australia, Sydney.