

THE MANAGEMENT OF
AYERS ROCK - MT OLGA NATIONAL PARK

Fourth Report of the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on
Environment and Conservation

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT

AND CONSERVATION

The Committee was appointed by resolution of the House of Representatives on 17 March 1976* to inquire into and report on -

- (a) environmental aspects of legislative and administrative measures which ought to be taken in order to ensure the wise and effective management of the Australian environment and of Australia's natural resources, and
- (b) such other matters relating to the environment and conservation and the management of Australia's natural resources as are referred to it by -
 - (i) the Minister for Environment, Housing and Community Development, or
 - (ii) resolution of the House.

On 23 September 1976 the Committee appointed a sub-committee to inquire into the implementation of the recommendations of the Committee of the 28th Parliament on Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park.

*House of Representatives Votes and Proceedings No. 11,
17 March 1976

Members of the Committee

Chairman

- Mr J.C. Hodges, M.P.
- Mr M. Baillieu, M.P.
- The Hon. G.M. Bryant, E.D., M.P.*
- The Hon. M.H. Cass, M.P.
- Mr P.S. Fisher, M.P.
- Dr H.A. Jenkins, M.P.
- Mr B.D. Simon, M.P.
- Mr I.B.C. Wilson, M.P.

Clerk to the Committee - Mr M. Adamson

Members of the sub-committee

Chairman

- Mr J.C. Hodges, M.P.

Members

- Mr M. Baillieu, M.P.
- Mr P.S. Fisher, M.P.
- Dr H.A. Jenkins, M.P.
- Mr B.D. Simon, M.P.

Clerk to the sub-
committee

- Mr J.R. Cummins

* Mr Bryant replaced Mr M.J. Young, M.P. as a member of the Committee on 14 October 1976

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R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government provide the necessary finance to enable:

- (a) the Northern Territory Reserves Board to commence during the 1977/78 financial year essential interim work in the Park;
- (b) the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service to devise ~~the~~ ^{and} implement quickly a comprehensive management plan for the Park;
- (c) during the 1977/78 financial year the commencement of construction of a new airstrip outside the Park boundaries; and
- (d) during the 1977/78 financial year the commencement of the sealing of the Erldunda-Ayers Rock road.



REPORT ON THE MANAGEMENT OF AYERS ROCK -
MT OLGA NATIONAL PARK

1 INTRODUCTION

The Reference

On 23 September 1976 the Committee resolved to inquire into and report on:

- (a) the extent to which the recommendations of the Committee of the 28th Parliament on Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park have been implemented;
- (b) the effects of the implementation;
- (c) further measures necessary to ensure proper management of the Park as a fauna reserve, conservation and tourist area.

2. To conduct the inquiry the Committee appointed a sub-committee consisting of Mr Hedges (Chairman), Mr Baillieu, Mr Fisher, Dr Jenkins and Mr Simon.

3. The Committee in deciding on this reference was aware of reports that many of the previous Committee's recommendations were yet to be implemented.

Evidence and Public Hearings

4. Submissions were invited from departments, authorities and individuals with an interest in the Park. A list of witnesses appearing before the sub-committee is given at Appendix 1. Commencing on 11 November 1976 the sub-committee held 4 public hearings. Evidence given at the public hearings is available for inspection in Hansard form in the Committee Office of the House of Representatives, the National Library and the Commonwealth Archives.

5. In November 1976 the sub-committee visited Alice Springs and Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park. During that visit the sub-committee held useful informal discussions with moteliers, tourist operators and officers involved in the administration of the Park.

The Previous Inquiry

6. In June 1973 the Committee of the 28th Parliament resolved that an inquiry should be carried out into the conflicts that arise from the management of the Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park in the Northern Territory as a conservation area and fauna reserve and its use for tourist purposes.

7. The report⁽¹⁾ of that Committee was tabled in the House of Representatives on 6 November 1973. The report contains 12 recommendations and includes a draft management plan for the Park. It recommends that a management plan be implemented as soon as possible, that the existing village and airstrip be resited outside the Park boundaries and that the opportunity be provided for Aboriginal involvement. The recommendations of the Committee of the 28th Parliament are at Appendix 2.

Ayers Rock Advisory Committee

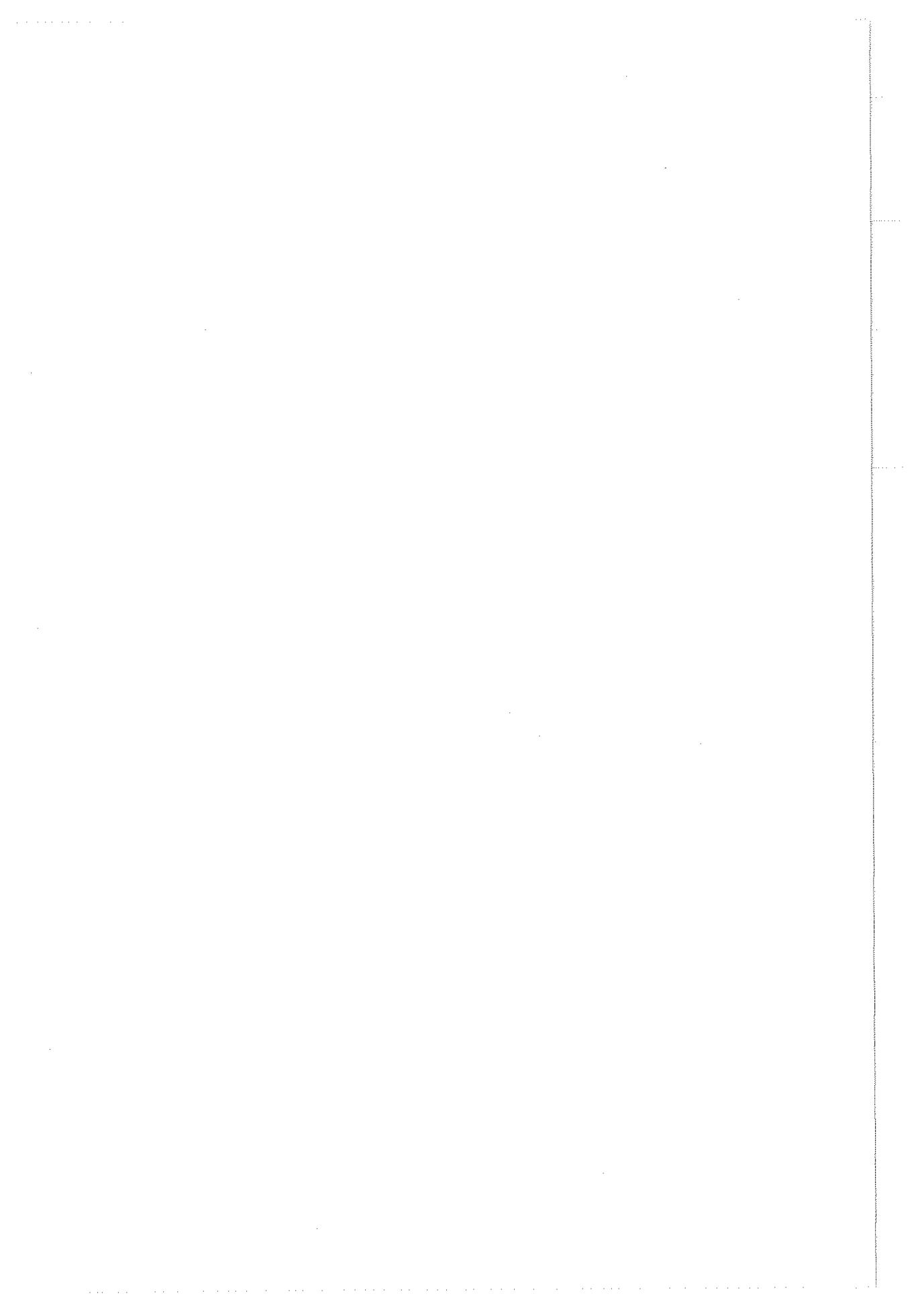
8. Following the tabling of the previous Committee's report the then Government established the Ayers Rock Advisory Committee to assist and advise the Northern Territory Reserves Board. The Advisory Committee consists of representatives of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, the

