

## **Issues arising from the committee's review**

### **Australia's rivers and waterways**

- 2.1 As one of Australia's most valuable natural resources, the health of Australia's rural and urban rivers and waterways is an area of high interest to the committee. The committee investigated several Environment Australia programs targeted towards rivers and water quality.

#### **The National Rivercare Program**

- 2.2 The National Rivercare Program is part of the Natural Heritage Trust, with funding of \$97 million to 2001.<sup>1</sup> The program builds on existing rivers programs and includes new measures to improve Australia's rivers.
- 2.3 The National Rivercare Program comprises three main elements: the National River Health Program, Waterwatch Australia, and some components of the Fisheries Action Program.

#### **National River Health Program**

- 2.4 The National River Health Program involves a comprehensive assessment of Australia's inland waters. The assessment is being undertaken using a standardised system, the Australian River Assessment Scheme (AUSRIVAS). During 1997-98, approximately 1 500 rivers were assessed using AUSRIVAS. Once assessment is complete, the National River Health

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1 Natural Heritage Trust internet site: <http://www.nht.gov.au/overview/rivers.html>, accessed 19 April 1999.

Program aims to identify actions to protect, repair and establish environmental flow requirements for rivers. The annual report indicates that an initial area of priority is identification of key water catchment areas across Australia.<sup>2</sup>

### Waterwatch Australia

- 2.5 Waterwatch Australia is a national volunteer water quality monitoring and education program. Under the umbrella of a Commonwealth program, separate Waterwatch programs are run in each state and territory, facilitated by a state/territory Waterwatch coordinator. The department outlined how communities are involved in water quality monitoring:

The Waterwatch program...is already engaged in very considerable community based water quality monitoring in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Typically it involves schools, community groups and service clubs—it particularly focuses on young people—monitoring the health of local streams, creeks, rivers, wetlands and so on. It is built into the curricula of several state education ministries. A very high degree of public consultation is involved.<sup>3</sup>

- 2.6 The data collected by Waterwatch groups are provided to each state or territory's water quality database.<sup>4</sup>

### Fisheries Action Program

- 2.7 The Fisheries Action Program is administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia (AFFA). It is funded for \$9.75 million over the life of the Natural Heritage Trust, and aims to fund practical projects to address the causes of the degradation of fisheries resources.<sup>5</sup> The National Rivercare Program includes elements of the Fisheries Action Program relating to inland waters.
- 2.8 The department told the committee that to date, the National River Health Program has not focused on urban waterways:

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2 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 61.

3 Transcript of Evidence, p. 4.

4 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 62.

5 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia, internet site: <http://affa.gov.au/fish/action/about.html>, accessed 20 April 1999.

The national Rivercare Initiative under the Natural Heritage Trust has been operating in areas outside the Murray-Darling Basin since the Trust began. However, I think it fair to say that it has not had an emphasis within metropolitan areas in the way that is currently proposed [in the Living Cities Program].<sup>6</sup>

- 2.9 While the committee is concerned that the National River Health Program has not yet focused on urban waterways, it appears that the Living Cities Program (outlined below) will include some proposals for urban river projects.

### Living Cities Program

- 2.10 The government announced the Living Cities Program in 1998 as part of its election policy *Environment: Our Living Heritage*.<sup>7</sup> The election policy stated that the program would provide \$50 million over three years to address urban environment issues. The program was identified as a new budget measure in the 1999-2000 federal budget, and allocated \$10.19 million for that financial year.<sup>8</sup>
- 2.11 The Living Cities Program comprises the following elements:
- Waste Management - responsible for promoting recycling and re-use of materials by business;
  - Chemwatch - to establish a national collection and destruction scheme for chemicals and a database for agricultural and veterinary chemicals;
  - Improving Air Quality - to develop a national strategy to monitor and manage air toxics;
  - Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) Refuelling Infrastructure - to encourage greater use of this alternative transport fuel by establishing a network of publicly accessible CNG refuelling stations; and
  - Urban Waterways and Reducing Coastal Pollution - includes three elements: Urban Stormwater, Waterwatch and Urban River Health.
- 2.12 The Urban Waterways and Reducing Coastal Pollution component of the Living Cities Program includes one existing program, Waterwatch Australia, and builds on the existing National River Health Program

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6 Transcript of Evidence, p. 7.

