

Chapter 1

Introduction

Terms of reference

1.1 On 7 December 2005, the Senate referred an inquiry into the funding and resourcing of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas to the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee for report by 30 November 2006. On 18 October 2006 the Senate granted an extension of time to report until 28 February 2007. Two further extensions were later granted to the committee, to 29 March 2007, and then again to 12 April 2007. The committee thanks the Senate and interested stakeholders for their cooperation with the committee as it has completed this major inquiry.

1.2 The terms of reference were:

The funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

- (a) the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- (b) whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;
- (c) any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- (d) the responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans; and
- (e) the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 In accordance with its usual practice, the committee advertised details of the inquiry in *The Australian* on 14 December 2005. The committee also made direct contact with a range of organisations and individuals to invite submissions to the Inquiry. The committee received written submissions from 221 individuals and organisations, as listed at Appendix 1. Additional information received by the committee is listed at Appendix 3.

1.4 Public hearings of the committee were held in all States and Territories, except Tasmania. Details of the 11 hearings, including a list of witnesses who gave evidence, are shown at Appendix 2.

1.5 The committee took the view that its understanding of issues raised in the course of the inquiry would be assisted by undertaking a program of site visits in conjunction with its hearings program. The committee inspected a number of national parks, conservation reserves and marine parks, as listed in Appendix 11. The program of site visits included a variety of reserve types in different management jurisdictions, subject to a range of pressures – some that were unique to particular parks, and others that were common to all. Each visit offered an insight into the diversity of ecosystems represented in the reserve system, their relationship with local communities, and their associated management issues.

Figure 1.1 Committee members and staff during site visits in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area



1.6 During the course of the inquiry, two witnesses raised concerns with the committee about their treatment by their employer in relation to evidence given to the committee. Senate privilege resolution 1(18) states:

Where a committee has any reason to believe that any person has been improperly influenced in respect of evidence which may be given before the committee, or has been subjected to or threatened with any penalty or injury

in respect of any evidence given, the committee shall take all reasonable steps to ascertain the facts of the matter. Where the committee considers that the facts disclose that a person may have been improperly influenced or subjected to or threatened with penalty or injury in respect of evidence which may be or has been given before the committee, the committee shall report the facts and its conclusions to the Senate.

1.7 The committee regards such allegations as serious matters and, in accordance with the Senate's privilege resolutions, sought to establish the facts of the matter. It wrote to one of the witnesses seeking more detail, and in both cases wrote to the two senior managers against whom allegations had been made, seeking their account of the facts. Both managers wrote to the committee responding to the claims made against them.

1.8 The committee is still considering the material made available to it, and will report on the matter to the Senate as soon as it is able.

Terminology used in this report

1.9 There are many different types of land and sea tenure that are managed for many different conservation purposes. This very diversity was itself a topic of discussion by some witnesses. The committee's terms of reference ask it to examine issues concerning 'Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas'. Throughout this report the committee refers to these areas as the conservation estate or the reserve system.

Acknowledgements

1.10 The committee wishes to express its appreciation for the cooperation of all who contributed to its inquiry, whether by making submissions, by personal attendance at a hearing, or, as in many cases, by giving both written and oral evidence. In particular, the committee thanks those who travelled significant distances to attend its public hearings.

1.11 The committee would like to note its gratitude to those park rangers and other officers from Commonwealth, state and territory departments who assisted the committee during site visits to national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas throughout Australia. In particular, the committee would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Mr Peter Cochrane, Director of National Parks; Ms Helen Halliday, Department of Environment and Heritage; Mr Alan Feely, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service; Ms Josh Gibson, Wet Tropics Management Authority; Mr Greg Leaman, South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage; and Mr Jim Sharp, Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation.

1.12 The committee also thanks the many individuals and businesses involved in management of Australia's conservation estate who spent time with the committee during its visits to some of Australia's diverse and valuable natural areas.

Figure 1.2 The committee visiting Woodside's facility, Karratha, Western Australia



1.13 The committee would also like to acknowledge the work of the secretariat for their organisation and support of such a large inquiry and for their work in drafting the report. The Committee particularly thanks Dr Jacqueline Dewar for her commitment while acting as secretary to the committee through much of the inquiry.