(1) House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation, Report on Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park, Parliamentary Paper No. 215 of 1973

Departments of Northern Territory, Construction, Aboriginal Affairs and Industry and Commerce and representatives of local Aboriginal communities. The Department of Transport provides advice and assistance as necessary.

9. Specifically, the Advisory Committee has been established to advise and assist the Reserves Board to implement the following proposals:

- the acquisition of existing tourist leases;
- rehabilitation of environmental damage;
- limitation of visitor usage within the Park;
- the implementation of a training program for Aboriginals;
- the implementation of a positive program of action to protect sites and objects of cultural significance to Aboriginals; and
- the development of a comprehensive plan of management which would include the siting of the tourist village and aerodrome in the preferred area north of the Park boundary.



2 MEASURES TAKEN TO IMPLEMENT THE
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE
OF THE 28TH PARLIAMENT

General

10. Delays in implementing the Committee's recommendations have been caused by inadequate manpower and finance. The Northern Territory Reserves Board told the sub-committee that it is very disappointed at the lack of progress in some areas. The Board believes that many of the problems outlined by the previous Committee would be overcome if the village was resited. To date little progress has been made in this matter.

11. Progress made in implementing each of the previous Committee's recommendations is outlined in the following paragraphs.

Recommendation 1 - Plan of Management

12. A draft management plan was prepared by the Northern Territory Reserves Board in August 1973 and was given wide distribution. Comments on the plan have been included in a recently completed revised plan. The revised plan is incomplete in that it does not include road alignments. It has yet to be considered by the Ayers Rock Advisory Committee.

13. Following discussions between the Ministers for Environment, Housing and Community Development and the Northern Territory and members of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly it was agreed that parks and reserves in the Northern Territory of national and international importance should be proclaimed under the Commonwealth

National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1975. The Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Majority Leader of the Legislative Assembly and officers of the Department of the Northern Territory and the Reserves Board agreed that the Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park was of national and international significance and should be so proclaimed.

14. A notice of intention to submit a report recommending declaration by the Governor-General under Sub-section 7(2) of the Act has recently been Gazetted.² Once the Park has been proclaimed under the Act it is a statutory requirement that a plan of management be prepared as soon as practicable.

Recommendation 2 - Zoning

15. The draft management plan provides for zoning as specified in this recommendation. As no plan has been adopted no zoning as such has been introduced. The Committee notes that one area of Aboriginal significance has been fenced off and set aside for exclusive Aboriginal use.

Recommendation 3 - Resiting Village and Airstrip

16. An area of 104 square kilometres outside the northern boundary of the Park has been set aside within which the new village and airstrip will be located. In August 1975 six town planning consultants were engaged to develop preliminary proposals for the new village. These proposals have been examined by the Ayers Rock Advisory Committee but financial restrictions have prevented the appointment of a selected consultant to develop a detailed town plan. The Ayers Rock Advisory Committee is currently examining the possibility

² Australian Government Gazette No. G49, 7 December 1976

of using the skills and expertise within the Government sector to undertake this work.

17. The sub-committee was informed that the planning detailed design and construction of the relocated new village is likely to take 5 to 8 years after an approval to proceed is given. No provision has been made in the current financial year to commence planning the village. The earliest that consultants could be commissioned would be 1977-78 and it is estimated that it would then take 12 months to develop a plan. Development of an adequate water supply could take another two years. Construction of roads, sewerage system etc could not take place until an adequate water supply was assured. The Director of the Reserves Board thought that if action was commenced immediately it would take 5 years to then complete the village. As yet no indication has been given by the Government when finance will be made available.

18. The Reserves Board in its planning has assumed that the airstrip will be relocated much sooner. The Board considers the existing strip dangerous and inadequate because of its location and construction and will not permit its upgrading.

Recommendation 4 - Siting of Roads

19. Proposals for essential work on the realignment of a number of internal roads are currently being considered by the Advisory Committee. No decision for the location of the Ayers Rock circuit road has been made. The Northern Territory Reserves Board has developed a series of alternative proposals for the location of this road. These proposals are shown at Appendix 3.

Recommendation 5 - Aboriginal Involvement

20. Members of the Aboriginal community have been encouraged to attend and participate in meetings of the Ayers Rock Advisory Committee.

21. In 1975 the Reserves Board employed, as rangers, 3 Aboriginals nominated by Aboriginal groups. The exercise has not been entirely successful as at present only one is still employed and staff ceilings preclude the filling of the 2 vacancies. The Reserves Board has applied to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for funds to employ additional Aboriginals under the Department's Special Works Projects program.

22. The Ininti Store which is owned by the Aboriginal community at Docker River sells artifacts from local Ayers Rock Aboriginals as well as items produced at Docker River. Aboriginal members of the Advisory Committee have requested the building of a museum and an additional outlet for the sale of artifacts.

23. A camp site with water and other facilities has been provided for Aboriginals at Ayers Rock. The Aboriginal population at Ayers Rock fluctuated from 6 to 40 members during 1976.

24. Aboriginals have not made any request for the exclusive use of Ayers Rock for ceremonial purposes. The sub-committee was informed that facilities would be made available should such a request be made. As mentioned previously one small area of the Rock has been set aside for exclusive Aboriginal use.

Recommendation 6 - Carrying Capacity, Firearms and Motor Vehicles

25. The Northern Territory Reserves Board currently restricts campers in the Park to 1,800 on any one night, even though facilities for this number are inadequate. To date nobody has been turned away. It will not be possible to close the Park at night until the village is relocated outside the Park boundaries. The use of firearms is prohibited and motor vehicles are restricted to designated roads.

