INQUIRY INTO ENABLING COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE IN AUSTRALIA'S EXTERNAL 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.

Island Park Reserves

The presence of a Commonwealth reserve in each of the Indian Ocean Territories (IOT) and on Norfolk Island means that Parks Australia is a major land manager and has a stake in communications infrastructure in support of conducting its park operations and visitor experiences to the 'Island Parks'.

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 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.

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

Norfolk Island National Park: Norfolk Island National Park covers 650 hectares or approximately 19% of the total land mass of Norfolk Island. The main island portion of the park was established in 1985, with the Phillip Island section established in 1996. The Norfolk Island National Park and Norfolk Island Botanic Garden Management Plan is available at:
https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2018L00619

Christmas Island National Park, Pulu Keeling National Park and Norfolk Island National Park are managed as a single management entity, with staff located in all three territories.

2. SCOPE OF SUBMISSION

Effective park management is integral to maintenance of the unique natural assets in the parks that support opportunities for nature-based tourism, hospitality and research.

This submission focusses on Parks Australia's activities and responsibilities for Christmas Island National Park, Pulu Keeling National Park and Norfolk Island National Park as they relate to the terms of reference.

ENABLING COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE IN AUSTRALIA'S EXTERNAL TERRITORIES

1. the availability of, and access to communications technologies and infrastructure in each of the external territories;

The Parks Australia offices on Christmas Island, Cocos and Norfolk Islands are supported by town communications infrastructure for telephone and internet services. Park management activities outside of the township as they relate to maintenance of parks assets (e.g. roads, boardwalks, signs) fieldwork for threatened and invasive species, and emergency and incident response, are reliant on remote communications using a combination of satellite phones, radios (where there is signal) and In Reach devices.

2. future opportunities in enabling communications technologies and infrastructure in each of the external territories including telecommunications services, submarine cables, satellite capabilities;

In support of enhancing tourism businesses and visitor experiences, Parks Australia would welcome development of a Christmas Island island-wide emergency radio communications network and limited mobile network cover at key tourism destinations (e.g. Grants Well). Infrastructure to support enhanced communications services would benefit park management (e.g. communications while undertaking fieldwork and asset maintenance), tourism (e.g. access to maps and social media) and emergency services (e.g. access to emergency authorities).

Reliable communication for Pulu Keeling National Park in the Cocos Keeling Islands remains a challenge for staff undertaking field work and community visiting the park. Further investigation of appropriate communication technology and infrastructure options would be helpful to guide emergency response options in the park.

Communications to Norfolk Island is dependent upon satellite connectivity, and this is unreliable during periods of inclement weather either on the mainland or in proximity to Norfolk Island. The office and parks hut on Phillip Island are connected to NBN but are severely impacted upon by poor satellite connectivity, and periods of outages are not uncommon. There is insufficient bandwidth to support high quality video conferencing.

3. opportunities and barriers arising from current and potential future communications infrastructure in each of the external territories;

Christmas Island National Park is a major tourist attraction and makes up 63% of the total Christmas Island landmass. The existing mobile network does not extend coverage to the National Park and consequently park staff are reliant on remote communications (e.g. satellite phones, radios and In Reach devices) while visitors are encouraged to carry a personal locator beacon (PLB). The lack of

mobile reception presents communication and navigation challenges for tourists visiting the park, and can also raise safety issues in emergency situations.

Access to reliable communications is important for emergency services. The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (DITRDC) commissioned a study in 2013 to identify solutions for an island wide emergency radio communications network. The report from that study, prepared by Germadjen Communications Pty Ltd, recommended a radio network be established to provide emergency communications. The report also noted that general public access to limited coverage at popular areas for the purpose of alerting emergency authorities was considered a priority. Although outside the scope of the study, the report also highlighted a strong preference by some participants for extending the mobile telephone network to provide wider coverage of Christmas Island. Parks Australia recognises the challenges in enabling complete radio coverage of Christmas Island, including the island's remoteness, typography and vegetation.

Norfolk Island National Park is a major tourist destination for visitors to Norfolk Island with an estimated visitation of 25,000 per year. Whilst Norfolk Island Telecom is currently upgrading the island's 2G network to 3G/ 4G, the full impacts on the upgrade in relation to communications across the island, and within the park specifically is still untested.

4. examining the economic benefits of improving the availability of, and access to communications infrastructure in each of the external territories;

Parks Australia has and will continue to support the development of key tourism infrastructure, for example, on Christmas Island, the Blowholes boardwalk, Margaret's Knoll, Grants Well and roads within the National Park. A campsite development plan funded by DITRDC at Grants Well, could be a potential catalyst for the development of new forest walks and mountain bike tracks. Access to reliable communications at key tourism destinations supports visitor experiences and has the potential to grow the profile and increase visitation at sites (for example, through access to social media). Quality mobile networks can bring economic benefits to regional areas through boosting growth in the tourism sector.

The exploration of mountain bike tourism on Christmas Island presents an opportunity to diversify visitor experiences. Mountain biking is an inherently risky recreational activity and access to reliable communication in the event of an accident may help to support growth of the mountain bike tourism market.

Research partnerships have been an avenue for investment on the islands. The significance of Christmas, Cocos and Norfolk 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. Access to easy and reliable communications while in the field will help to support future interest in research and the economic benefits that flow through supporting researchers (e.g. transport, accommodation and food).

5. recommendations for any future communications technologies and infrastructure for each of the external territories.

In support of national park related business and rewarding visitor experiences, Parks Australia supports a Christmas Island island-wide emergency radio communications network complemented by limited mobile network cover at key tourism destinations.