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Tidbinbilla Discussion Paper – December 2008

This letter is in response to the invitation to comment on this Discussion Paper about a new Plan of Management for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) is aware that the National Parks Association ACT will be submitting a detailed response to this Discussion Paper. COG endorses the views of the NPA ACT.

COG particularly agrees with the NPA ACT that Tidbinbilla was not the only place affected by the 2003 bushfires, and therefore there can be no special case promoting any fundamental change in management policy (re points on page 6 of the paper). COG also agrees with the cautions advocated by the NPA ACT about Tidbinbilla's limitations, especially with respect to an enhanced tourist market, scientific focus etc. The bushfire proneness of the reserve is also a factor which needs to be taken into account in this respect.

COG is dedicated to the study and conservation of native birds and their habitats. COG is essentially concerned with better protection for native vegetation which provides habitat for various species of birds. Wilderness and forest areas, such as occur in Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla NR, are very important for a range of bird species, including some rarer species, as well as a breeding area for many small birds which migrate to the Brindabella ranges and the lower woodland and forest slopes in the spring and summer.

COG has a particular interest in the Superb Lyrebird population at Tidbinbilla, which has been the subject of research and surveys over many decades. This population has shown a slow recovery since the 2003 bushfires. COG notes though, that Tidbinbilla has recovered well from those bushfires with birdlife now largely back to 'normal', and this has occurred despite the lack of any management on the part of TAMS.

Generally, COG is disappointed with the Discussion Paper which we, like the NPA ACT, believe has a narrow focus, shows that little thought has gone into major issues fundamental to a management plan for a reserve, and fails to even mention or address those fundamental issues which are at the core of any management plan for what is basically a conservation area and low impact recreation facility.

We are aware that much capital investment has gone into Tidbinbilla for the purpose of attracting more 'tourist/visitor' market, yet the restoration of basic infrastructure and facilities for low impact

recreation such as walking and birdwatching, restoration of the former walking trails, strategic plantings, and weed control has been neglected, as well as a loss of staff to support these activities.

COG believes that the Government needs to take a step back instead of allowing unthinking 'kite flying', and that there needs to be a shift back to fundamentals, with more focus on the fundamental objectives/purpose of the reserve, that is conservation of the environment and its biodiversity, low impact recreation for bushwalkers, birdwatchers, families etc. Trying to make Tidbinbilla into much more than it can realistically be is a recipe for disaster.

COG shares the concerns of the NPA ACT regarding the apparent sidelining of the Friends of Tidbinbilla Group which has contributed much to the reserve over the years (water testing, weeding, trails and heritage buildings restoration), and that the broader community effectively now has little say in the management of Tidbinbilla.

Overall, we feel any new Management Plan needs to address prominently, the linkages of Tidbinbilla with other parts of the reserve system, including the Jerrabomberra wetlands and the Murrumbidgee River Corridor.

COG is pleased to hear that the Skywalk proposal will not proceed. This is still mentioned in the Discussion Paper. COG believes that funding should be prioritised for fundamental, core works and monitoring in the reserve, not for theme park attractions.

Finally by way of overall comments, there should be an opportunity for greater discussion with community groups about some aspects of the Discussion Paper, such as the intended role of tourism, before proceeding to the next stage of drafting a plan. This has already been raised by the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group at a meeting with TAMS staff.

Tourism and Private Accommodation

Like the NPA ACT, COG is concerned that the Discussion Paper has an alarming thread throughout on opening up opportunities, particularly for tourism. The Discussion Paper is not open on what might be in mind for the nature reserve. COG, like the NPA ACT is concerned that expectations regarding tourism need to be carefully thought through, especially given Tidbinbilla's natural and geographic limitations and fire proneness.

Like the NPA ACT, COG does not support private tourism or additional infrastructure owned or managed by commercial interests within Tidbinbilla, including accommodation. While COG is not opposed to attracting tourists to Canberra to also visit Tidbinbilla, we believe it is more appropriate for any accommodation needed for tourists to be sited outside the reserve and that creating opportunities for local landowners to provide this is a more compatible outcome for a national park/special purpose reserve, and also gives linkages to and benefits for the local community.

In the past, Community Groups have consistently opposed built accommodation at Tidbinbilla NR. COG is not opposed to Birrigai being used (outside school schedules) for accommodation for self catering groups or for low impact family camping at Birrigai, but we do not support commercial or semi-commercial type accommodation within Tidbinbilla, as we do not believe this is compatible with the fundamental purposes of the reserve.

COG is not opposed to limited camping facilities in the Tidbinbilla special purpose area for groups or individuals undertaking studies, surveys or conservation related activities or work in the reserve, provided this is low key and managed by parks staff. COG members undertake regular Lyrebird

surveys at Tidbinbilla and these would be greatly assisted if the organisers and members participating had access to camping facilities the night before surveys either in or near the reserve.

COG would also like to see free access to the reserve, that is, no entry fees for ACT residents.

Wetlands and Education

The Discussion Paper makes no mention of linkages with areas like the Jerrabomberra Wetlands. COG believes that the Jerrabomberra Wetlands and the wetlands at Tidbinbilla should be managed as a joint operation. Also, COG believes that any wetlands educational portfolio should be based at Jerrabomberra Wetlands, not at Tidbinbilla. The Jerrabomberra Wetlands area has enormous potential as a centre for community and schools education, given its location within urban Canberra, and this should be the focus of any investment in education.

Scientific Research

Again like Education, COG believes there needs to be more careful thought and consideration about issues canvassed in the Discussion Paper as to whether it is appropriate for Tidbinbilla to assume a greater wildlife research role or indeed become the centre for all ACT Government research. While it may be appropriate to have some wildlife research projects based in the reserve, such as the captive wildlife programs, COG does not support any move to centralise wildlife research at Tidbinbilla or indeed relocate the Government's wildlife research staff. The bushfire proneness of the reserve is one issue which is pertinent here to both educational and research establishments at Tidbinbilla.

COG would like to see long-term surveys of flora and fauna as a greater focus of management activity, and be properly funded. As far as we are aware, there is little or no systematic, ongoing monitoring of flora and fauna undertaken by parks staff and no overall plan for long-term conservation/biodiversity monitoring. COG would like to see a comprehensive biodiversity monitoring program as part of any new management plan. There are great opportunities to involve community groups like COG who have expertise in particular areas, with support from parks staff.

Reintroductions of species

COG notes that the Discussion Paper canvasses what potential there exists for reintroductions of species which have become extinct etc (page 15). COG strongly argues that any investment of this nature should be directed to the Mulligan's Flat Woodland Sanctuary, not to Tidbinbilla.

Nature Discovery Centre – Brolga display

A number of our members who have visited the Nature Discovery Centre have commented on the appalling display of the Brolga, which sits in a tiny enclosure like a stuffed animal. This makes the facility resemble a zoo or theme park. There needs to be a re-think about these kinds of displays, and an effort to show birds (and other wildlife) in a much more natural and free roaming situation or setting. We do not agree with the point on page 8 of the Paper which asserts that these displays are in any way a 'natural setting'.

Yours sincerely

Chris Davey
President
10 February 2009