Recommendation 7 - Concession Holders

26. All existing leases were purchased by the Reserves Board during 1975/76 for a cost of \$988,000. All except the Ayers Rock Hotel have been leased back. The Reserves Board recently decided to grant leases for terms of 5 to 10 years, because of the delay in resiting the village.

Recommendation 8 - Interpretation, Displays

27. A portion of Ayers Rock Hotel has been set up as a visitor centre and includes displays of cultural, historical and scientific features. Much of this work has been undertaken by the Aboriginal rangers. In addition the Reserves Board has published descriptive material on the flora and fauna of Ayers Rock.

Recommendation 9 - Staffing and Finance

28. At present 15 staff are employed at Ayers Rock. Staff ceilings and lack of funds have precluded the employment of an ecologist and technical assistants and additional Aboriginal rangers. No scientific staff have been appointed.

29. The allocation of funds was reduced from \$1,145,000 in 1975/76 to \$936,000 in 1976/77.

Recommendation 10 - Rehabilitation

30. Some work on erosion control has been undertaken and is progressing. Financial restrictions have meant some work has been deferred.

Recommendation 11 - Park Boundaries

31. The Committee received conflicting evidence as to the Aboriginals' wishes regarding the inclusion of the Sedimentaries in the Park. The Sedimentaries area has been included in the Notice of Intention referred to in paragraph 12.

Recommendation 12 - National Heritage Area

32. The area has not been declared a National Heritage Area under the provisions of the National Heritage Commission Act 1975.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Proposed Interim Expenditure

33. The sub-committee was told that because of financial restrictions the new village could not now be in operation for at least 8 to 10 years. The Reserves Board has had no alternative but to accept this and has accordingly developed proposals for urgent interim work to keep the existing facilities in operation for that period. Preliminary cost estimates indicate a minimum of \$2,280,000 to an optimum of \$3,561,000. Details of the proposed expenditure are shown in Appendix 4.

34. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service expressed concern that the expenditure could give de facto recognition to the existing site, causing it to become permanent. The Service questioned whether the money might not be better directed towards the new village.

35. The Reserves Board told the sub-committee that half of the expenditure could be recovered when the new village was built. Of the remainder a large proportion is devoted to rehabilitation work and would be required even if the village was moved immediately. Other witnesses agreed that the expenditure was necessary.

36. The Committee agrees that existing facilities at the Rock are inadequate. All engineering services are in a run down condition. The sewerage system in particular is a health hazard and would not be tolerated in other parts of the Northern Territory and the solid waste disposal is unsatisfactory. The Committee accepts that the village cannot be

moved in the near future. The Reserves Board estimates that 1.5 million people will visit the Park in the next 10 years. The proposed expenditure represents less than \$2 per head. The Committee considers that the Government must review its priorities and make the necessary finance available to enable remedial action to be undertaken without delay.

Park Administration

37. In its report the previous Committee concluded that administration of the Park should be by a Commonwealth National Parks Service. The present Committee welcomes the decision to declare the park under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975. Once declared a plan of management will be prepared. However it believes that proclamation under the Act will not in itself lead to better management of the Park. The situation will remain unchanged if increased finance and manpower are not made available.

38. Despite inadequate manpower, finance and historical factors beyond its control, the Reserves Board has to date done a remarkable job in managing the Park. It would be unfortunate if the expertise and dedication of the Board were lost. The Committee considers that the Reserves Board should continue to be directly involved when park administration and policy formulation become the responsibility of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Relocation of the Village

39. The Committee is concerned about the delay in relocating the village but accepts that it cannot be moved for a number of years even given an early approval to proceed.

The Committee accepts assurances that the environment will not be disastrously affected by a 7 or 8 year delay, particularly if resources are directed towards rehabilitation and tourist control. It is fair to say however that as a National Heritage Area and a principal tourist attraction in Australia the Government has a prime responsibility to ensure that the Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park does not deteriorate for want of attention nor that tourists are discouraged through the absence of reasonable facilities.

40. The Committee emphasises that in line with accepted practice overseas the village should be located outside the Park boundary as soon as possible. Park administrators should ensure that continuing efforts are made to this end.

41. One matter that was raised during the inquiry was the need to locate the village at the selected site which is 17 kilometres from the Rock. The Committee agrees that the village should not be visible from the Rock and the Olgas, but considers that management authorities should closely examine whether the village should be located so far from the Rock which may detract from tourist interest.

Relocation of the Airfield

42. The relocation of the airport is a separate question to the relocation of the village. The present airfield is inadequate and dangerous. During periods of wet weather the strip becomes unserviceable due to poor drainage and because of its proximity to the Rock wind turbulence makes landing and take-off hazardous. The strip can only be used by commercial aircraft up to the Heron type (14 passengers).

In addition the strip is unsightly and interferes with the natural drainage. However under no circumstances should it be upgraded or major improvements made.

43. The Committee considers the airfield should be relocated outside the boundary of the Park as a matter of urgency. Initially the new airfield should be designed to take the aircraft using the present facility but capable of rapid upgrading for larger heavier aircraft.

Erldunda/Ayers Rock Road

44. Access to the Park from the Stuart Highway is by the Erldunda - Ayers Rock Road. Parts of this road have been described as the most dangerous in Central Australia. The sub-committee was told that conditions have led to injuries and costly damage to vehicles. The Reserves Board claimed that Park management was made difficult because many visitors after driving on the road arrive at the Park in an irritable condition. Many bus borne tourists arrange to fly out rather than travel on the road again.

45. There is no doubt that the existing road makes travelling to the Rock difficult and unpleasant. The Department of Industry and Commerce argued that an improved road may increase the number of tourists and exert pressures on already inadequate facilities at the Rock. The Committee's view is that as many tourists are unaware of the real nature of the road until they have completed the forward journey, an upgraded road should not influence numbers greatly.

46. The Committee considers that there is no alternative but for the road to be resealed and rerouted so that it passes near the proposed new village and airstrip. The Committee believes that construction of this road should encourage commencement on the airstrip and new village.

Ring Road

47. No final decision has been made on the location of the road that circles Ayers Rock. The sub-committee was told that by the provision of floodways and culverts the existing road will not impair natural drainage. The Reserves Board's interim work plan contains proposals to undertake such work. The Committee supports these proposals.

48. The Committee re-examined proposals to move the ring road away from the Rock and considers that such proposals are of low priority. The Committee is sympathetic to the arguments advanced in favour of leaving the road alignment unchanged. These are that the existing alignments provide the greatest visitor satisfaction and that there is a danger of people driving off road if the road is moved several kilometres from the Rock.