7 Liberal Party of Australia / National Party of Australia, *Environment: Our Living Heritage*, September 1998, Liberal Party of Australia internet site: <http://www.liberal.org.au/ARCHIVES/election98/policy>, accessed 19 April 1999.

8 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 30.

(outlined above). It also includes a new program, Urban Stormwater, which will encourage innovative and best practice approaches to stormwater management.<sup>9</sup>

- 2.13 At the time of the public hearing, details of the Living Cities Program were not available, as the program was funded in the 1999-2000 federal budget announced on 11 May 1999. The committee welcomes the inclusion of an Urban River Health component in the Living Cities Program, as described in the budget papers:

...the Urban River Health programme will establish a national monitoring regime for urban rivers. Activities will encompass both river health bioassessment monitoring activities as well as ongoing development of nationally consistent protocols for assessing urban river health.<sup>10</sup>

- 2.14 The committee questioned the process of community consultation for existing programs under the National Rivercare Program, and new programs such as Living Cities. The department told the committee that it may rely on state and local governments to undertake the community consultation:

The gist of that initiative [Living Cities] is that we will probably consult more with the states and territories. We would then expect them to consult within their jurisdictions on any issues that they want to bring forward to Commonwealth attention.<sup>11</sup>

- 2.15 The committee believes that the Department of the Environment and Heritage should ensure that states and territories undertake substantial consultation with local communities who are targeted for inclusion in programs such as National Rivercare and Living Cities.
- 2.16 At the public hearing, the committee sought to understand how the various rivers programs, and other programs such as those run by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, are integrated. However, the committee was not provided with a clear answer.
- 2.17 The committee is particularly concerned that the current rivers programs do not specifically address problems in urban rivers and waterways. Some urban rivers, such as the Georges River in Western Sydney, are under severe environmental pressure.
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9 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 32.

10 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 32.

11 Transcript of Evidence, p. 4.

## National Water Quality Management Strategy

- 2.18 The National Water Quality Management Strategy (NWQMS) was developed jointly by the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) and the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ, which is supported by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolio).<sup>12</sup>
- 2.19 The NWQMS aims to achieve sustainable water use by protecting and enhancing water quality while maintaining economic and social development.
- 2.20 The strategy comprises 20 documents aimed at improving water management practices. The documents include guidelines on:
- drinking water standards;
  - water quality monitoring and reporting;
  - groundwater protection;
  - urban stormwater management; and
  - management of effluents from a number of agricultural and horticultural industries.<sup>13</sup>
- 2.21 Some of these documents are still in draft format, with public consultation being undertaken.
- 2.22 At the public hearing the department told the committee that the water quality guidelines are now under review:
- The strategy is aimed at protecting the quality of the nation's fresh and marine water through policy guidelines, including the national water quality guidelines for fresh and marine waters. The water quality guidelines are currently under review.<sup>14</sup>
- 2.23 The 1999-2000 federal budget included ongoing funding for the NWQMS. According to the budget documentation, the funding will enable eight draft guideline documents (outlined in paragraph 2.20) to be finalised by June 2000.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ) internet site: <http://www.dpie.gov.au/dpie/armcanz>, accessed 22 April 1999.

13 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia, National Water Quality Management Strategy internet site: <http://www.affa.gov.au/nwqms>, accessed 22 April 1999.

14 Transcript of Evidence, p. 2.

15 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 35.

- 2.24 The committee examined the issue of water quality standards, which are currently determined by state and territory governments. The NWQMS provides guidelines on water quality but does not set mandatory standards. The department indicated that it is desirable that national water quality standards be adopted, to establish consistency between all states and territories. However, the state and territory governments have been reluctant to cooperate:

The states have been a little bit reluctant to agree to go down that path at this stage because they believe that we need to finalise the National Water Quality Management Strategy guidelines before we develop [national water quality standards].<sup>16</sup>

- 2.25 The committee believes that the establishment of a national policy on water quality, and other measures such as consistent water quality standards across Australia, should be a priority issue for the government. The committee believes that a framework such as the NWQMS could be an important coordinating mechanism for management of all river and water quality programs. The committee is pleased that the strategy has received ongoing funding in the 1999-2000 budget.

