



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

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Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

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"Many hands...one voice"

Landcare ACT Ltd

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The Committee Secretary
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Dear Members of the Standing Committee

Submission to the Nature In Our City Inquiry

Landcare ACT (LACT), the peak body for environmental volunteering, welcomes this inquiry into matters affecting the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra. It is particularly timely for our unique 'city in a landscape' as we transition towards higher densities and different ways of living and working in the 21st century.

All cities across Australia are facing the key challenges of population growth, resource consumption and climate change. How we in the ACT respond will shape both the city and the quality of life for future generations. LACT's submission addresses this inquiry's terms of reference within the frame of these 'big picture' challenges.

The term nature is taken in this submission as meaning the resources and non-human species living within Canberra's parks, gardens, open spaces and reserves, and the surrounding non-urban lands, as it is the setting for the city and the area most affected by metropolitan expansion.

Clear, forward looking and evidence-based policy should be the basis for decision-making. Around 60 per cent of the ACT is 'nature reserve' in some form, however current policy documents are lacking in guidance on the importance and values of nature.

1. *The level of public support for and satisfaction with amount and quality nature and natural environment areas in Canberra, particularly in urban areas.*

Canberra's landscape setting provides an enviable degree of access to the natural environment which enhances its residents' wellbeing and quality of life. Support for natural environment areas is shown by the large amount of volunteer effort dedicated to maintaining nature reserves and parks.

LACT's member organisations represent over 60 community groups dedicated to the care of local environmental values and sites, a significant and underappreciated avoided cost for the government purse. Many of these grassroots groups are dedicated to the rehabilitation and maintenance of urban parks and open spaces. Thousands of volunteer hours per year supplement the work of the Parks and Conservation Service and City Services, and many more are devoted to other forms of environmental volunteering such as Frogwatch and Waterwatch.

The ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment ¹ calculated the replacement cost in terms of wages for these volunteer hours at \$50.5 million in 2015-16, more than 22% of total ACT Government spending on the environment. Much of that effort is directed to urban reserves, parks and wetlands.

2. *The types of nature and natural environmental areas within Canberra e.g. urban open spaces or bushland reserves and the existing or potential benefits and challenges they bring to Canberra's: Social amenity; Economic development; Biodiversity; and/or Climate resilience.*

At the most basic level, humans are 'hardwired' with a need to experience nature with our senses. Many studies from around the world recognise access to nature is a benefit for human health and wellbeing. This is particularly so for recovery from illness, particularly mental health, and for development of children, most recently recognised in the nature play movement.

LACT well understands the benefits of nature in the city in providing a range of services and benefits such as amenity, passive and active recreation, increased land values, opportunity for social cohesion, biodiversity and climate resilience. However, the challenge is to determine the 'types' and 'how much' nature is to be kept or introduced in renewal of our 20th century city.

A basic first step is consideration of place and the existing natural elements. Planning processes should include assessment of factors such as landscape features and viewsheds, community views and heritage, and microclimate vulnerabilities, leading to analysis of the 'values' of places and how much of the natural assets that exist can be kept. This is currently not sufficiently considered, as the worth of nature is not recognised in dollar terms. It is easier to knock down and re-build when the natural assets do not have a monetary value. Where existing natural assets are removed, it is important to reinstate sufficient access to nature in new development precincts to avoid exacerbating social inequities in access to the benefits of green infrastructure. Where new assets are established, such as new wetlands performing important water quality functions, sufficient attention must be given to ongoing management costs and public education.

The city's most important natural asset is Canberra Nature Park, derived from the planning concept of the National Capital Open Space System. This retention of hilltops and ridges free of development with open space reserves and buffers between the 'new town' districts of Canberra, is what provides the landscape character of the 'bush capital' and access to nature for everyone not far from where they live and work.

¹http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/1106301/Environmental-Economic-Accounts-for-ACT-state-of-the-environment-reporting_Proof-of-Concept-A151125412.pdf

LACT suggest that a key finding from this inquiry be to uphold the concept of and extension to Canberra Nature Park as integral to Canberra's amenity and identity as the 'bush capital'.