49. The Committee believes that there can be a balance between tourist demands and protection of the environment. The upgrading of the existing ring road with culverts and floodways will enable judgments to be made at a later date as to the need to relocate the road.

Effectiveness of Restoration Work

50. The present financial stringencies mean that restoration work is almost at a standstill. Some witnesses said that restoration work carried out to date may not be as effective as it could be. The Reserves Board's programs have been supervised by soil conservation experts. The Committee considers that now is an opportune time for the Reserves Board to reassess its programs to determine if the most adequate methods are being utilised. This experience in restoration will assist management of parks in other arid areas.

Involvement of Aboriginals

51. The Committee notes that attempts have been made to involve Aboriginals in Park administration with partial success only. The Committee agrees that Aboriginals should be engaged for work at Ayers Rock and believes that efforts to interest them should be continued.

Sedimentaries

52. When the sub-committee visited the Park it was reliably informed that the Aboriginals with traditional ties with the area have no objections to the inclusion of the Sedimentaries within its boundaries. Some time later the witness from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs told the sub-committee that the Aboriginals did have reservations as there are sacred sites within the area. The Committee believes that the Sedimentaries should be included within the Park and considers that the wishes of Aboriginals can be accommodated by having areas of significance to them set aside for their exclusive use as at Ayers Rock.

Recommendations

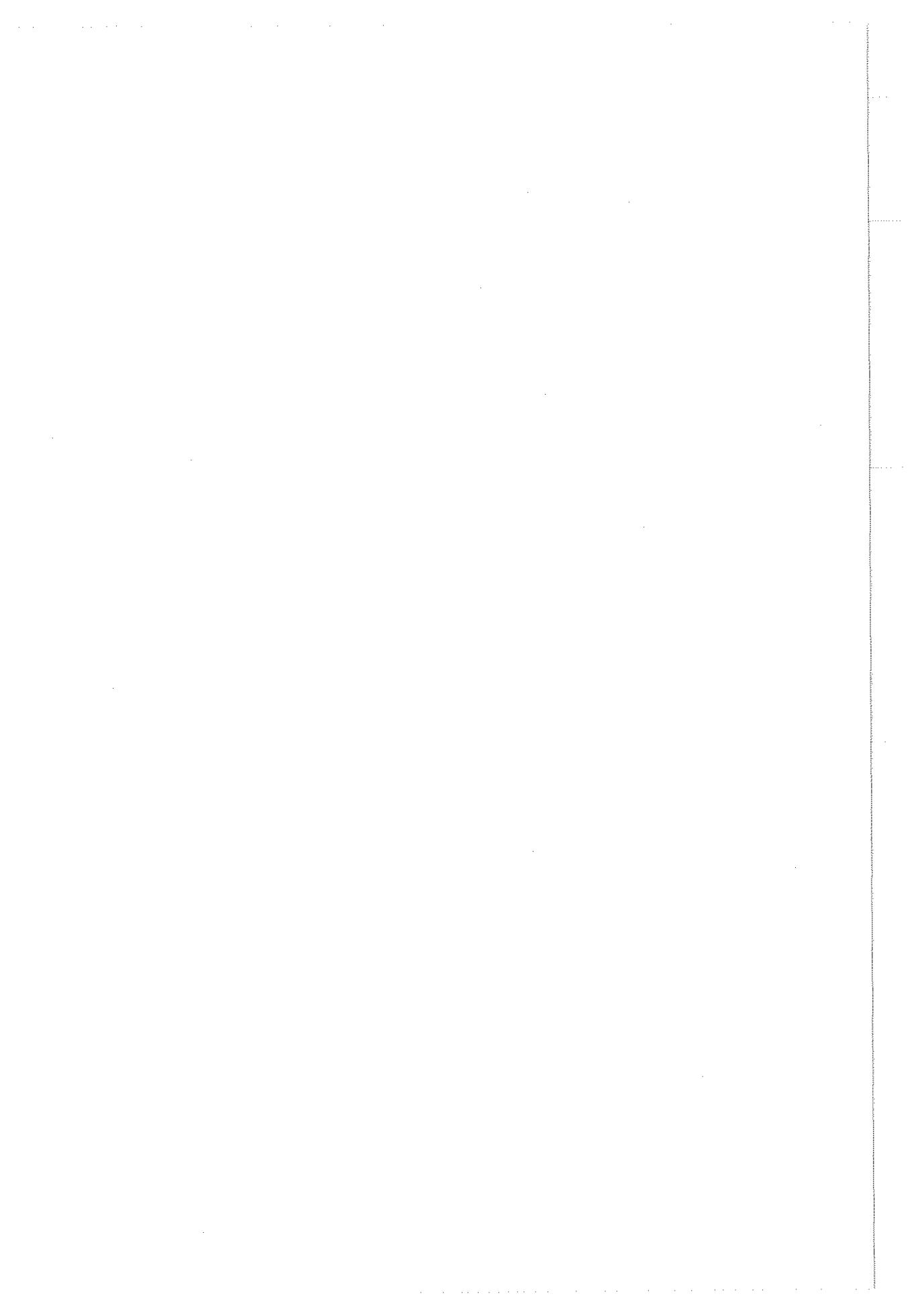
53. Ayers Rock is a major attraction for both local and overseas tourists. The Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park is an important national park in its own right and part of the national heritage. It is deteriorating because for various reasons Governments have not made the necessary finance available. The Committee considers that urgent remedial action needs to be undertaken without further delay. The Committee recognises that sometimes economic situations necessitate restrictions in Government funding in some areas. However the Committee believes that the Ayers Rock - Mt Olga National Park has been neglected for too long and considers the present Government must re-examine its priorities concerning the Park.

54. The Committee therefore recommends that the Commonwealth Government provide the necessary finance to enable:

- (a) the Northern Territory Reserves Board to commence during the 1977/78 financial year essential interim work in the Park;
- (b) the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service to devise and implement quickly a comprehensive management plan for the Park;
- (c) during the 1977/78 financial year the commencement of construction of a new airstrip outside the Park boundaries; and
- (d) during the 1977/78 financial year the commencement of the sealing of the Erldunda-Ayers Rock road.

(J.C. HODGES)
Chairman

February 1977



APPENDIX 1

LIST OF WITNESSES

FINGER, Mr M.R.	Chairman Ayers Rock Advisory Committee DARWIN. N.T.
HARE, Mr W.T.	Director Northern Territory Reserves Board ALICE SPRINGS. N.T.
HILL, Mr M.A.	Officer Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service CANBERRA. A.C.T.
HUEY, Mr R.	Acting Assistant Director Southern Branch Department of Aboriginal Affairs ALICE SPRINGS. N.T.
KILGARIFF, Senator B.F.	P.O. Box 20 ALICE SPRINGS. N.T.
MALONEY, Mr B.J.	Director Projects Section Tourism Industry Branch Department of Industry and Commerce CANBERRA. A.C.T.
OVINGTON, Professor J.D.	Director Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service CANBERRA. A.C.T.
RUSSELL, Mr V.S.	Officer Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service CANBERRA. A.C.T.
WATSON, Mr W.R.	First Assistant Secretary Environment Policy Division Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development CANBERRA. A.C.T.



