

MOLONGLO CATCHMENT GROUP Inc.

ABN 78 210 867 987



The Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services,
Legislative Assembly for the ACT,
GPO Box 1020, CANBERRA ACT 2601.

Email: LACommitteeETCS@parliament.act.gov.au

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Submission from Molonglo Catchment Group to the Inquiry into the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra

The Molonglo Catchment Group (MCG) was formed in 2003 with the principal objective of developing the Molonglo Catchment Strategy (2004-24). The implementation of this Strategy was the logical next step for the Group and is now our key role. We do this by coordinating and integrating the network of Landcare and Park care groups in the Molonglo catchment and working directly with rural and peri-urban landholders, appropriate to the level of support (resources) available.

Our latest corporate plan incorporates our vision for the Molonglo catchment of “A healthy, resilient and productive catchment”. In this vision, the term ‘catchment’ means “the Molonglo and Queanbeyan river system with all its diverse, interconnected tableland landscapes and communities”.

The vision emphasises the balance between socioeconomic and environmental goals, and that healthy and resilient environments underpin productive uses of natural resources. The vision also highlights the underpinning philosophy of our updated Molonglo Catchment Strategy 2015-2030 (MCS 2015-2030)—that landscapes, waterways and communities are interconnected in complex ways.

Our MCS 2015-2030 adopted four aspirational goals which were prioritised under this overall vision:

1. community that understands and values the local and broader environment
2. natural resource management which integrates western science and Aboriginal knowledge
3. a connected, diverse, healthy landscape and sustainable food supply
4. a healthy Lake Burley Griffin

Our region is unlike most other Landcare districts, in that there is no one authority with clear responsibility for planning or programs across the region. MCG adds value by assisting all the dispersed stakeholder groups to promote and undertake environmental protection and enhancement within the catchment.

In that context the Molonglo Catchment Group submits the following statement in addressing a number of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference regarding matters affecting the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra.

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

If there is anything truly unique about Canberra, then it is the integration of Canberra Nature Park into the urban environment. It is Canberra's most precious asset which draws broad public support and interest. However, this asset is under continuous threat from: development encroachment, lack of conservation funding, lack of appropriate management, inappropriate use and an increasing push to 'make use of it', not for Conservation, Research & Education, but for Recreation. There is an immediate need to minimise the reduction of the amount and quality of nature and natural environment areas in urban and peri-urban areas. The ACT Government must appropriately protect and adequately manage endangered grasslands and woodlands. Public support and engagement could be improved through concerted and strategic community engagement and education programs that result in tangible benefits to the environment and community stewardship for Canberra's natural areas. At present, community groups such as catchment groups, rely on sporadic funding from various grants and government agencies to fill this niche in an ad-hoc manner, according to grant criteria.

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:

a. Social amenity;

Natural areas, particularly nature reserves like Canberra Nature Park are very important and should be enjoyed in a manner that is cognizant of conservation needs and of sensitive ways in which to enjoy nature. The benefits of interacting with nature are quantifiable for people's mental and physical health as well as engendering stewardship and respect for the environment. However, the status 'nature reserve' comes with parameters which must be acknowledged when the area is to be used for social amenity. These parameters (in the form of activities declarations) should be respected by those who use these areas. The challenges of nature reserves being used for social amenity lie in people disregarding the restrictions on activities in a reserve, such as dog-walking off leash, mountain biking off formed trails, wood collection, lighting campfires etc. These challenges are similar in the context of urban open space. As stated in response to criterion one; public support and engagement could be improved through concerted and strategic community engagement and education programs that result in tangible benefits to the environment and community stewardship for Canberra's natural areas. Visible enforcement of legislation also needs to occur. Compliance in both Urban reserves and Nature Reserves is not sufficiently resourced in the ACT. The number of crimes committed in nature reserves far outweighs the number of penalties or prosecutions. There is little in the way of education or incentive to do the right thing, and almost no recourse for those that don't.

b. Economic development;

If this inquiry follows the loose definition of economic development to be 'bringing outside money in' to grow or benefit the local economy, then extreme caution must be taken in allowing economic development in the nature reserve system. Where there is any threat to the conservation of biodiversity or to the social amenity of natural areas, rigorous and transparent assessment is paramount. The *Nature Conservation Act* in its present form does not adequately address the regulation or impact assessment of economic developments such as licensing of tour-operators in reserves, events that attract a fee for attendees or ventures such as Tidbinbilla's 'Nature Stays'.

