



INSTITUTE OF FORESTERS OF AUSTRALIA
ACT DIVISION

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Mick Gentleman MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
Legislative Assembly for the ACT

Inquiry into the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

Dear Mr Gentleman

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Planning and Environment Committee's Inquiry into the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The Institute of Foresters welcomes the work of your committee as it provides a focus on the issues of the sustainable management of the ACT's urban and rural lands. Our comments relate to the feasibility of the proposed nomination and the implications for the management of ACT's extensive forests and woodlands.

General Comments

Of particular importance is the need for community discussion on the proposal. The UNESCO concept of Biosphere Reserves is a relatively new concept for the ACT community; this is partly because Australia has been slow to take up and apply the concept and biosphere reserves are usually in remote places and few in number. The assessment of the proposal and its application to the ACT is therefore timely and essential in informing the ACT Assembly and the community of the costs and benefits of a biosphere reserve in the ACT.

The biosphere reserve concept would appear to be compatible with the rural land use strategies already in place and need not impose additional restrictions on land managers. It might then build on the great strengths of the 'bush capital', draw attention to the importance of sound management of the ACT's natural and man-made assets and to the role of communities in ongoing improvement. Importantly it provides for economic and social outcomes that are an integral part of achieving sustainability outcomes. This is essential as the community needs to see benefits from the proposal as the proposed nomination does not of itself appear to provide these.

We agree with the statement by the Chief Minister that the ACT has the key elements of a possible biosphere reserve including:

- a core protected area with little human activity: in this case Namadgi;
- a buffer zone: our rural lands, forests, Lower Cotter Catchment, nature reserves and the Murrumbidgee River Corridor; and
- an economic and social zone: the city and its nearby villages.

But we would note that there are embedded community and privately managed assets that need to be considered. We see significant opportunities provided that it is not used to engender new, unrealistic restrictions on the management and use of these lands as they are an important component of the social and economic fabric of the Territory and already contribute to sustainable outcomes.

We recognize the importance of sustainability to the long term future of the ACT and its potential to showcase to other parts of Australia and to the rest of the world as part of a biosphere reserve. There could also be opportunities to promote and build on the ACT's strengths as a centre of excellence in a range of fields that would assist the community to advance the implementation of a biosphere reserve concept.

While the nomination process is still in its very early stages, we believe that this is an aim worth pursuing, provided that the nomination process is soundly conceived and the subsequent management of natural and built heritage is properly funded so that the concept will impress the importance of true sustainability in the minds of Canberrans. We would also note that this needs to be based on effective planning and management of resources.

The Institute recognises that much of the ACT is forested and effective forest and woodland management is therefore critical to meeting the objectives of a biosphere reserve. We would emphasise that any nomination can and should support:

- sustainable management of forests and woodlands for their multiple and diverse uses;
- stakeholder input in the development of strategic forest and woodland management plans;
- strategic forest and woodland planning that is integrated and holistic taking into account the risks and threats to the range of environmental, cultural, social and economic values;
- consideration of values at a landscape level;
- monitoring and review of strategic management plans every five to ten years as well as periodic auditing of the implementation of operational plans;
- the use of appropriate criteria and indicators as a framework for monitoring sustainable forest and woodland management.

As a fire prone region we also see the need for a better appreciation of the important and complex role that fire plays in the evolution and maintenance of Australian ecosystems, including the collection and analysis of comprehensive scientific information and the effective distribution of information to policy makers, land managers and the community.

This is an issue of particular significance to the ACT and is one where the ACT can demonstrate national leadership because forest fires can have effects that are significant at local, regional and global scales. But this is no simple matter and needs:

- to be accelerated through resources coordinated research into the behaviour, environmental effects and social impacts of bushfires;
- communities, agencies and governments fostering cooperative arrangements in relation to understanding and managing the impacts and use of fire.

Issues that need to be addressed:

1. There does not appear to be a significant body of evidence in support of the proposal

The information currently available is limited and not specific to the Territory. A key activity would be to ensure that residents of the ACT are familiar with the concept, what it entails, its benefits and costs, what is in it for them and whether it would attract public and private sector funding so that they can support it and work towards its implementation.

2. Involvement of the non-government sector

The biosphere reserve would have implications for managing private land and the limited information available does not suggest that there are clear precedents to achieve this. There would also need to be a clear path for the engagement of the community in its implementation. This entails funding to deliver enhanced sustainability outcomes. In regard to funding from the private sector, there are few such examples of successful stewardship of heritage values in the ACT (positive examples that come to mind include the Hyatt Hotel and Westbourne Woods – in both cases there are substantial benefits to the custodians; negative examples include the equestrian park near Curtin and some mountain bike tracks). On the other hand, publicly funded activities are increasingly likely to suffer as a result of budgetary cutbacks, etc. It seems that Westbourne Woods would be equally as neglected as other similar places if their conservation were left to the public sector (the Redwood Grove at Pialligo comes to mind as an example).

3. It does not appear that there are clear and detailed precedents for the operation of the biosphere proposal in highly urbanised areas like Canberra

While the ACT Government website refers in broad terms to the urban issues it is not clear how or if it will impact on the urban landscape. There are also issues relating to the Commonwealth Government as it is unlikely that the proposal could be implemented without the support of the Minister for Territories and National Capital Authority, particularly in those areas within their direct control.

4. Involvement of local stakeholders

The ACT already has processes in place to involve local stakeholders in decision-making processes, as does the Commonwealth Government. Subsequent involvement of local stakeholders in education and training can only be decided once the geographic and administrative extents of the proposal are known. However, the nomination process and subsequent management has the potential to help the ACT and others have a keener debate about 'sustainability' and how Canberra meets its food, fibre, energy, water needs, ie its "footprint" both in terms of land use and consumption impacts as well as consider its conservation issues.

In other Australian examples, areas that are already protected by State legislation have been nominated as Biosphere Reserves but the management has been "business as usual" so that the benefits of nomination are at best, unclear. As discussed, stakeholders would need to be engaged in development and implementation.

5. Communication strategies

Communication strategies must start with a public information process and then be taken forward in a step-wise manner as specific outcomes are achieved.

6. Timeframe and viability of the proposed nomination

It is too soon to consider either the timeframe or viability of a nomination for a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the ACT until the public knows more about the process and the responsibilities and benefits attached to the outcomes. In the meantime we should make every effort to look after the assets that we need to conserve.

About the Institute

The Institute of Foresters is a national professional body with 1240 members engaged in all branches of forest management and conservation in Australia. The Institute is strongly committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and the processes and practices which translate these principles into outcomes.

The membership represents all segments of the forestry profession, including public and private practitioners engaged in many aspects of forestry, nature conservation, resource and land management, research, administration and education. Membership is not restricted to professional foresters and other forestry professionals are welcomed to the institute.

The Institute is:

- an advocate for better forest management in Australia;
- an advocate for high professional standards in forestry;
- an advocate for active management of our forests for all values.

Yours sincerely

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