APPENDIX 2

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE
OF THE 28TH PARLIAMENT

1. That a comprehensive management plan for the Ayers Rock-Mount Olga National Park be implemented as soon as possible.
2. That the Park be broadly zoned into:
 - (a) areas of intensive usage, chiefly in the area of Ayers Rock itself;
 - (b) areas of some restriction that could be developed progressively to take pressure off Ayers Rock itself;
 - (c) essentially wilderness areas, where access would be very restricted or prohibited; and
 - (d) sacred and other areas under direct Aboriginal control, and to which access will be given only on terms and conditions determined by Aboriginal trustees.
3. That the existing village and airstrip be resited outside the present National Park boundaries to minimise adverse environmental and aesthetic effects adjacent to Ayers Rock.
4. That roads be sited in the interests of minimising environmental damage rather than maximising tourist convenience. The road which presently encircles Ayers Rock be moved out some distance from its base and spur roads be constructed where necessary.
5. That opportunity be provided for Aboriginal involvement in the following ways:
 - (a) participating actively in the management of the Park;
 - (b) maintenance of existing cultural features such as the decorated caves;
 - (c) construction and maintenance of National Park facilities;
 - (d) provision of information, guide and travel services;
 - (e) teaching white people of Aboriginal tradition and involvement at Ayers Rock;
 - (f) selling Aboriginal artifacts;

- (g) displaying indigenous plants and animals in a natural setting;
- (h) provision of a camp site within reasonable distance of Ayers Rock; and
- (i) exclusive usage of Ayers Rock for certain ceremonial purposes at times to be negotiated.

6. That the 'carrying capacity' of the Park be established and visitor numbers restricted to this limit. In peak periods visitors be admitted only on guided tours. The Park be closed at night. The use of firearms be prohibited except for official use. Motor vehicles to be used only on designated roads.

7. That all existing concession holders at Ayers Rock be compensated and given priority in allocation of land at a new village site if they wish.

8. That interpretation of cultural, historical and scientific features take place, involving Aboriginals where appropriate.

9. That the Park be adequately and professionally staffed and financed to meet the objectives outlined.

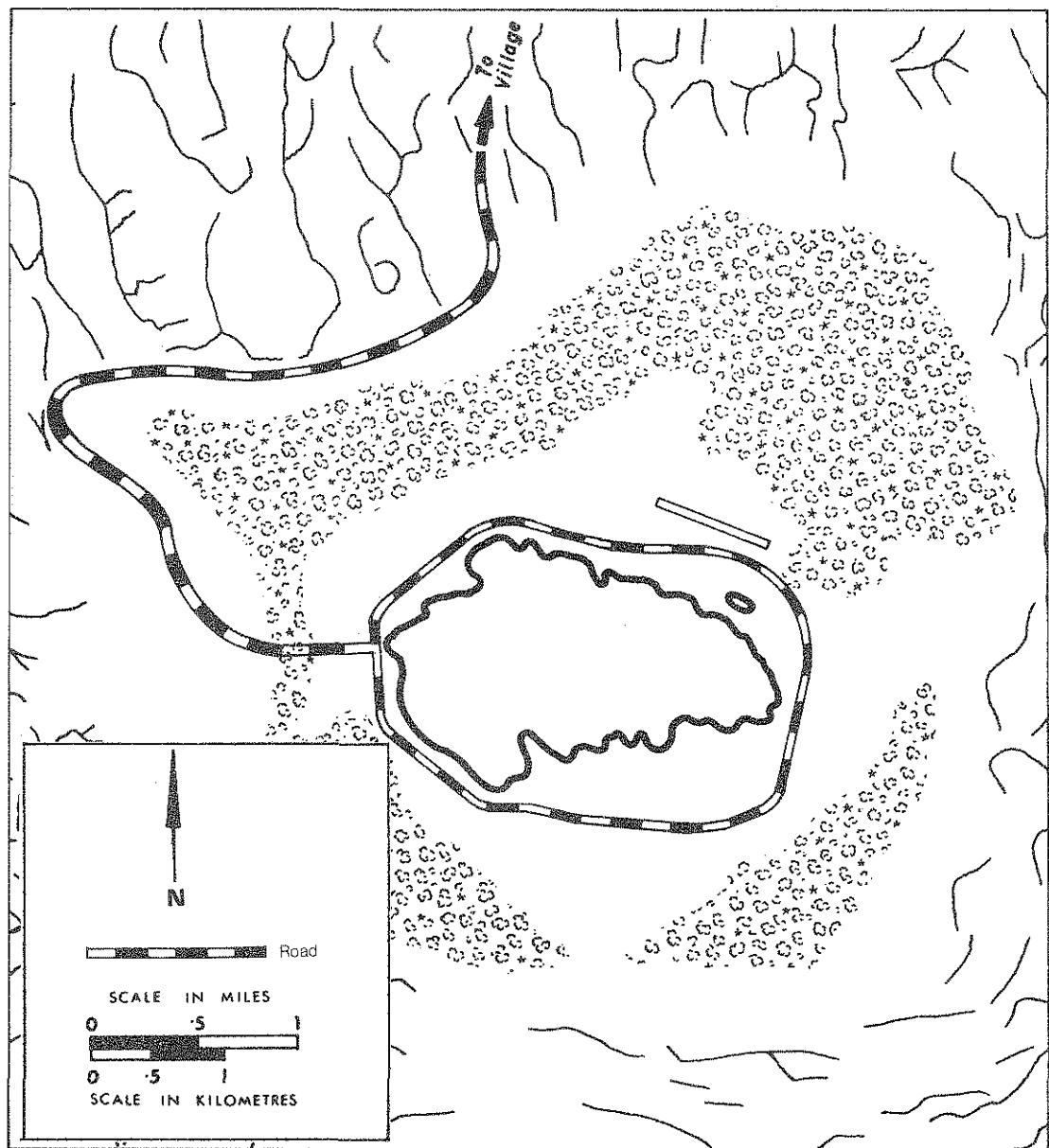
10. That measures for the restoration of areas which have been environmentally damaged be adopted.

11. That Park boundaries be extended on the basis of ecological requirements and should include the area known as the 'Sedimentaries'.

12. That the Park be declared a 'National Heritage Area' to signify its importance for both whites and Aboriginals and to indicate its protected nature and purpose.

