

INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORIES

Submission by the Director of National Parks to the inquiry by the
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External
Territories

18 JANUARY 2021

1. BACKGROUND

The Director of National Parks

The Director of National Parks is a corporation sole established under Division 5 of Part 19 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) with responsibility for the Australian Government's protected area estate, both terrestrial and marine, declared as Commonwealth reserves under the EPBC Act. The Director is assisted by Parks Australia, a division of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, in carrying out the Director's responsibilities.

Indian Ocean Territories Reserves

The presence of a Commonwealth reserve in each of the Indian Ocean Territories (IOT) means that Parks Australia is a significant stakeholder in relation to social, economic and environmental sustainability. It has an important role in conservation management and is a substantial employer and element of the social fabric.

Christmas Island National Park: Christmas Island National Park was established in three stages from 1980 and covers approximately 63 per cent of the island's land area plus a marine zone which incorporates much of the island's fringing coral reef system. Christmas Island is a unique ecosystem, home to many endemic species and the park protects the bulk of their remaining natural habitat (although there are several important areas of biodiversity significance outside of the park). The island is recognised internationally for its seabird populations, has two Ramsar-listed wetlands and protects the world's most diverse and abundant array of land crab species.

Introduced plants and animals pose a direct threat to the island's remaining native species, as well as to any future potential horticultural/agricultural industries. Parks Australia cooperates with researchers and on-island partners to design and deliver conservation programs, particularly invasive species control, which operate by the nature of the work both inside and beyond the park boundaries.

Christmas Island National Park is managed in accordance with a management plan (2014-2024) prepared under the EPBC Act. The plan is a legislative instrument with direct legal effect within the park boundaries and has the following vision:

Christmas Island National Park is internationally recognised for its conservation, scientific and nature-based tourism values and as a place where:

- natural environments and native species are protected, conserved and restored*
- visitors have inspirational, unique and rewarding experiences*
- stakeholders and the community are engaged in, and value, the park's conservation.*

The Christmas Island National Park Management Plan is available at:

https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2014L00168/Html/Volume_2

Pulu Keeling National Park: Pulu Keeling National Park was established in 1995 and covers the whole of North Keeling Island and waters extending 1.5 kilometres from the island's high-water mark. The entire park is listed under the Ramsar Convention as a wetland of international importance. The park protects the last remaining example of the native vegetation of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands group and is one of the few Indian Ocean atolls free of rats and other introduced mammals; its intact vegetation and pest-free status means it is a major nesting site for frigatebirds, boobies and other seabirds. As well as managing the park, Cocos-based Parks Australia staff participate in conservation programs undertaken in the Territory's southern atoll in collaboration with the Cocos Shire: monitoring Cocos buff banded rails on Horsburgh Island, rat baiting on Direction Island, ant-control

on Pulu Blan and Pulu Blan Madar, cat control on West and Home Island, management of marine plastic waste, and the regeneration of native flora.

Pulu Keeling National Park is managed in accordance with a management plan (2015-2025) prepared under the EPBC Act. The plan is a legislative instrument with direct legal effect within the park boundaries and has the following vision:

Pulu Keeling National Park continues to be recognised for its natural, cultural and scientific values, as an isolated atoll with largely intact marine, terrestrial and wetland ecosystems, with minimal human impact upon its natural condition.

The Pulu Keeling National Park Management Plan is available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2015L01389>

Christmas Island National Park and Pulu Keeling National Park are managed as a single management entity, with staff located in both territories and the manager of both parks based on Christmas Island. Parks Australia has established and maintains a number of consultative bodies to inform management of each park—examples are the Pulu Keeling National Park Community Management Committee, the Christmas Island Crazy Ant Scientific Advisory Panel, the Christmas Island Reptile Advisory Panel, the Christmas Island Flying Fox Advisory Panel, the Christmas Island Cat Eradication Steering Committee, the Technical Advisory Committee for Cat Eradication and the Cocos buff-banded rail recovery team.

As a major land manager in the IOT, Parks Australia is also active in relevant external committees including the Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands emergency management committees and the Interagency Coordination Committee. Cocos-based staff also work cooperatively with the community and stakeholders in relation to conservation issues across the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, including via participation in relevant consultative and advisory groups.

2. SCOPE OF SUBMISSION

Parks Australia works cooperatively with stakeholders and the wider community in our management of the two parks and their associated conservation programs. Detailed description of the ecological features of the IOT national parks and the environmental programs of Parks Australia has been provided in a previous submission to this committee -

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Capital_and_External_Territories/Indian_Ocean_Territories/Submissions - Sub14, and duplication of this material has been avoided for the sake of brevity and direct relevance.

Effective park management is integral to maintenance of the unique natural assets that form a fundamental element of the island's economy. This primarily manifests in the opportunities for nature-based tourism, hospitality and research that the park and other natural areas provide but also includes a direct economic contribution of local employment opportunities, spending and social well-being.

This submission focusses on Parks Australia's activities and responsibilities as they relate to the terms of reference, and notes the challenges, barriers and opportunities relevant to the inquiry that arise in the conduct of our core business of national park management.

CHALLENGES, BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Encouraging innovation and investment that addresses sustainability challenges and provides economic opportunities. This could include innovative approaches to waste management, and capitalising on the unique environmental qualities that represent the marketing and strategic advantage of the Islands in the long term.

Although Parks Australia's core remit is environmental protection, the social and economic aspects of its work are well recognised in the Christmas Island National Park management plan's vision (cited above) and the organisation's purpose, elaborated in the Director of National Parks Corporate Plan: to protect, conserve and enhance the values of Commonwealth parks and gardens for the use and well-being of all Australians.