### Water quality data

- 2.26 The lack of comprehensive national data on water quality is an issue of concern to the committee. The department acknowledged a lack of water quality data:

We do not have a national database on water quality.<sup>17</sup>

- 2.27 Water quality data are currently collected by state of the environment reporting at Commonwealth, state and territory levels. In addition, community groups and schools across Australia gather water quality data through their participation in the Waterwatch Australia program.
- 2.28 While much data are being collected around Australia, they do not appear to be coordinated or compiled in a single, dedicated database.
- 2.29 The committee notes that the National Land and Water Resources Audit, funded for \$30 million under the Natural Heritage Trust, aims to provide a comprehensive national appraisal of Australia's land resource base. The required outcomes of the audit are:

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16 Transcript of Evidence, p. 8.

17 Transcript of Evidence, p. 2.

- scientific assessments on the status of, and where possible, recent changes in, the nation's land, vegetation and water resources to assist decision-makers in their efforts to achieve ecological sustainability;
- reports on the economic, environmental and social assessments of land and water resource change (including land cover) and remedial actions;
- integrated, nationally compatible data sets that contribute to the audit, and which are suitable for ongoing development and maintenance as a readily accessible national information system; and
- a National Water Resource Assessment to show the extent of both the surface and groundwater resources, quality, supply capacity and use.<sup>18</sup>

2.30 The National Land and Water Resources Audit is being overseen by the Ministers for the Environment and Heritage and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and an advisory board. A number of working groups provide input to the audit plan for each specific audit 'theme'. While some data are being gathered from existing information held by the Commonwealth and state governments, information gaps are being met through research projects funded by the audit. Day-to-day management of the audit is undertaken by the Audit Management Unit, provided by AFFA.

## Conclusion

- 2.31 The committee believes that management of Australia's rivers and other inland waters is a significant environmental challenge. A number of current programs are implementing valuable work to protect and enhance the health of rivers and waterways. However, there needs to be a more coordinated approach. The committee believes it is vital to coordinate all rivers and waterways programs to ensure:
- good community consultation;
  - high levels of community awareness and involvement in programs for urban and rural environments; and
  - ongoing monitoring of results.

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<sup>18</sup> National Land & Water Resources Audit, internet site: <http://www.nlwra.gov.au>, accessed 3 June 1999.

## Recommendation 1

- 2.32 **The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage, in conjunction with other relevant departments and agencies, undertake a review of programs addressing inland rivers and waterways. The review should consider:**
- **rationalisation of current rivers and waterways programs into a single river health strategy, incorporating and strengthening the National Water Quality Management Strategy;**
  - **a proposal for developing mandatory national water quality standards; and**
  - **development of a national database on water quality, incorporating data collected by the National Land and Water Resources Audit.**

## Australia's world heritage areas

- 2.33 The House of Representatives environment committee in its various forms has had a long-standing interest in heritage matters, which is reflected in its completion of a number of reports on heritage issues. The committee used its review of the department's annual report to follow up on an inquiry undertaken in previous Parliaments.

### Committee's report into Managing Australia's World Heritage Areas

- 2.34 During the 37th and 38th Parliaments the previous committee (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts) undertook an inquiry into management of Australia's World Heritage Areas. The committee's report, *Managing Australia's World Heritage*, was tabled in Parliament in October 1996. The report contained 54 recommendations for improving Australia's management of its world heritage areas. The government's response to the report, incorporating the committee's recommendations, was tabled on 8 April 1998.
- 2.35 During 1997-98 the department developed guidelines to monitor the conservation of Australia's world heritage areas, with a view to meeting

international obligations and improving the management of listed properties.<sup>19</sup>

- 2.36 The committee asked the department to further outline progress on implementing the recommendations from the *Managing Australia's World Heritage* report. The department highlighted some areas where work is being undertaken:

In brief, we would say that the Australian and World Heritage Group was in agreement with 90 per cent of the recommendations, and, indeed, a number of those were being implemented. Some of the key things that either were being implemented or are under way are involving the community, setting up monitoring of world heritage values, which seemed fairly important, and reaching agreements with the states and between the states and the Commonwealth... we now have well working ministerial councils in all the jurisdictions in Australia. As well as that, we have moved to make sure that there are community consultation groups involving the local community in all our world heritage areas.<sup>20</sup>