APPENDIX 3(i)

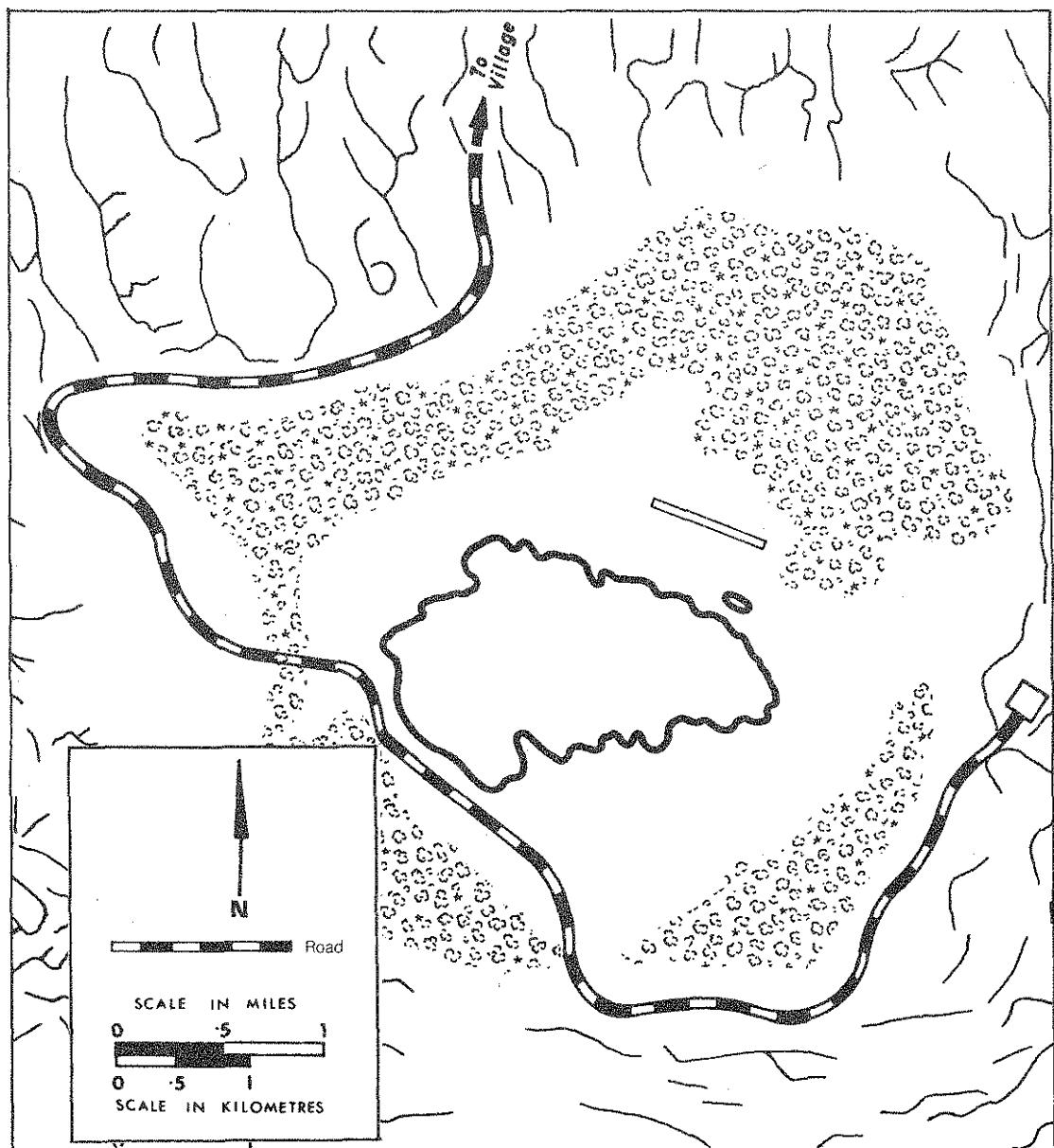
CIRCUIT ROAD, PROPOSAL A



Source: Northern Territory Reserves Board

APPENDIX 3(ii)

