



friends of the
pinnacle

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The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment
PO Box 356
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Dear Dr Cooper

INVESTIGATION INTO CANBERRA NATURE PARK, MOLONGLO RIVER CORRIDOR AND GOOGONG FORESHORE

Thank you for inviting the Friends of the Pinnacle (FOTPIN) to provide late input to the above investigation.

By way of background, FOTPIN is a re-emerged parkcare group that was active during the early 1990's. The group reformed in 2009, and is comprised of previous group members and recent 'recruits'.

There is a general view within the group that the Pinnacle has been poorly managed. Management activities appear to be largely reactive, with little evidence of property scale planning. The absence of property-level management planning, coupled with The Pinnacle's declining condition, has caused us to adopt a targeted, pro-active approach to managing the Pinnacle.

Our goal is to protect and enhance the ecological values of The Pinnacle Nature Reserve. For us this means responding to landscape scale processes, including the need to control and reverse the impacts of weeds, pest animals, total grazing pressure, land and water degradation and contemporary fire regimes.

An early priority for us is to control priority weeds. Informed by the ACT's Weed Strategy and Weeds and Invertebrate Pest Management Guidelines, we have drafted a Community Weed Management Plan. This Plan will provide baseline information on the extent of priority weeds at the Pinnacle, management principles, priorities, strategies, performance targets, and continuous improvement and reporting arrangements.

We see the Weed Plan as a prospectus for informed co-investment, a platform for raising awareness, engaging and partnering community and government organisations, and building and maintaining community capacity. This includes actively and appropriately engaging Traditional Owners and adjacent land-managers.

More recently FOTPIN assisted with the ACT Government's rabbit control activities by mapping rabbit warrens at The Pinnacle and on adjacent Government-managed lands. There is no evidence of a property-level program to direct rabbit control activities, and so we have approached the ACT Government to jointly develop and implement a community-based rabbit control program. We are also exploring with an adjacent lessee opportunities for an integrated control program.

The proposed rabbit control program will contain many of the planning elements in the draft Weed Plan and is intended to play, at least conceptually, a similar role to that outlined for the Weed Plan.

Perhaps of greater strategic value, we will be conducting a biological survey of the Reserve in spring 2010. The outcomes of this survey will help improve our threat abatement plans (e.g. weed plan) and inform development of an ecological restoration strategy for The Pinnacle. We have received from The University of Canberra a plan showing potential areas of *Aprasia parapulchella* habitat, and will soon conduct field validation of this in preparation for the spring surveys.

It is not too late for The Pinnacle. We understand The Pinnacle is in relatively good condition - compared to some other Canberra Nature Park reserves - and we believe some of the threatening processes can be reversed. Here you see a community group working in partnership with Government, to build and implement a robust, evidence and policy-based management system that involves the local community.

FOTPIN is receiving a great deal of practical and advisory support from PC&L, for which we are grateful.

The following comments are against specific Terms of Reference:

1. *assesses the condition of the forests, woodlands and grassy woodlands in these areas, including the effects of grazing by stock and/or kangaroos, vertebrate pests and weeds;*

FOTPIN understands the Pinnacle Nature Reserve to be in relatively good condition, however:

- exotic grass species have been almost entirely replaced native grasses;
- a significant planting program in the early 1990's introduced non-locally indigenous species;
- there is significant erosion along tracks and paths, some gully erosion along the top of Deep Creek, and erosion adjacent to shaded areas used by large 'mobs' of kangaroos;
- there is some, but not uniform, evidence of tree and shrub recruitment,
- several very large rabbit warrens pose an ongoing challenge to effective rabbit control;
- adjacent land management, particularly in respect to rabbit and weed control, is unsympathetic to protecting and enhancing the values of the Pinnacle;
- connectivity to Mount Painter and the Molonglo River corridor is highly constrained;
- current fire hazard management policy proposes planned burns at ecologically unsustainable intervals; and
- non-grassy invasive weeds dominate large areas of the reserve.