Revenue raising for either the government or private enterprise, or both, is risky business. Protections for the environment must be in place before anymore 'economic development' is encouraged. This requires a strategic approach acknowledged across government directorates and the business community. This could be done with a legally binding document (new legislation or *Nature Conservation Act* amendment) or a strategy such as an updated and binding *Nature Conservation Strategy*, implemented by government land-management agencies (TCCS and PCS).

c. Biodiversity; and/or

d. Climate resilience.

Sensitive and adaptive urban design is a necessity for climate adaptation and resilience. The ACT's building and planning regulations only pay lip-service to this. The urban heat effect in new developments in the ACT is a concern, as is the wholesale clearing of vegetation for these urban developments. Stormwater events such as those that occurred in Canberra's northern suburbs in late 2017 are already reflecting the need for better flood mitigation.

3. Opportunities for Blue (water) and or Green (natural) Infrastructure in Canberra including;

a. Functional requirements of proposed infrastructure;

b. Cost and Maintenance considerations;

TCCS cover costs once developers and contractors have moved on from construction of, for example, one-off BPP projects, urban wetlands and stormwater retention ponds in Coombs, Wright, Googong. Maintenance capability and the timing of handover to budget poor local governments affects environmental outcomes on site and downstream.

Consideration of ongoing cost and maintenance expenditure should factor in costs of enforcing compliance with regulations, and associated with generating and maintaining community stewardship in supporting environmental outcomes for the long-term.

c. Amenity benefits; and

d. Conservation and biodiversity benefits.

Green spaces, urban biodiversity, community gardens, places of stillness, safe green spaces for kids to play and old folks to mingle will be ever more important. Any new development and infill development should be scrutinized for how much of "Blue & Green Infrastructure" it provides and generates for the local neighbourhood.

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

Herbivore grazing pressure is contributing to the degradation of endangered ecological communities in the ACT (grasslands and woodlands). Large kangaroo populations in urban reserves are threatening biodiversity as well as draining resources in managing/mitigating roadkill. Current low feed levels in reserves are resulting in herbivores moving into urban parks, gardens and roadways.

The single largest threat to biodiversity is weeds. Weed management in the ACT is under-resourced and, as with education and community engagement, depends upon volunteers for much of the work that is done. Parkcare and Landcare volunteers are a valuable resource in the management of weeds across tenures in the ACT. MCG member groups advocate strongly for improved education of ACT residents

with regard to weeds. Suburban gardens are a source of weeds which encroach on nearby urban reserves. Education campaigns such as the former Floriade Bush Friendly Garden and 'Weed-Swap' events have seemingly been abandoned by the ACT Government. There are insufficient funds in community grants to run these events without government support. Nor should the onus be placed entirely on volunteer community groups to undertake education required to protect the biodiversity within Government managed land.

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

Current planning policy contributes to the creation of 'islands' of remnant grasslands and woodlands. Corridors connecting species and habitat are disrupted and consequently, so is connectivity of habitat for species.

There is an urgent need for better management of Kangaroos. For example, inconsistency in regulations means Kangaroos can be culled on golf courses, but they can't be culled in Reserves at the urban interface between broadacre and rural lands. The peri-urban fringe provides feed while the lowlands are sparse.

Government management, particularly that of TCCS, is under-resourced with regards to the management of pest plants and animal species. The focus perceived by the MCG membership is that land managers appear to be moving away from a conservation focus, instead promoting recreation and visitor services in reserves.



Karen Williams

President