3. *Opportunities for Blue (water) and or Green (natural) Infrastructure in Canberra including: Functional requirements of proposed infrastructure; Cost and Maintenance considerations; Amenity benefits; and Conservation and biodiversity benefits.*

In Canberra we are fortunate to have more nature in and around the city than in any other Australian city. But LACT is of the view that we are losing it through lack of investment to maintain what we have². Although landscape components, such as street trees and waterways are funded as part of development, these natural assets – plants, water, soils - are taken for granted with insufficient ongoing (lifecycle) maintenance funding to thrive. Frequently, it is not until there are public complaints about poor landscape quality standards that something is done. This knee jerk response to landscape management of the city is worrying, as it means resources are pulled from somewhere else, and the functional requirements of maintaining our living infrastructure are not properly resourced.

Insufficient priority is given to nature in some newer and redeveloping urban areas. LACT supports in principle the government's stated agenda to move to a more compact city through increasing densities in centres and transport corridors, however the regulatory settings and standards need to evolve if we are to keep our 'garden city' and 'bush capital' characters with the amenity that our 20th century investments bring.

LACT welcomes the ACT Government's commitment to preparing a Living Infrastructure Plan in 2018³ and looks forward to contributing to addressing these issues.

One area that the committee may wish to examine in this context is a revisit of the idea for the ACT to be nominated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. This has previously been considered and in 2009 was rejected⁴, however the programme nationally and internationally has changed considerably since then. It now has a key focus linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals as well as the multilateral environment agreements dealing with biodiversity to which Australia has adhered.

The addition of three Biosphere reserves since the Legislative Assembly last considered the issue (Westernport and Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Noosa and Great Sandy in Queensland) that encompass urban, peri-urban and rural landscapes in Australia offers a potentially strong and practical way to bring landscape planning and community aspiration together in one organised package. UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are also a connected global network that offers the potential for information and personnel exchange to improve sustainable development practice locally and globally

Across the country Landcare is linked strongly to the network of Australian Biosphere reserves. We would be pleased to present a more detailed proposal on this issue in particular if the committee finds the idea of interest.

Nature provides a range of services to urban areas that are not valued and not accounted for in decision making. Part of the reason for this is because existing asset and accounting systems are not commonly applied to nature or the services and benefits that we accrue from them. On 27 April 2018 the Meeting of Commonwealth, state and territory environment ministers endorsed a

² The informal association, the ACT Tree Network is dismayed at the continuing (over a decade long) depletion of budget funding for upkeep of the urban forest.

³ ACT Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, 2016, plus announcement by Minister Shane Rattenbury in February 2018 with release of the Living Infrastructure Information Paper.

⁴ https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/380772/6th_PE_30_Biosphere.pdf

strategy to deliver a common national approach to implementing the United Nations System of Economic Environmental Accounting (SEEA). The SEEA takes account of, and provides where possible a monetary value for, the 'stocks and flows' of nature to help balance the ledger and enable a more complete consideration of values by decision makers.

To address the *existing or potential benefits* of nature, and truly optimise the opportunities from living infrastructure, the ACT Government has to firstly invest in SEEA accounting for our existing assets to determine what we have. By providing this common denominator of value, people from across our community will be better able to understand the benefits of nature in the city.

LACT suggests this inquiry should recommend as a high priority the funding of a full SEEA for the city and surrounds, plus revise the administrative systems to recognise living infrastructure as assets with whole of lifecycle costs that need to be funded beyond short-term budget and political cycles.

4. Managing the interface between the natural environment and urban areas particularly in regards to conserved environmental areas.

The greatest weakness of the 2012 ACT Planning Strategy is its lack of a declared metropolitan boundary and the 50:50 target for greenfield vs urban intensification, which is a guarantee of urban sprawl. LACT welcomes the recent announcement of the refresh of this document and is hopeful that an urban growth strategy will be clearly addressed.