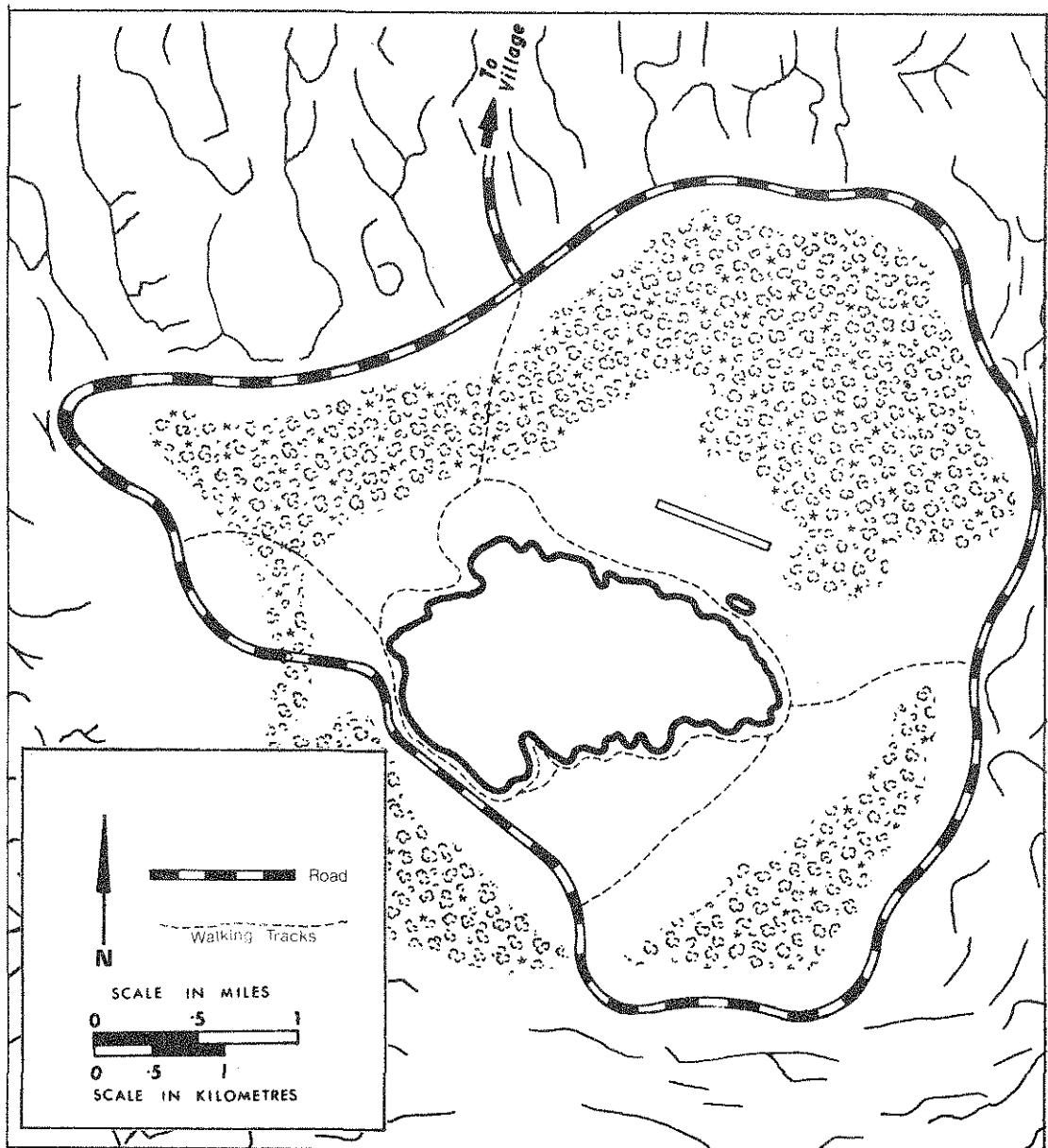
CIRCUIT ROAD, PROPOSAL B



Source: Northern Territory Reserves Board

APPENDIX 3(iii)

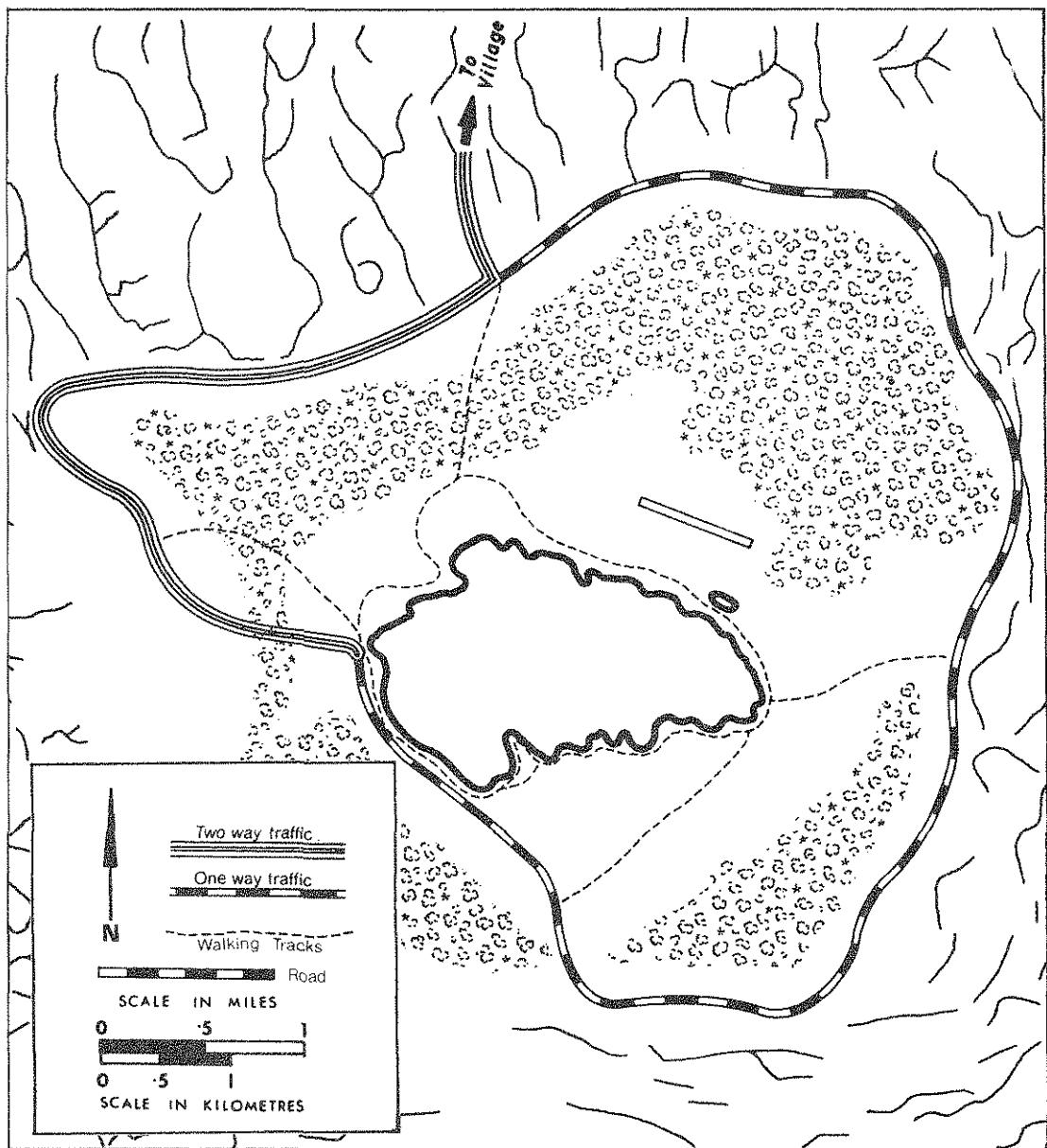
CIRCUIT ROAD, PROPOSAL C



Source: Northern Territory Reserves Board

APPENDIX 3(iv)