We understand PC&L surveyed the reserve and adjacent properties, classifying vegetation condition according to degree of modification. However, this appears to be a broad assessment based on aerial photography and rapid ground truthing, and would not be suitable (and was likely not intended) for property level management planning and project activity.

As we progressively characterise and manage threats to the reserve, FOTPIN is 'building a picture' of the Reserve's condition. Our draft Weed Plan highlights that more than 1.7 hectares are covered by Horehound, that in early December 2009 Saffron Thistle covered almost 10% of the reserve, and that there may have been up to 2,900 individual Briar Rose bushes.

PC&L's Weed Management Guidelines identify African Love Grass and St John's Wort as high priority weeds due to their ability to invade undisturbed lands. The former is found along roadside verges surrounding the reserve and adjacent to tracks entering to the north, and the latter is found throughout the reserve, broadly dispersed and in discrete patches.

The threat weed species pose to the reserve is difficult to characterise, especially given its modified condition. Our condition surveys and monitoring to date focus on defining the extent of weed infestations, identifying spatial priorities for intervention, and tracking the effectiveness of controls - rather than establishing systems for evaluating the impact of infestations. ACT Government policy indicates the presence of these weeds is detrimental to the ecological integrity of the reserve.

FOTPIN will give greater emphasis to condition assessments as we move into restoration planning. This will give us a condition 'baseline' for tracking improvement outcomes, the effectiveness of our threat abatement and restoration programs, and to help prioritise assets for protection and enhancement.

2. identifies actions to protect and enhance these areas, including land use or boundary changes while taking into account their purpose, values and location and the status of indigenous species and communities protected in the nature reserve system;

As touched on elsewhere in this submission, FOTPIN is looking to develop a restoration plan supported by a series of property-scale threat abatement plans. We will soon release a draft Community Weed Management Plan, are working jointly with PC&L on a collaborative, formal program to control rabbits, and we are investigating fire and water quality/soil erosion issues. We consider controlling and reversing the impacts of these landscape scale threats critical to securing longer term investments in ecological restoration, resilience and connectivity outcomes. Implementing these plans will be backed by well designed monitoring and continuous improvement processes.

FOTPIN believes the area known as "Bottom Pinnacle", as well as a 'triangular' paddock on the Kama property to the north of the Bottom Pinnacle, should be incorporated into the Pinnacle Nature Reserve. This would lead to better outcomes for these three parcels and adjacent nature reserves through:

- improved protection of their conservation values;
- enhancing connectivity between The Pinnacle, the Kama Nature Reserve, and the Molonglo River Corridor through dryland areas and along Deep Creek; and
- facilitating a consistent management system across this continuum.

There may also be portions of the former Kama property, presently managed by PC&L, which would contribute beneficially to the conservation reserve system.

There are several specific management issues, which are possibly not unique to The Pinnacle. These include impacts from the construction of amateur BMX tracks, and horse and mountain-bike riding off designated tracks, fauna, rocks and firewood removal, and the presence of cats and off-leash dogs. These issues could be addressed through, for example:

- the Sustainable Schools Initiative, teaching the importance of our reserve system, its management objectives and acceptable activities on these lands;
- considering establishment of a leash-free dog exercise area near The Pinnacle, possibly adjacent to the Dungowan Street entrance;
- constructing barriers to horse access to The Pinnacle;
- greater monitoring and enforcement activity at peak use times; and
- landscaping the waste rock dump adjacent to the water tanks, and possibly establishing an alternative amateur BMX track.

3. *reviews land management programs and practices for these areas and areas that adjoin them. This is to include, but will not be limited to, agistment, leasing, culling arrangements, Land Management Agreements or plans of management which may apply;*

FOTPIN expects to see land management programs and practices articulated through property-specific plans or strategies. We are not aware of strategies for The Pinnacle, and believe this a major barrier to:

- involving and engaging the community in reserve management;
- setting priorities for management activity;
- facilitating transparent and accountable park management; and
- achieving desired conservation outcomes.

For these and other reasons some members of the group has chosen to transparently develop and implement management plans for The Pinnacle. Our Community Weed Management Plan is a long term plan, and includes arrangements for monitoring, community reporting and continuous improvement – features that are critical to ensuring the plan remains relevant to all parties active at the property level.