Part of this strategy should be the interface of urban and non-urban areas. Canberra city is mostly characterised by a defined and sharp transition from suburban living to rural or reserve lands. Key desired outcomes of interface management for nature conservation are ensuring: safety of life and property; richness of biodiversity, and reduction of bio-security threats. These are best achieved by what is done so well in Canberra with the 'clean urban edge' provided by a road or fence to the reserve or rural land. This is very different to the density transition from 'city' to 'bush' through ever increasing block sizes for lifestyle choices that is seen across the border. LACT support the ACT's planning practise of rural land holdings being large, sized to be self-sufficient in water and production capacity for economic sustainability.

The urban edge is a primary source of weed incursions that can compete with native species and reduce the value of conservation areas. New developments can also bring in new neighbours who do not always hold good environmental literacy. The planning and funding of environmental education for residents near natural areas is essential to limit adverse impacts on the natural environment. If growing the ACT is inevitable, it has to be partnered with funding organisations such as community-based Catchment Groups to provide this ongoing education and community building activities. Currently Canberra has a high level of environmental literacy compared to many centres, and this is well worth maintaining.

In Australia if the free market or the Government values a product or service then there is payment for this to those who provide it. Farmers do not get paid by any part of the economy for nature conservation or as a product of their land management ensuring environmental services such as fresh air and clean water to the wider community. Consequently, LACT suggests the government should consider the value to the Territory of these 'products' and if a shift of farm practises is desired, how best to remunerate ACT farmers for providing these goods and services.

Similarly, looking after nature needs long-term commitment. Lack of certainty of tenure gives rise to uses for short-term gains, with lack of attention to longer-term outcomes. Every small business person knows that without certainty of tenure you can't get a loan and can't invest in the future of the business. LACT is of the view that with a metropolitan boundary established, all other non-urban land should have the right to a 99 year lease for land tenure certainty.

LACT suggests this inquiry should recommend the ACT Planning Strategy refresh include a defined metro boundary to accommodate urban growth targets and a process for non-urban land planning that is fair and will provide for sustainable uses into the future.

5. Current policy or regulatory settings that impede the integration of the natural environment within optimal urban development and design.

There is no landscape policy for Canberra city, no document that considers the broader landscape issues, or concepts of beauty and human interaction with nature. There is no guidance to draw the city's diverse districts, from Gungahlin in the north to Tuggeranong in the south, together into a cohesive whole. Similarly, there is no Natural Resources Plan for the Territory to guide decisions about uses of nature's assets.

The Nature Conservation Strategy 2013-23 is the nearest to a policy on 'nature', however as the name suggests, its focus is narrow, being the specifics of wildlife (animal and plant) conservation. Further, the underpinning philosophy appears to promulgate the Victorian era ideal of "wilderness", that is an uninhabited landscape. This out-dated concept ignores the facts of aboriginal inhabitation, use and management of the land. This is relevant because the place specific management plans for each reserve have this policy as the start point.

In the absence of these fundamental policies, place specific documents for future urban areas, new estates or redevelopments, are prepared without sufficient consideration of wider issues.

The inherited landscape of today is derived from the millennia of Aboriginal inhabitation, a century of agricultural settlement, and Canberra's first 100 years. Stewardship of our living legacy is our responsibility. Nature in the broad, as well as the detail of its components, needs to be deeply understood to be able to be well managed.

LACT is of the view that there are insufficient policies that consider nature to guide future urban growth or prevent incremental urban sprawl. Further, the lack of both a Landscape Policy and a Natural Resource Management Plan impede the potential for integration of the natural environment with optimal urban development. LACT suggests this inquiry should recommend the development of new policies as a high priority

Thank you for the opportunity to raise these important issues and we would be pleased to appear at your hearings later this year. For more information about our work and recent workshops and reports on matters of relevance to this inquiry please refer to our website, and particularly to our Position Statement on Peri-urban land (<https://landcareact.org.au>).

Yours sincerely

A black rectangular redaction box covers the signature of Peter Bridgewater. A handwritten signature is visible above the redaction.

Peter Bridgewater
Chair, Landcare ACT
29 June 2018