CIRCUIT ROAD, PROPOSAL D



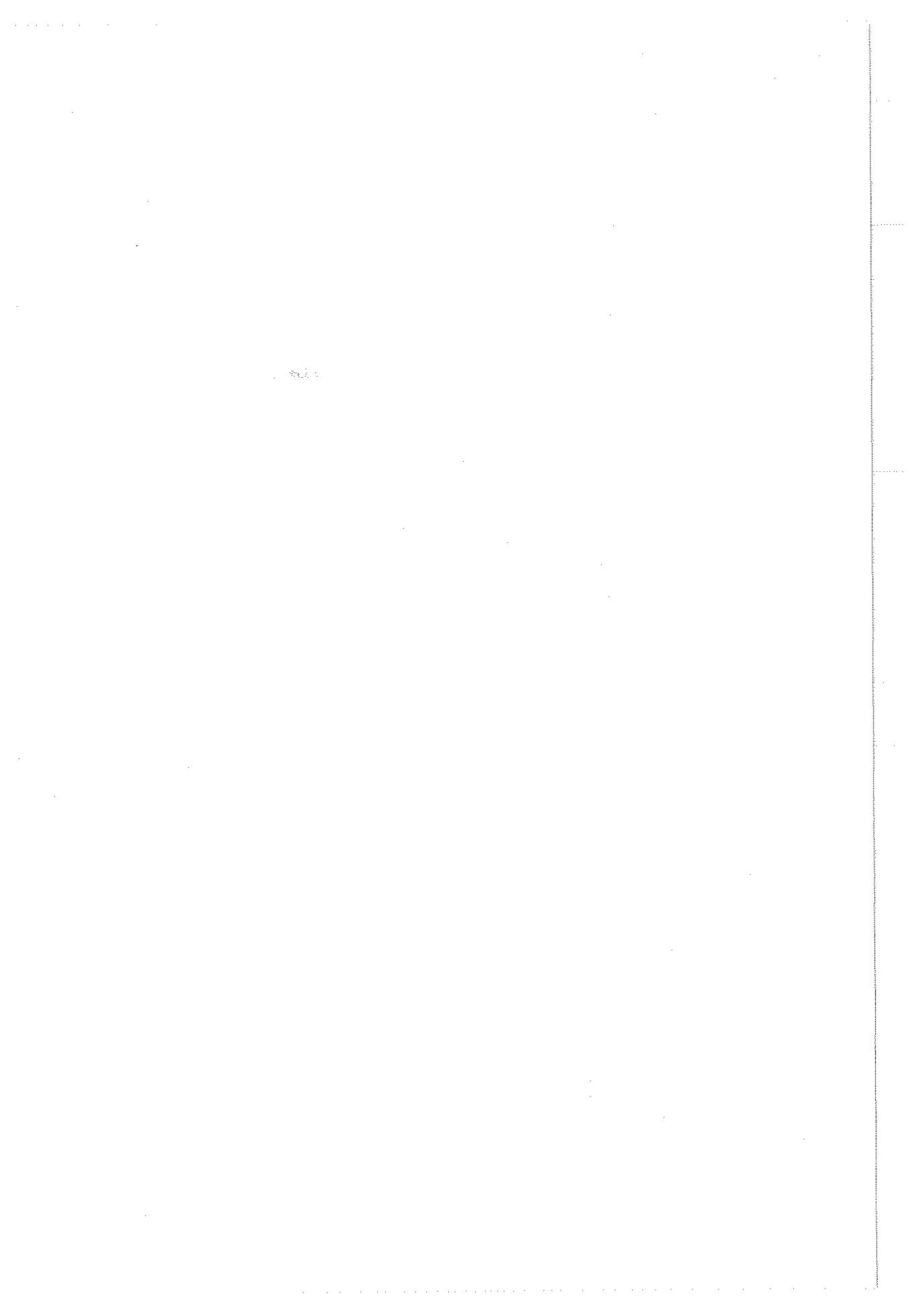
Source: Northern Territory Reserves Board

APPENDIX 4

PROPOSED INTERIM EXPENDITURE

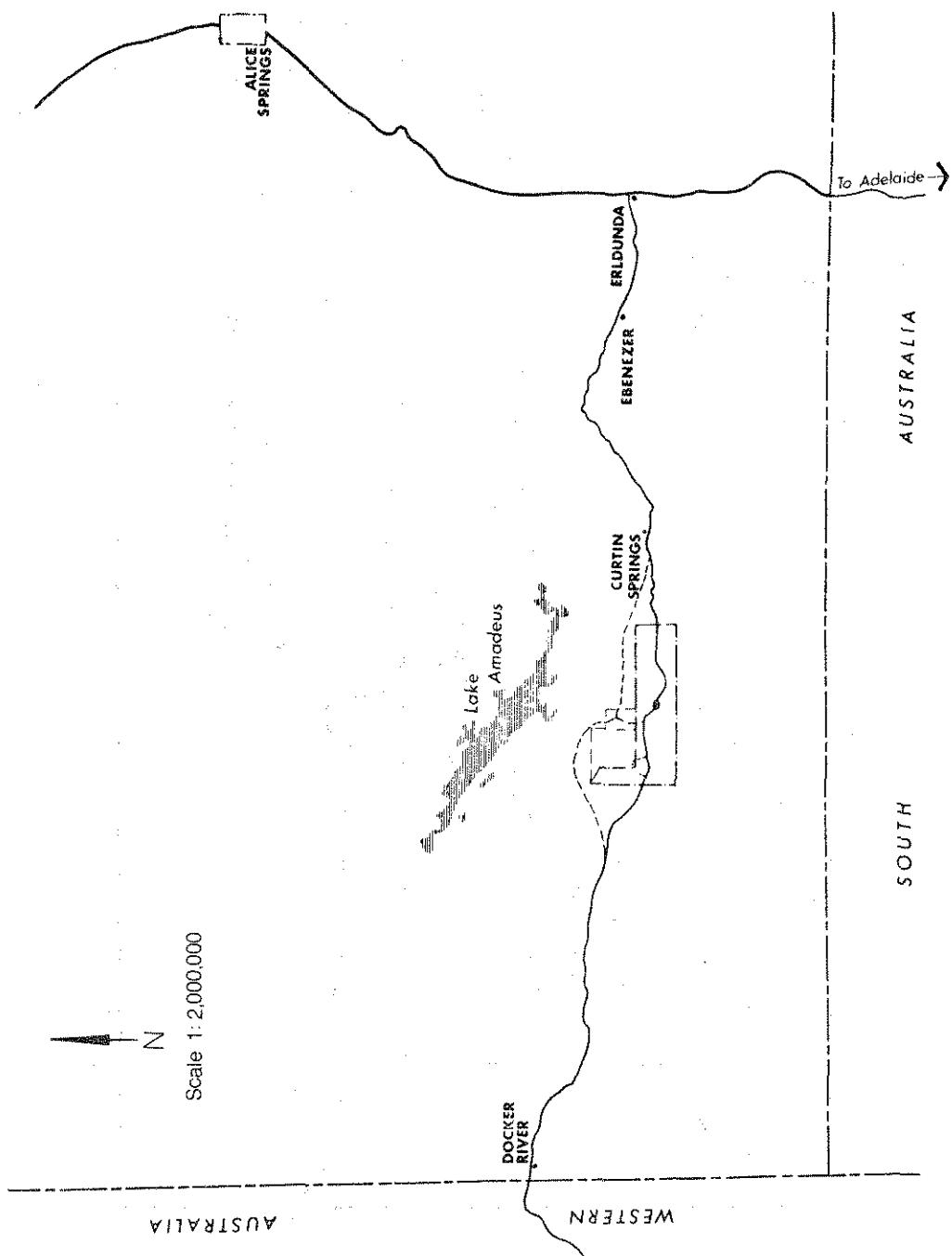
Project	<u>Optimum</u>	<u>Minimum</u>
	\$ '000	\$ '000
Sewerage	280	250
Electricity	660	490
Staff Housing	290	240
Camping	530	320
Garbage	70	40
Tracks	310	220
Roads	860	250
Communications	35	20
Rehabilitation	75	70
Water	360	340
Control Station & Display	75	30
Service Area	16	10
Total	\$ 3,561	\$ 2,280

Source: Northern Territory Reserves Board



APPENDIX 5(i)

LOCALITY PLAN, AYERS ROCK - MT OLGA NATIONAL PARK



AYERS ROCK - MT OLGA NATIONAL PARK

APPENDIX 5(i)

