

Inquiry into Australia's National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Area's.

By

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(BOC)**

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Trip Committee.

A proposal submitted in response to an invitation from the Acting Secretary (References Committee) Dr Jacqueline Dewar to Australian National Four Wheel Drive Council on – "Funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas".

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Introduction

About BOC:

The Bayside Offroaders Club Inc is a Queensland not for profit recreational four wheel drive club starting in 1998.

As a Four Wheel Drive Club our recreation pursuits are not only limited to four wheel driving. As a family orientated club we engage in a range of recreation pursuits using our vehicles as a means of transport. Our members participate in bushwalking; photography; fishing; bird watching; general sight seeing; camping and basically enjoying the great outdoors.

We have a tread lightly approach to all activities and a sustainability attitude towards our recreation activities. The Bayside Offroaders Club is a member of the Queensland Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs with a National Council overarching all State Associations within Australia.

We promote four wheel driving as a legitimate recreation activity and have a particular interest in how national parks and conservation areas are managed and controlled.

We support the committee's role in this inquiry and welcome the opportunity to put forward our submission. We request that 'Bayside Offroaders Club be included to participate in any future processes.

Access:

Over the last couple of decades there has been a significant shift in the management and subsequent access to national parks, conservation areas and public lands. During this period there has been a significant rise in the conservation movement which has resulted in reduced access for groups such as ours for recreation access. During this period we have experienced lockouts and restrictions to access public lands, resulting in less places to go, specifically areas close to the major regional areas.

At the same time there has been a huge increase in the number of people seeking access to public lands and remote areas for that unique experience. This is evidenced by the 4WD recreation boom and the increasing number of grey nomads travelling across this great land.

The fight between those who want to stop recreational access and recreational stakeholder groups has dragged on for a long time. The RFA process is a classic example where the catch phrase of "No Net Access Loss" was bantered by the State Government; it quickly became evident that real net loss was the name of the game for major regional areas.

Conservation:

Most recreation facilities and vehicle access are often on the edge of parks or near major access roads. Although the logic of this is obvious in limiting cost and providing easier public accessibility, it limits access to those areas that have significant features. This means those less able to track great distances on foot are denied access and the chance to experience the heart of these areas.

In Queensland there is over 750km of walking tracks to major attractions, this is great if you are fit and can carry a heavy backpack.

As recreational four wheel drivers;

We all love the bush, that's why we go into it. However not all lovers of our Australian bush can access it on foot? We have many busy people who don't have the time to undertake such large walks and in our club we have members with disabilities, older and younger members who don't have the ability to walk long distances or to carry heavy backpacks to access many of these remote areas.

Four Wheel Drive Recreation:

Four wheel drive enthusiasts have been travelling the depth and breadth of this land for a long time and for many reasons. Today holidaying has reached an all time high as Australians transverse the country side to experience the remoteness and beauty this country has to offer. The 4WD vehicle has become a mechanism to enjoy outdoor pursuits providing relief from stressful lives, a chance to spend time with family and friends; the challenge travelling to isolated locations for new experiences.

Objectives of National Parks:

What are the objectives of national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas? A review of the internet indicated the following;

NSW and Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service – *“are government bodies responsible for developing and maintaining the parks and reserve systems, and conserving natural and cultural heritage, in each state including the management of Tourism and Recreation”*. The question is who for?

Over the year's one could be forgiven for thinking that the management of nature comes first with access and people a distant last. In fact the Queensland EPA website states that *“Parks are managed for many purposes. Nature comes first but people are not forgotten. On the same website “Recreation facilities and vehicle access are often on the edge of the park or near major access roads in this way, people can use and enjoy parks while harm to the park's natural and cultural values is kept to a minimum. Careful management ensures people can enjoy the parks without damaging special places”*.

This appears to indicate a couple of things. Firstly is this a polite way of saying Lock it up and you will be allowed to see those areas we want to show you depending on the cost. Certainly only fit and healthy are able to see more than the fringes of these parks.

Issues Of concern

Our main concern is the continued loss of access for recreation purposes. The loss of access is a direct concern to our members.

