

STATE OF THE PARK

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National parks are the foundation of biodiversity conservation in this State and across Australia. Only national parks and other conservation areas fully protect our unique plants, animals and landscapes, and enable threatened species to survive. From early 2012 to late 2014, national parks in Queensland came under siege from numerous quarters and were asked to fulfil roles that they were never designed for. Not only has this damaged the national parks brand, but confused the very purpose of parks themselves.

This article explores some of the primary challenges currently faced by national parks in Queensland.

Growing the national park estate

National parks in Queensland currently cover approximately 5% of the State. By comparison, the national average is approaching 10% and the international Convention on Biological Diversity target's (to which Australia is a signatory) is 17% of the Australian landmass preserved in protected areas. As this article goes to press, none of the 12 national reserve system (NRS) properties purchased by the Bligh ALP government have been gazetted, all locked into the deliberations of a Protected Area Review during the last three years, the recommendations of which are unlikely to see the light of day. Collectively, these properties cost almost \$27m to acquire, with two-thirds of the funding

coming from the now defunct federal government's National Reserve System program. These lands - all in regions with few national parks - provide wonderful habitat for endangered birds such as Gouldian and Black-throated Finches (latter described on pg12), new species of plants, include amazing gorges, and protect the headwaters of several of our mighty Gulf rivers. Their gazettal would go a long way to conserve some of the remaining 18% of threatened plants and animals in Queensland that have no formal protection in national parks.

On the positive side of the ledger, the Newman LNP government saw six properties acquired as national park with several others under contract and investigation. Another 10 properties were purchased as national park using koala acquisitions funding, with all 10 adjoining existing parks. Like the 12 NRS properties, none of these properties have been gazetted.

The main impediment to gazettal remains mining interests. While the physical footprint of actual mining is relatively small (<2% of Queensland), mining exploration permits cover a massive 82% of the State. In short, these permits must be inactive for a minimum period of five years and then retired in order for a gazettal to proceed. Of the 12 NRS properties, only two are free of exploration permits. The solution proposed in the past has been to gazette the components of these properties that are permit-free, and declare the remainder Regional

Park until the mining interests can be retired. Although a compromise, this provides one path forward to commence the gazettal process.

Parks not paddocks

In May 2013, after a prolonged period of drought, the then Newman LNP government decided that five national parks (Blackbraes, Forest Den, Mazeppa, Moorrinya and Nairana) and eight national reserve system properties would be made available to graziers under a hardship grazing program. It was argued that not only would these lands provide fodder for cattle, but that grazing would assist in managing introduced grasses in these 13 protected areas. Conservationists were assured that strict grazing regimes would be adhered to in order to manage the impact of grazing on native flora and fauna, and that the habitat of endangered animals found in these parks would be protected. Ironically, many of the plans created to recover these species clearly state that grazing is one of the principal threats to their survival.

By August, the transformation of these protected areas into cow paddocks was almost complete. Trees and understorey vegetation had been cleared to erect new boundary fencing at Moorrinya and Blackbraes National Parks, watering points installed and some internal fencing put in place. By November, large sections of Forest Den and Moorrinya National Parks had been grazed down to bare earth,



completely removing all understorey habitat and leaving nothing for local wildlife. The damage was extensive, not localized to high traffic areas such as watering points, and it appeared that the permit system and associated stocking rates decreed by the government had been breached.

After a sustained media campaign, the cattle came off national parks by the end of 2013, and off the national reserve properties by June 2014. In the public's eyes, it appeared that grazing was no longer an issue on national parks. But what is out of sight, is truly out of mind. During the latter half of 2014, NPAQ continued to receive reports from concerned landholders about cattle intrusions in national parks. A cursory search of encumbrances on these and other parks unearthed over 30 grazing leases covering almost 100,000 hectares on 11 national parks. How could this be so? As part of regional forestry agreements, some state forests were made national park. At the time of gazettal, some of these new national parks carried grazing leases; many were for an original period of 50 years and allowed to continue. In addition, when some national parks were purchased, some graziers negotiated to graze part of the new national park for a limited time period as part of the purchase arrangements. The actual number of national parks still affected by grazing today is almost certainly much higher than 11.

Grazing national parks is a bad idea. It directly threatens the survival of rare animals and plants, and studies indicate that there is no net benefit to conservation from grazing exotic species, such as buffel grass, in national parks. Grazing does not promote the wide regeneration of native plants that fire does, and inevitably leads to a reduction in the diversity of native plants. Rather, there is the very real risk that cattle actually introduce new weeds, and spread existing weeds, in national parks.