Reserve system management must respond to threats posed by landscape scale processes, and activities on adjoining properties, including weeds, pest animals, soil and water degradation and the implementation of fire hazard policy.

Ideally an integrated approach to threat abatement and biodiversity conservation should be taken at a scale that maximises the likelihood of efficiently achieving and securing desired outcomes. For example, to address rabbit or kangaroo impacts on The Pinnacle requires a control program designed and implemented in a coordinated manner across the area bounded by urban development, William Hovell, Coulter and Springvale Drives. Similarly, control of woody weeds throughout adjacent leasehold land would help to reduce reinfestation of The Pinnacle.

As a minimum leasehold lands should be required to be managed ‘sustainably’, that is, to maintain the productive resource base and maintain key biodiversity elements. A simple, robust set of performance requirements should be established for leaseholders, to address sustainability objectives and the needs of adjoining reserves, within an integrated management plan.

Mowing impacts are a serious risk to nature reserves if they are not carefully implemented to avoid spreading weeds, and damaging native grasses before seed set.

4. *identifies any urgent actions and longer-term changes that are needed to improve the management of these areas. This is to include successful management measures that should be retained;*

We believe funding for reserve management is not commensurate with management needs. For example, agency weed control at The Pinnacle addresses only the highest priority weeds listed in the PC&L Management Guidelines, and even so, the high priority St John’s Wort infests large areas of the Reserve.

Only in recent years has an attempt been made to control rabbits at The Pinnacle, however reinfestation occurred due to poor follow-up after initial baiting and warren treatment. Where rabbit warrens were ripped, failure to implement effective rehabilitation techniques meant those areas were recolonised and infested with Saffron Thistle, Patterson’s Curse and thistle species. Inadequate and unreliable funding levels, which the above reflects – leads to inefficiencies, greater cost and uncertain environmental outcomes.

An important element of park management funding is ensuring adequate resourcing for park rangers, and to retain and develop sufficient rangers for the task. Rangers are needed to maintain a formal presence and discourage inappropriate use, to develop and implement workplans and contracts, to monitor site condition and to liaise with adjacent land managers and parkcare groups. Rangers play a critical role in reserve management, and in involving and engaging the community. It is in response to inadequate resourcing that many parkcarers, often in full time employment, commit considerable time and effort on reserve management.

The above focus on park rangers should not be to the detriment of other PC&L staff. Scientific and planning skills are a critical support to managers, and those officers must be valued also and adequately rewarded for the skills they bring to the organisation.

Canberra's network of conservation reserves underpins the unique ambience and identity of Canberra, our National Capital. The importance of Canberra's reserve system is reflected in extensive areas being designated land under the National Capital Plan, with The Pinnacle designated as "Hills, Ridges and Buffers". The Federal Government continues to require these lands be managed for their landscape value but appears unwilling to contribute to their management. Addressing this anomaly may lead to more suitable funding levels, greater transparency and improved outcomes.

5. identifies knowledge gaps, research or survey needs, and compliance and monitoring requirements that may be necessary to support improved management programs and practices while taking into account the context of the areas and effects of climate variability;

Environment policy makers often use the concept 'ecosystem services' to refer to the benefits people derive from ecosystem processes – the provision of clean air, water, productive soils, pharmaceuticals etc. The awe and sense of place or wellbeing derived from experiencing natural places has been an important driver in the creation of national parks. FOTPIN is confident ecosystem services the Canberra Nature Park provides are a significant factor in the well-being of Canberra residents. A very simple reflection of this may be the relative value of residences adjacent to this park system.

The Pinnacle is enjoyed by many hundreds of people. Most are in no doubt as to the benefits of the nature reserve for their personal well-being. Others will make the connection if stimulated by awareness raising activities such as the frequent guided walks operated by FOTPIN.