In addition to protecting the iconic species which are the face of tourism in the IOT – the red crabs, the seabirds and forest - there are several other, less obvious ways in which Parks Australia's core business connects to the socio-economic considerations of this inquiry.

A large proportion of the island's nature-based tourism infrastructure – walks, boardwalks, signage and approximately 70 percent of the island's road networks are located within the national park. Maintenance of this infrastructure to appropriate and safe standards provides a broad public good for Christmas Island and supports the economic sustainability of tourism businesses.

The marine fringe of the park, which extends 50 metres seawards from the national park's coastline, covers a significant proportion of the reef system that sustains the diving and snorkelling tourism industry on the island. On the Cocos Islands, the newly translocated population of critically endangered Christmas Island blue-tailed skinks to Pulu Blan in the Cocos atoll has proved a popular addition to the range of local tour operator products. The weekly Christmas Island Reptile tour is popular with visitors and has been a regular itinerary of the local tour operators and visitors to the island. This has allowed visitors to understand and appreciate the conservation work done in the park.

Development of key tourism infrastructure at Margaret's Knoll and Grant's Well is underway in close cooperation with the community and tourism industry and follows the completion of the Blowholes boardwalk infrastructure. Also, a campsite development for Grant's Well is underway, funded by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications. Subject to approval, this public use facility will support a series of new forest walks, mountain bike tracks and the first overnight walk on the island. These innovative and inclusive projects are creating new opportunities for tourism operators to consolidate the existing brand and to develop new markets.

In 2020 Parks Australia secured new funding to repair and seal the three major roads in the park. When completed in 2023 these roads will provide seamless connection with roads outside of the park and improve the overall road networks on the island.

The ongoing management and maintenance of infrastructure presents an opportunity and challenge for ongoing park management.

Complicated systems of tenure, legal jurisdiction and administrative responsibility create challenges to integrated management. For Parks Australia, it complicates the management of invasive species (found on both sides of the park boundary), the annual crab migration, and infrastructure obligations relating to roads and water within the park and managing these issues requires complex coordination. For example, Parks Australia staff spend approximately 60 per cent of their time on road management outside the park during the crab migration season. Also, Parks Australia undertakes a significant proportion of invasive species management work outside the national park for cats and Yellow Crazy Ant control.

Building on investments in education and research by encouraging partnerships across the IOT with local, mainland and international organisations with an education, research, biodiversity or sustainability focus to drive investment and innovative economic outcomes.

The partnerships fostered by the park have been the vehicle for long-term investment from several mainland and international research organisations. The significance of Christmas Island's biodiversity not only attracts respected Australian research bodies (e.g. La Trobe University, James Cook University, Australian National University), but also highly respected international research institutions, including the National University of Singapore and Germany's Max Planck Institute. The partnerships with these research organisations have been useful in assisting Parks Australia to deliver management plan obligations, for example, through assessment and monitoring of native and invasive species.

Over many years, there has been a continued and regular association and presence on the island of researchers, students and volunteers. Academic research, including PhD projects, supports conservation programs, and builds understanding and awareness of the island's natural wonders.

Parks Australia supports a range of external research activities, including through information and equipment sharing, and the provision of accommodation on Christmas Island at the park's 'Pink House' research station (which has bunk beds and a small laboratory). Reputable science has helped secure significant funding from the National Environmental Science Program (NESP).

Identifying how the community can contribute to citizen science, and capitalise on jobs flowing from government investment, including in education and research.

In addition to the approximately 22 on-going local positions attached to the park, Parks Australia provided 642 days (4,814 hours) casual employment for 14 local individuals during the 2020 calendar year, working across the full range of park functions.

Pre-COVID, 2020 saw good examples of 'voluntourism', with self-funded travellers supervised by park staff in volunteer work across a number of field-based functions, such as the census and maintenance of captive populations of Christmas Island blue-tailed skinks and Lister's geckoes.

A proposal for a Junior Ranger program has been developed in collaboration with the Christmas Island District High School. The National Parks Conservation Trust (<https://parkstrust.org.au/>) and Parks Australia are seeking to leverage philanthropic support to establish the program which would have dedicated staffing and form part of the curriculum, providing a new way for the community to support and engage in park management.

Socially responsible development that addresses the social impact of cost of living and geographic isolation; and supports community needs and aspirations.

Parks Australia has convened a new community consultative group for Christmas Island National Park to better understand community needs and aspirations and provide a forum for community groups and organisations to work with Parks Australia to support community interests.

Strengthening and diversifying the IOT economies; and identifying future infrastructure needs to support sustainable economic growth.

Parks Australia manages the catchment for the island's water-supply, and key water delivery infrastructure is located within the park at Jedda and Jane-Up Cave. Management of this resource is subject to the park's management plan.

Roads which link the accessible and economically significant parts of the island traverse the park, including the roads that connect the immigration detention centre and mining areas to the township. The responsibility of Parks Australia, these assets are critical to park and non-park-users alike. Maintaining them in the face of increased use will present budget pressures and likely require partnerships or budget augmentation.

The annual crab migration is an excellent example of an event that crosses jurisdictions and boundaries, tests roles and responsibilities, and matters to the community and businesses alike. Crab fencing and further innovation to augment the crab bridge and underpasses is needed to ensure productive migration seasons. This work is economically, socially and environmentally vital for the island, however, stretches the capacity of the park to manage beyond its boundaries.

The establishment of a multi-functional (Indian Ocean Territories) research and educational facility on Christmas Island, in conjunction with relevant research and educational partners, has been proposed on several occasions. There may be value in a feasibility study for such a facility in the Indian Ocean Territories.