- 2.37 The committee's inquiry found that the Commonwealth government was not providing adequate levels of funding for management of world heritage areas. The committee's report recommended that Commonwealth funding for protection, conservation and presentation of world heritage areas be increased, by \$20 million in the first year and \$16 million in following years.<sup>21</sup>

- 2.38 The committee inquired into the current level of Commonwealth government funding for world heritage areas. The department told the committee that funding for world heritage areas has increased, although not to the levels recommended by the committee:

At the stage of the committee's report in 1996, the level of Commonwealth funding to the states for the 1996-97 financial year was \$11 million. In the current financial year 1998-99, that stands at \$15 million. So, yes, it has increased.<sup>22</sup>

- 2.39 The committee's report examined private sector involvement in world heritage areas. The committee recommended that the Commonwealth

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19 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 42.

20 Transcript of Evidence, p. 9.

21 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, *Managing Australia's World Heritage*, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, October 1996, p. 162.

22 Transcript of Evidence, p. 10.

government encourage management agencies to explore various means of service provision in world heritage areas (through contracting and market testing), and that the Commonwealth undertake consultations to determine ways of involving the private sector in infrastructure provision, works and services in world heritage areas.<sup>23</sup>

- 2.40 The committee sought an update on initiatives to involve the private sector in infrastructure and service provision in world heritage areas. The department speculated that the private sector may be becoming involved in world heritage areas, but did not provide specific examples:

...most of the world heritage areas would have a positive view of a private sector involvement if it were in accordance with the plan of management and if it did not endanger any of the values. I suppose Skyrail in the wet tropics would be an example of a long thought through decision about private investment in a world heritage area. But it often, as you will be aware, raises a considerable amount of concern in the local community if people think the values are going to be endangered.<sup>24</sup>

- 2.41 At the time of the committee's report, not all world heritage areas had completed management plans. Some areas had draft management plans, while others were managed according to pre-existing regional plans. The committee recommended that each world heritage property have a management plan specific to protection of world heritage values.<sup>25</sup> The department advised the committee that management plans are in advanced stages of development for all world heritage areas. As community consultation was another major theme of the report, the committee inquired about the process of development of management plans, and the involvement of local communities in developing the management plans. The department replied:

...there are different ways, depending of the nature of the property and the nature of the stakeholders who have interests in that particular property. Generally, what we would do is work cooperatively with the state governments and work through their legislative processes.

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23 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, *Managing Australia's World Heritage*, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, October 1996, p. 106.

24 Transcript of Evidence, p. 11.

25 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, *Managing Australia's World Heritage*, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, October 1996, p. 76.

Very often, what we would do when we have a plan at a certain level of development is actually take it to the local community and have a workshop which specifically involves graziers, Aboriginal people and so on.<sup>26</sup>

- 2.42 While the committee's report did not address the nomination or listing process for World Heritage Areas, the committee was aware of controversy surrounding the nomination and listing process at the time of its inquiry. At the public hearing for its review of the 1997-98 annual report, the committee noted the nomination of the Blue Mountains area for world heritage listing, which has been strongly supported by the local and wider community. When asked why this nomination has met with such support, the department replied that the Blue Mountains nomination is supported because the area is already a national park, is a tourist destination and would benefit from world heritage recognition. Furthermore, there are no other industries in the area which would be adversely affected by a world heritage listing.<sup>27</sup> It appears that the cooperative approach to world heritage listing proposals now adopted by the Commonwealth government is overcoming the problem that beset earlier nominations.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

- 2.43 The committee is pleased that the government has chosen to implement many of the recommendations made in the *Managing Australia's World Heritage* report. The need for management plans specific to world heritage values and the involvement of local communities in the development of the plans cannot be overstated. The committee believes that the department should pursue options for private sector involvement, where appropriate, in service and infrastructure provision for world heritage areas.

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26 Transcript of Evidence, pp. 12 and 13.

27 Transcript of Evidence, p. 12.

28 In 1992 the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments signed the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment, which specifically included guidelines for Commonwealth/state arrangements in world heritage nominations.