The inquiry might support the need for research and surveys quantifying the value of nature reserves to the well-being of Canberra residents, and the value residents place on healthy functioning reserves over ones for example, infested with Saffron Thistles, Blackberries or thistles. This would incorporate the psychological, physical and social benefits of fresh air, exercise, closeness to nature and the opportunities for 'parkcare' and recreational activities available through these reserves. The health benefit of this park system potentially translates to cost savings to the ACT economy in its health and social welfare budgets through people undertaking these activities.

Past land management practices have converted native grassy understorey into exotic grasses and clovers, which are now a widespread problem across the ACT. This major cause of environmental degradation needs to be addressed by trialling prospective and potentially cost-effective restoration techniques, and to then implement those techniques on a priority basis across a large area of the reserve system. Parkcare groups could potentially contribute substantially to offsetting the costs of restoration trials and implementation.

As mentioned elsewhere FOTPIN is looking to develop and implement an integrated threat abatement and ecological restoration program at The Pinnacle. This management program would benefit from the

following knowledge gaps being addressed:

- the sustainable kangaroo carrying capacity of The Pinnacle, and current numbers of kangaroos;
- the nature of soil erosion on the reserve, and robust and cost-effective means of reducing this erosion to acceptable levels;
- the nature and location of species threatened by controlled burning at currently proposed return intervals;
- the likely original vegetation communities on The Pinnacle;
- the likelihood of effectively reintroducing listed species to The Pinnacle, including species protected under the *Nature Conservation Act 1980* and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; and
- measures needed to develop effective connectivity enabling wildlife to move between the Pinnacle and the Molonglo Valley.

6. *identifies ways for ensuring effective communication and involvement of stakeholders, including Aboriginal people, whose actions potentially, indirectly or directly, affect these areas;*

Stakeholders, acting as individuals or associations, constitute community, and so active broad based stakeholder communication and involvement is vital to community support for The Pinnacle.

Since late 2009 we have sought to engage a range of stakeholders. In early 2010 we distributed letterbox fliers, and placed posters in the local area, to let the community know we are active and of projects planned for the near future. This was timed with setting up a blogsite, updated weekly, to inform our group and others on our activities and priorities.

Following close liaison with the Ngambri people, we posted prominently on our blogsite an Acknowledgement of Country, and invited a Ngambri elder to Welcome us to Country at an upcoming public event. These are critical initial steps to engaging Traditional Owners.

One of our team has approached the former lessees, who also manage an adjacent rural lease, Mr and Mrs Maurice Tully. Our primary intention here was to introduce ourselves as ‘the new neighbours’, and to be open to learning about the nature and management history of The Pinnacle (which Mr and Mrs Tully call Stringybark Hill), and to identify ways of collaborating on ‘transboundary’ issues such as rabbit control.

More recently one of our team has approached the Belconnen Community Council with a view to sharing with them our aspirations for the Pinnacle, and our strategic approach to achieving those aspirations. We are also in the early stages of building joint programs with the Weetangera Primary School, although progress here has been frustrated by lack of time.

We believe an essential means of involving stakeholders is to actively engage key stakeholders in developing and implementing management plans. We will soon release a draft Community Weed Management Plan for The Pinnacle. We are taking this opportunity to invite a range of stakeholders to the public launch of the Weed Plan, to share with them The Pinnacle’s natural values, and to explore with them ways of working together to implement the Plan.

We see the Weed Plan – an early element of our business planning – to be an important vehicle for collaboration and joint investment with government, business, other environment groups and individuals. Monitoring and periodic reporting to the community will help keep the Weed Plan relevant and an ongoing, adaptive vehicle for community involvement.

In addition to threat abatement planning, the group plans to develop an ecological restoration plan for The Pinnacle during 2011. From the beginning, we are working with members of the Canberra Ornithologists

Group, the Friends of Grasslands, PC&L, The University of Canberra and Greening Australia to better characterise the attributes and functions of The Pinnacle, and to formulate a shared vision for the reserve. We will then consult widely with stakeholders to design an implementation program involving those groups and individuals.