Not enough education of the general public to be responsible and do the right thing for sustainable use with minimum environmental impact. As a member of Four Wheel Drive Queensland the clubs promote a tread lightly attitude and conduct nationally accredited 4WD training course for members. Four Wheel Drive Queensland is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO).

Lack of funding to develop proper maintenance programmes, it appears the money collected from permits and camping fees don't go back into maintenance programmes. An example of this is Fraser Island where the State Government through a knee jerk reaction to an unfortunate fatal incident pumped the total maintenance budget into dingo eradication and fence proofing. If it was considered an emergent situation then additional funds should have been sourced by the State Government rather than blowing the maintenance budget.

There needs to be more importance placed on education and learning through direct access rather than locking up areas that only allows access to a privileged few .A lock-out with un-maintained tracks exposes these areas to bushfire land damage with little or no access for fire fighting and creating fire breaks.

4WD Clubs, while not being able to fully maintain tracks, are able to keep them clear of fallen trees and advise authorities of problems encountered. This helps ensure access for emergency services.

As quoted by Federal Forestry Minister Senator Ian Macdonald “*I have heard a lot of comment about the need to save trees from loggers, but have not heard the same passion from those people about the need to save trees from fires and mismanagement*”.

The Values & Objectives of Australian National Parks.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has established a six-category system of protected areas to clarify the differences between various objectives for protected areas including National Parks. National Parks are designated for three primary management objectives with equal emphasis on each, viz. preservation of species and genetic diversity; maintenance of environmental services; and tourism and recreation.

Secondary objectives of National Parks include scientific, educational, spiritual and aesthetic uses, which are likely compatible with the primary goals. However, it is often questioned whether the primary goals are able to coexist among themselves. For example, recreational uses are often in conflict with the preservation goal. The management objectives for National Parks can be rearranged into three components, viz. preservation, conservation and public use.

It's this conflict that concerns us the most where it seems the easiest and cheapest solution is preservation and lock-up. This is a short term view to cut or maintain existing maintenance costs where a longer holistic view is needed using all available groups and resources through a network of partisan arrangements.

Example: utilise the State 4WD Clubs as national parks eyes and ears to report back on track condition and undertake minor clearing if required. With a little education there is no reason why Clubs could not report on the state of flora and fauna and other information relevant to the management of these areas. The trade –off would be access to areas that normally are closed to us. We believe that “**education through access**” would have far reaching benefits requiring little effort to implement. Implementation could be through each State 4WD Association and the relevant land management bodies with a process to traverse tracks and a reporting mechanism back to the land management bodies.

In the past emphasis has been placed on preservation and conservation but little into expanding public access. “**Education through Access**’ should be adopted and promoted.

Resources to meet Objectives and Management Requirements.

Pressure on our Parks is increasing with reduced access being a by product of this pressure on resources, funding and reduced maintenance programmes. Since most responsibility for management and maintenance resides with state governments many of these programmes are driven by the bottom line – financial decisions.

An untapped resource is through the Queensland Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs which has 58 member clubs with approximately 2,500 vehicle memberships and about 8,000 family members, and growing throughout Queensland and Northern NSW. This assistance if utilised and managed properly would provide a community net work to assist the depleted resources that currently exist through budget restrictions.

This is a community group that can provide some of that much needed help to monitor and assist in maintaining tracks through many Parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Nationally each state Association has access to similar member clubs. That's a large voluntary resource capable of assisting in the management of public lands throughout Australia.

Threats to the objectives and management of National Parks.

Bushfire land damage is a real threat to the conservation of large areas of public lands. What's the point of a lock-out if the total area is destroyed through bushfire land damage? As stated by the NAFI Executive Director Kate Carnell *"Surely the level of destruction should horrify anyone who genuinely cares for the environment. Instead we have yet more calls for under-funded parks, and opposition to fuel reduction and responsible fire management"*.

There is an old saying "Use it or lose it", surely better land management can be achieved through a co-operative approach with concerned recreation groups such as the 4WD movement. Damage by irresponsible users is a serious threat to public lands. Surely a management strategy to enlist the assistance of recreation groups through access is a better proposition than closing the areas to all users, including many who do the right thing and appreciate the parks for what they are.