## National parks and reserves

### Management of national parks

- 2.44 National parks within Australia are managed by the Commonwealth government or by the relevant state or territory government. The Director of National Parks and Wildlife, within the Department of the Environment and Heritage's Biodiversity Group, is responsible for management of Commonwealth national parks. The Director of National Parks and Wildlife is assisted in this management by two Biodiversity Group sub-programs, Parks Australia and Wildlife Australia.
- 2.45 The committee notes that, at the time of writing this report, new legislation dealing with Commonwealth environment management responsibilities is before the Parliament. This legislation will affect how national parks are managed.
- 2.46 The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Bill 1998 replaces the following five existing pieces of Commonwealth legislation:
- *Environment Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974;*
  - *National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975;*
  - *Whale Protection Act 1980;*
  - *World Heritage (Properties Conservation) Act 1983;* and
  - *Endangered Species Protection Act 1992.*
- 2.47 As the Bill was referred to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage committee did not make specific inquiries regarding the proposed new legislation. However, it did raise some general issues regarding management of national parks, which are outlined below.
- 2.48 The national parks managed by the Commonwealth government include:
- the Australian National Botanic Gardens;
  - Kakadu National Park;
  - Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park;
  - Booderee National Park (formerly Jervis Bay National Park);
  - Norfolk Island National Park and Botanic Gardens;
  - Christmas Island National Park;

- Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve;
- Pulu-Keeling Islands;
- Coral Sea Islands Territory;
- Ningaloo and Solitary Islands Marine Park;
- Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve
- Coringa-Herald and Lihou Reef National Nature Reserve; and
- Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs Marine National Nature Reserve.

2.49 Each Commonwealth-managed national park has an existing management plan or, at the time the annual report was written, management plans were being developed.<sup>29</sup>

2.50 The committee sought an update from the department about the status of management plans for the national parks. The information provided is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Progress towards completion of management plans for national parks

National Park	Status of management plan
Australian National Botanic Gardens	Due by the end of 1999
Kakadu National Park	In place
Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park	Draft out for public comment
Booderee National Park	Under preparation
Norfolk Island National Park	Due for renewal
Christmas Island National Park	In place
Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve	In place
Pulu Keeling Island	In place
Ningaloo Reef Commonwealth Waters	In place
Mermaid Reef Marine National Reserve	Draft out for public comment
Coral Sea Islands Territory	Information not provided
Coringa-Herald and Lihou Reef National Nature Reserve	Information not provided
Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs Marine National Nature Reserve	Information not provided

Source: *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 17.

2.51 The committee also inquired how indigenous communities are involved in management of national parks. The department told the committee that three national parks, Booderee, Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta, are each

<sup>29</sup> Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 219.

jointly managed by a board comprising Commonwealth representatives and Aboriginal landowners. The Aboriginal landowners have the majority on each board:

Those boards of management prepare the plans in conjunction with the director. At that higher level of policy, that setting of directions, the traditional owners have an important role.

Those boards also have other roles. They have provided advice to the minister on the management of the parks, they monitor management of the parks in conjunction with the director and they also make decisions that are consistent with the plan of management. They have a central role.<sup>30</sup>

- 2.52 The committee questioned what influence the Commonwealth government has over management of national parks which fall under state and territory control. The department explained that ANZECC monitors state and territory management of national parks, and:

...has now become quite a powerful vehicle because there are a number of working groups that ANZECC particularly has established which are looking at issues of best practice, so we are building a better comradeship between the different park services and the personnel within the park services. The knowledge is simply flowing into those areas.<sup>31</sup>

### **National Reserves System Program**

- 2.53 The National Reserves System Program is a major program under the Natural Heritage Trust. The program, funded for \$80 million, aims to:
- establish and manage new ecologically significant protected areas for addition to the National Reserve System;
  - provide incentives for indigenous people to participate in the program through voluntary declaration of protected areas on their lands, and involve indigenous people in the management of existing National Reserves System areas;
  - provide incentives for landholders (both private owners and leaseholders) to enhance the National Reserve System; and

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30 Transcript of Evidence, p. 18.