Involving stakeholders at the community level is more than timely information sharing – it is acknowledging unique stakeholder relationships with the Pinnacle, and building trust and partnerships at the individual and organisation levels. For example, in the near future, we intend to meet with one local volunteer fire fighting group which is closely associated with The Pinnacle. Their perspectives and priorities may well differ to that of FOTPIN, however we believe that sharing links to ‘place’ is advantageous to our, and possibly their goals.

There are few people that deny the importance of The Pinnacle - the challenge for us is the time and effort that communication and involvement requires, and for some, the ability to take personal risks to engage with people holding different values and perspectives.

Previously, PC&L rangers conducted guided walks into the reserves abutting suburbs. Many environment groups (including FOTPIN) now organise similar guided walks on natural history or wildlife subjects. As volunteers their knowledge and skills may be limited, and they may not be equipped to communicate the special significance of these natural places. Further they may not have the capacity or access to modern communication technologies commonly used to advertise their event. A PC&L officer dedicated to volunteer coordination and training, and advertising guided walks, would be immensely valuable to a range of voluntary environment groups. Backed by an effective awareness campaign, this strategy could be very efficient in attracting people to use and care for their park system.

The co-ordinator could also maintain an easy-access database/website of all organisations’ and agencies’ nature-park walks, activities and special events. We hope this process is emerging with the assistance of the ACT Landcare Website.

In addition to the above, there is a wealth of useful and engaging information in previous publications, including *Canberra Nature Park: Bush on your Doorstep* and *Get out there*. The ANU’s *Urban Habitat Guidelines*, the three Catchment Groups’ publications and brochures, brochures published by individual reserves’ groups, and the Conservation Council’s brochures are all informative resources. Generally, however, knowledge gaps occur where these publications or websites are inadequately promoted or linked. Those who understand ‘the bush’, flora and fauna are more likely to be protective of it.

7. identifies potential biodiversity offset management actions or sites;

FOTPIN considers the use of biodiversity offsets to be presently a somewhat speculative alternative to protecting and rehabilitating ecological communities and habitats in situ, particularly for grasslands and grassy woodlands that are threatened ecosystems.

Amongst other things, our proposed ecological restoration strategy will review and assess the scientific literature on restoration techniques, identify restoration opportunities, and suggest initial sites and actions. It would be on the basis of this strategy that we could propose restoration actions, where those options might then be available to organisations seeking biodiversity offsets for the impacts of development elsewhere in the Molonglo Valley.

8. *identifies the evidence justifying the need for managing grazing pressure in the context of sound reserve management practice;*

We suspect the low levels of regeneration of many native plant species at The Pinnacle is a direct result of grazing pressures from rabbits and kangaroos. There is strong evidence that native grasses are severely grazed, limiting flowering opportunities. FOTPIN considers that total grazing pressure impacts need to be managed to an acceptable level, possibly based on existing knowledge or learnings from elsewhere in the Canberra Nature Park, before we embark on a program of revegetation and appropriate plantings or seeding.

Possible solutions to this problem are the ongoing rabbit control efforts, particularly if this is implemented at a whole-of-landscape scale rather than just within conservation areas. For this reason we are exploring possible arrangements with the adjacent lessee. Associated with this must also be adequate monitoring and follow up to reduce weed infestation after ripping and exterminate remaining rabbits before populations increase again. At The Pinnacle, kangaroo numbers could be managed by limiting access to water, and by fencing areas that will be targeted for restoration and planting. Strategic monitoring to assess impacts of grazing is urgently needed, something which can most effectively be achieved using fencing experiments and monitoring plant regeneration.

We are not opposed to a kangaroo cull provided that:

- alternatives have been properly and transparently assessed;
- there is evidence demonstrating that reducing kangaroo numbers will increase biodiversity; and
- reserve users have had full opportunity to understand the objectives and options for kangaroo control.

If it comes to this, we would encourage the ACT Government to work collaboratively with our group to survey kangaroo numbers, assess the impacts, develop management options and conduct local consultations – including with specific interest groups such as those that use The Pinnacle and/or live adjacent to The Pinnacle reserve.

Submitted by Vaughn Cox, on behalf of The Friends of The Pinnacle.