Weed infestation is a threat to the environment and characteristic of our public lands. A locked gate on a national park will not stop weed infestation. Many of the areas we traverse are infested with noxious weed; lantana in the south-eastern parts of the state and cactus & various South African feral plants rampant in outback Queensland. It's interesting that local authorities issue notices to private land owners to eliminate noxious weeds, yet across the fence in a state forest, national park or conservation areas noxious weed runs rampant.

There appears to be a lack of education and co-operation with the community, especially those who do the wrong thing. However a starting point would be those recreation groups who do care about the sustainability of our public lands and are willing to help.

Responsibilities of Governments to the creation and management of National parks and the establishment of long term plans.

Education and awareness can be expanded through greater access, giving people first hand experience and knowledge as to how fragile and resilient the environment can be. As parks and conservation areas are also managed for people including the young, old and the public with disabilities, awareness can be accelerated and achieved through the experience of seeing and living the true natural experience.

Access means more than a car-park and a few public toilets with sectioned camping spots. These are important to park management and facilities provision, but the responsibility of Governments should be more. The development of plans for cooperative public lands management is one way Governments need to be proactive in this regard.

In our club alone we have young families older retired members with various levels of health, members with disabilities although capable behind the wheel of a vehicle have difficulty walking tracks no matter how well constructed.

If the current funding is inadequate then look towards cooperative management strategies and get the recreation stakeholders involved. The one resource we do have is numbers. Through the cooperation and support of recreation users, including 4WD recreation movement, land management principles could be revolutionised. Let's think out side the square for a change. By developing these alliances with a trade off for access sustainable management programmes can be established for the long term.

The record of Governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks.

The Queensland Environment Protection Agency Strategic Plan 2006/2009 has a vision; "A Queensland where everyone values the environment", their role according to the plan "Protecting the environment for a sustainable future". It's an interesting dilemma a vision where everyone values the environment and a role that locks up the environment for the future. How do we value something that we never get access, to experience and see.

Over the past decade in Victoria there have been huge areas of new national parks created. At the same time, park managers were not provided with sufficient resources to maintain the existing newly proclaimed areas.

There is strong evidence that national parks are improperly managed because they neither have the funds or the personnel to manage these areas properly.

Fires that have swept through Australia's national parks and neighbouring property have now destroyed over three million hectares of land.

New South Wales & ACT	1,595,000 hectares
Victoria	1,324,000 hectares
Queensland	115,000 hectares
Tasmania	41,000 hectares
Western Australia	31,000 hectares
Total:	3,106,000 hectares

Access for controlling fires is more readily achieved through well maintained road networks. By providing recreation groups such as ours, access to these road networks could be maintained and reported to public land managers to channel maintenance programmes to areas that need it.

It is often claimed that the forests 'regenerate' after fires. However, a close examination of the under-story and tree species that grow back indicate that intense fire and a limited fuel reduction regime is rapidly changing the forest ecosystems.

Conclusion

Do we have enough public lands? The answer is probably No! Do we have enough access to public lands? The answer a definite No! Are public lands managed properly? The answer is no! We believe the staff on the ground and in the field work hard but are under funded and equipped to do it properly. The main reason for this is government funding.

Recreational or other groups should be encouraged to sponsor a park, or part of a park, taking on a degree of agreed maintenance and condition reporting. This will relieve government staff from these duties giving them more time for those tasks that require their specific skills and/or qualifications. This type of cooperative management will lead to more cost effective management of parks with reduced reliance on government funding or better usage of government funding.

The 4WD movement over the past year or so has been painted in a bad light by a number of self interest groups. Yes there are some 4WD owners outside the associated club structure who do the wrong thing but through the associated club structure there is a concerned cross section of the community who are concerned about the environment and conservation of public lands and enjoy these natural habitats.

We believe that the current practice of lock it up at the expense of cooperate management strategies is not a valid practice. Groups such as ours are keen to be involved so let's move to an era of **education through recreation** and share the responsibility and the experience.