31 Transcript of Evidence, p. 30.

- develop and implement best practice standards for the management of the National Reserve System.<sup>32</sup>
- 2.54 Prior to 1997-98, funds were directed to the states and territories to assist in the purchase of properties which contained ecosystems defined as 'high priority' for inclusion in the National Reserve System. During 1997-98, the program was widened to include a community component. This was to facilitate the purchase of land to establish private protected areas and to assist landowners to set up private protected areas on their own properties. Four projects involving the establishment of private protected areas were funded during 1997-98. There were also 22 grants for properties under the Indigenous Protected Areas component of the National Reserve System Program.<sup>33</sup>
- 2.55 The committee questioned the department how it ensures that private landowners or indigenous communities are managing the private reserves in accordance with government standards. The department replied that funding for all projects under the Natural Heritage Trust, including projects for the National Reserve System Program, is administered under contract, with standards set out within the contractual arrangements:
- Generally, there is a state agency of another organisation with whom we have a contractual arrangement to deliver what is specified against that funding, just as we do if we provide a grant to a land-holder, a Waterwatch group, a Rotary club or whatever.<sup>34</sup>
- 2.56 In addition, a network of indigenous facilitators is funded under the Natural Heritage Trust to help indigenous communities access and engage in trust programs.

## Conclusion

- 2.57 The committee believes that the National Reserve System Program is an important initiative enabling private landowners and indigenous communities to contribute to Australia's biodiversity. As with national parks, the properties under the National Reserve System Program will require careful management, which should be benchmarked against international practice. The committee believes it is vital that funding for management and monitoring of national reserve properties is maintained over time.

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32 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 54.

33 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 55.

34 Transcript of Evidence, p. 19.

## Regional Forest Agreements

2.58 In 1992, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments signed the National Forest Policy Statement (NFPS). The statement outlined agreed objectives and policies for the future of Australia's public and private forests. It provided national goals covering the breadth of the forestry issues to be addressed. The issues comprise:

- conservation;
- wood production and industry development;
- integrated and coordinated decision making and management;
- private native forests;
- plantations;
- water supply and catchment management;
- tourism and other economic and social opportunities;
- employment;
- workforce education and training;
- public awareness, education and involvement;
- research and development; and
- international responsibilities.<sup>35</sup>

2.59 The NFPS provides that for each forest region there will be:

- a Comprehensive Regional Assessment (CRA), which is a comprehensive joint assessment of all forest values (environmental, heritage, economic and social) by the Commonwealth and state or territory governments;
- the establishment of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system and agreements on forest management based on the CRA; and
- the signing of a Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) between the Commonwealth and state or territory governments.

2.60 According to the Department of the Environment and Heritage, RFAs are intended to provide the basis for both future forest management and an internationally competitive and ecologically sustainable forest products

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35 National Forest Policy Statement, Regional Forest Agreements internet site: <http://www.rfa.gov.au/nfps/contents.html>, accessed 9 June 1999.

industry. The agreements provide for a comprehensive, adequate and representative forest reserve system and will clearly identify those forest resources available for multiple use, including resources for sustainable timber harvesting. The purpose of the agreements is to reduce uncertainty, duplication and fragmentation in government decision making by producing a durable agreement for the next 20 years.<sup>36</sup>

- 2.61 The development of RFAs is being managed jointly by the Department of the Environment and Heritage and AFFA.
- 2.62 The Environment Forests Taskforce, within the Environment Priorities and Coordination Group, is responsible for the Department of Environment and Heritage's involvement in the RFA process. The department's Environmental Resources Information Network (ERIN) was also involved in the RFA process during 1997-98. ERIN's main responsibility was in data management and analysis, with around 3 000 datasets documented to the end of the 1997-98 financial year.<sup>37</sup>
- 2.63 During 1997-98 the department participated in the development of three completed RFAs in Tasmania, Gippsland and the Central Highlands of Victoria. The 1999-2000 federal budget included \$6.97 million which was allocated to the RFA process in 1998-99, but was not spent due to delays in completing RFAs in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. The 1999-2000 budget allocated an additional \$1.8 million for completion of the draft RFAs and to continue the prohibition of woodchip exports from forests not covered by RFAs after January 2000.<sup>38</sup>
- 2.64 The committee inquired how data were collected for the CRAs, which are the basis for development of RFAs. The department replied:
- The first step was to look at the available information, and the second step was to carry out a series of studies to fill the information gaps. Then there were the usual processes for a document which tries to balance the various interests to go out for public comment. It varies from state to state, but there are usually processes whereby stakeholders can actively in the first instance say, 'this is the information we need', and secondly comment.