A changing climate

In 2010, conservation groups and the then Bligh ALP government sought to establish a biodiversity strategy in Queensland that anticipated the likely impacts of a changing climate. Part of this strategy was to determine how best to make additions to a static national park system against the backdrop of the highly variable impacts that changes in climate would bring.

In the northern hemisphere, many conservation groups and governments continue to promote the establishment of migratory landscape scale corridors as mechanisms to conserve biodiversity and maintain ecosystem function. Think of Yellowstone to Yukon, the Meso-American Biological Corridor and the Pan European Green Corridor Network to name a few. Locally, there is little evidence to support widespread species migration in response to past climate oscillations, a relatively flat landscape that would

have forced latitudinal migration over vast distances, and a distinct lack of the large iconic migratory fauna found in North America or Europe. In Australia there remains the very real risk that landscape corridor projects overstate the migratory, and therefore climate adaptation benefits of such linkages.

In a visionary and unheralded move, the Newman LNP government continued to expand the national park estate while giving full consideration to a changing climate. By using the latest climate research from the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, new national park acquisitions focussed on areas that demonstrated resilience to climate impacts, that protected refugia, and that consolidated existing protected areas (by buffering, building core habitat areas, and establishing short corridors). Continuation of this strategy provides the best opportunity for our unique plants and animals to persist in the landscape.

Managing protected areas

A recent research project investigating the costs and drivers of national park management in Queensland found that parks are performing poorly on protecting biodiversity with most funds being allocated to visitor management. The project found that most national parks performed poorly or fairly on biodiversity related functions such as weed and pest management and the monitoring of natural values,



but that most performed well on the functions related to visitor facilities and management. The implication here is that as budgets shrink, managers are forced to choose what management activities they will resource. Often they cannot decrease visitor related activities due to safety issues and complaints from the public, so instead the management of natural values declines.

The research has highlighted the growing gap between current levels of funding and the funding required to manage national parks well. Not only are visitor numbers one of the main drivers of the costs of park management, but managing visitors is expensive compared to caring for biodiversity. Any policy to increase park visitation will disproportionately increase pressure on existing budgets.

There has been no net increase in operational funding for national park management during the last three years. In addition, total numbers of QPWS Rangers have dropped from

approximately 820 to 750, and QPWS support staff from 300 to 200, a dire situation when national parks are predicted to grow by at least 700,000 ha in the near future. Meanwhile, longstanding management issues such as feral species, the balanced application of fire, and the maintenance of boundary fencing remain. In addition, cat and fox infestations continue to proliferate in the absence of top predators, and the number one driver of weed infestations remains roads. Clearly operational funding for National Parks needs to be significantly increased during this term of state government.

The commercialisation of national parks

The Newman LNP government also moved quickly to include commercial activity as an object in the Nature Conservation Act, laying a platform for resorts, zip-lines and similar activities to occur in national parks. Never before had the very foundation of what constitutes an acceptable activity in a national park been so redefined. When it comes to assessing appropriate development in parks, resorts are a case in point.

Across the world there is little evidence of market demand for resorts in national parks. Indeed less than 1% of the 20,000 national parks worldwide have any significant tourism infrastructure of a comparable nature. Resorts confuse public access to public land with the exclusive use

associated with private facilities, and their development undermines the naturalness of parks and risks eroding their attractiveness to tourists. Resorts also attract effort and resources away from other national park management priorities - a commercial investment must be protected from fire, have good access roads and attract services such as walking tracks. The Queensland economy already gains over \$4b a year from tourists visiting national parks, without any need to develop parks. A more preferable situation would be encouraging tourism providers to buy and develop land next to national parks, and protect that land under a nature refuge agreement.

Like grazing, the commercialization of national parks detracts from the park brand and threatens the very founding principles that led to the creation of these unique places.

National parks and other protected areas are the jewels in Australia's conservation crown. Not only do they conserve and protect biodiversity, but form the basis of our economic and social wellbeing, attracting millions of visitors annually and delivering ecosystem services that have immense value. National parks deliver tourism revenue, improved health, disaster mitigation, clean water, food security, cultural heritage and climate control. It is up to us to ensure that their primary conservation role is never compromised.



Cool burn, Main Range NP (Paul Donatui)