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36 Environment Australia, *Comprehensive Regional Assessments and Regional Forest Agreements*, Environment Forest Taskforce, Information sheet no. 1, April 1998. Regional Forest Agreements internet site: <http://www.rfa.gov.au/cra/cra-rfa-over.html>, accessed 19 March 1999.

37 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 20.

38 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 33.

The Commonwealth's role in this process is very much to validate state analysis and data, and to do some of our own analysis from remote sensing and the like. Most of the detailed gathering of data is undertaken by the states or by other agencies where the Commonwealth and the state jointly fund research that we regard as necessary to establish those values.<sup>39</sup>

- 2.65 The committee wishes to emphasise its belief that the data underpinning RFAs, including socio-economic analyses of the areas affected, must be comprehensive and reliable.

### Conclusion

- 2.66 The committee believes that an important long-term issue is the need for ongoing resources to manage the reserves identified in RFAs. The agreements are designed to be durable for 20 years, but without long-term management strategies and the funds to implement them, forest reserves protected by RFAs may not sustain the values identified as important in the original agreements.
- 2.67 A recurring issue throughout the committee's review of the 1997-98 annual report was the need for good data collection and storage across portfolio programs. The committee believes that the data collected for the RFAs should be fed into other information collections such as state of the environment reporting.

## State of the environment reporting

- 2.68 In 1996 the government released a national state of the environment report. The comprehensive report identified key environmental issues for Australia, including:
- the need for a systems approach and integrated environmental management;
  - biodiversity;
  - land degradation;
  - global climate change;
  - water issues;
  - coastal and urban environmental issues; and
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39 Transcript of Evidence, pp. 16 and 22.

- social and cultural issues such as the well-being of indigenous Australians and protecting Australia's heritage.<sup>40</sup>

2.69 While the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments undertake state of the environment reporting, there is no national framework. While some states and territories have a legislated commitment to reporting, others do not. The Commonwealth government has no legislative obligation to produce state of the environment reports, but has undertaken to produce one every five years. The next is due in 2001.

2.70 The department's 1997-98 annual report outlines action taken towards compiling the next state of the environment report, and the committee notes that, in its 1999-2000 Portfolio Budget Statement, the department has allocated \$1.72 million for producing five reports on implementation of Key Environmental Indicators.<sup>41</sup> The committee inquired about the format of the next report and what the purpose of the report would be. The department's Chief Science Adviser and Supervising Scientist told the committee:

The state of the environment report that was published in 1996 was a very comprehensive attempt at producing a view of Australia's environment at a snapshot in time. Indeed, that report is very comprehensive in its coverage. But many environmental events move at quite different levels of time, areas of space, areas of impact and so on.

My forecast is that the state of the environment reporting will become a mechanism that will cover a wide range of things and be a continuous process. We will have to do something in 2001 because we accept that that is what will happen. But it almost certainly will not be as substantial in size as the 1996 one, because we will have been doing a wide range of other things.<sup>42</sup>

2.71 The committee considers that data collected in other environment programs, such as the RFAs and Natural Heritage Trust programs, should be used in the compilation of the state of the environment report. The committee believes that the report has the potential to be used as a day-to-day tool for environment managers. The department agreed that data from all sources should be included:

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40 State of the Environment Advisory Council, Australia: *State of the Environment 1996*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, May 1996, p. ES-7.

41 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, p. 58.

42 Transcript of Evidence, p. 26.

We really are in an extremely good position to draw together the main things and, of course, the RFA processes...The state of the environment reporting mechanism will be seen, certainly over the next couple of years, as a key, reflecting and measuring what is going on in these other areas but also adding to and reflecting what is going on in the other areas.

...the key is to ensure that the work in the state of the environment report—and this is why it is important for it not to just happen every five years—does feed into the other environmental processes, whether they are terrestrial or marine.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

- 2.72 State of the environment reporting is an important tool that provides environmental information to scientists, environment managers, policy makers and the general community. The committee notes that the department is currently considering the format of future reports, including the use of environmental indicators. The committee believes that state of the environment reporting may provide an excellent framework for assessing the impact of environment programs. For example, the information contained in the 1996 report could be used as the benchmark against which programs funded under the Natural Heritage Trust are measured.

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## Recommendation 2

- 2.73 **The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage examine the extent to which data collected for other portfolio and agency programs is used in the compilation of the state of the environment report.**

**The department should then develop its state of the environment reporting framework around existing data resources as far as possible, to draw upon the whole of government's resources and its expertise across program areas. State of the environment reporting should provide a basis for future decision-making for all environment policies and programs.**

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43 Transcript of Evidence, pp. 27 and 28.

## Marine issues

- 2.74 The committee notes that the Oceans Policy was launched in December 1998, and that some aspects of the policy, including the establishment of Regional Marine Management Plans, are in the early stages of development. The 1999-2000 federal budget allocated \$12.05 million to develop and implement programs under the Oceans Policy.<sup>44</sup>
- 2.75 As development of the Oceans Policy was only briefly mentioned in the 1997-98 annual report, the committee focused its inquiries on management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. In particular, the committee questioned the nature of the relationship between the Commonwealth and the Queensland governments, in managing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The department acknowledged that the relationship has, at times, been strained. However:
- In some areas the relationship is already fairly transparent in terms of many of the management issues. The core issue, which we are going through a very detailed process with at the moment, is getting a much clearer interpretation of the day-to-day management agreement, which is the jointly funded exercise between the Commonwealth and the state.<sup>45</sup>
- 2.76 The department told the committee that the Commonwealth and Queensland governments were working to establish coastal management plans which will be used as a basis for local environment tasks such as water catchment management. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is also trying to make its structure more user-friendly:
- What we have tried to do with all of the issues groups is to provide clear foci so that people who have to deal with that particular issue know where to go [in the Authority] ...into an area which deals with coastal or water quality, deals with tourism, deals with fishing or deals with conservation, biodiversity and heritage. That does seem to be streamlining a lot of things.<sup>46</sup>
- 2.77 The committee raised with the department the latest reports of a re-emergence of the crown of thorns starfish. The department told the committee that invasions of the starfish have occurred at roughly 15 to 17 year intervals. Research has also shown that the reef has recovered around

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44 *Portfolio Budget Statements 1999-2000: Environment and Heritage Portfolio*, Budget related paper no. 1.7, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 11 May 1999, pp. 32 and 42.

45 Transcript of Evidence, p. 34.

46 Transcript of Evidence, p. 35.

12 to 14 years after the attack. The department outlined its monitoring and management program for the starfish, involving a new survey technique to identify and remove young starfish before they grow to a large size:

What this is enabling us to do is identify areas where we need to redouble the adult monitoring and put the tourist industry on alert for the need to implement control programs in areas of importance to them for potentially destroying tourist dive sites.<sup>47</sup>

2.78 The committee also inquired about Australia's international reputation for marine management. The department replied that our standing is very good:

There is no doubt there that we are regarded, I am frequently told, as state of the art. We are frequently asked for advice, both paid and unpaid advice, from international agencies such as the World Bank and the UN bodies through to bilateral things with the Indonesian government, the Maldivan government and so forth. There are a number of major issues in global coral reef management in which, by default, we are the global centre.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

2.79 The committee was pleased to hear from the department that its relationship with the Queensland government regarding management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is improving. There is clearly an ongoing need for research into crown of thorns starfish and other threats to Australia's marine environment, particularly in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The committee calls on the government to ensure that funding for such research is maintained.

## Committee's conclusions

2.80 The committee's inquiry into the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98 aimed to examine some of the major programs being run by the department, and highlight areas of interest and concern where appropriate. The short inquiry focused on rivers and waterways, world heritage management, national parks and reserves, state of the environment reporting and marine issues.

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47 Transcript of Evidence, p. 37.

48 Transcript of Evidence, p. 37.

- 2.81 Several of the programs the committee investigated are funded under the Natural Heritage Trust. The issues raised by the committee regarding the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of programs, and incorporating data into state of the environment reporting, could be applied to all programs funded under the Natural Heritage Trust.
- 2.82 The committee believes that one of the major challenges for the Department of the Environment and Heritage is to ensure that all its programs are coordinated and make the best use of available environmental data and resources. The department should also aim to facilitate widespread community involvement in environment programs.

Ian Causley  
Committee Chair  
9 June 1999