

**Submission
No 467**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Balranald Shire Council

Name: Mr Chris Littlemore

Date received: 31/08/2012

BALRANALD SHIRE COUNCIL

ALL COMMUNICATIONS
MUST BE ADDRESSED TO
THE GENERAL MANAGER

PO BOX 120
BALRANALD NSW 2715

Contact:

TELEPHONE: (03) 5020 1300
FAX: (03) 5020 1620
EMAIL: council@balranald.nsw.gov.au

Balranald Shire Council submission to the Management of public land in New South Wales inquiry.

Council wishes to thank the Standing Committee for taking the time to visit Balranald and for the invitation to address the Committee in Deniliquin. It also welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Management of public land in New South Wales.

As the Committee has taken the initiative to tour Yanga National Park, it would have an appreciation of the scale of the property and its capacity to be used for primary production and generate economic activity.

In relation to the review, Council has comment to make about Yanga in particular, about public land in general and national parks in general.

Yanga.

Yanga was purchased in 2005. At the time Council and the community generally were concerned about the economic impacts on the community. NSW NPWS staff were clear that the economic impact of the newly created park would make up for the foregone primary production income. While it may not have been committed to paper, visitor numbers like 50,000 per annum were touted with the clear comparison that Yanga would be the next Mungo.

With regard to visitation, the last consultative meeting at Yanga discussed the inherent problems with the primitive counters used which primarily count axles, the "accepted" number of visitors per axle and the fact the park has three access counters and a single car could cross all three. Add to this the number of parks vehicles and contractors, confidence in visitor numbers is severely eroded.

Council has urged the NSW NPWS through the consultative committee to take the necessary steps to get this tourist economic activity going. Despite much activity related to infrastructure in the park, little promotion of the park has occurred.

Immediate improvement is needed in the area of accessibility of the park. Until recently the park would close to the public after the slightest rainfall. This was patently obvious as the parks staff would fax the closures to the Council and council's visitor centre. No tourist operator would be scheduling regular visits to a park that is not reliably open.

In addition, parks staff were actively attempting to encourage local operators to start operating in the park. Given the issues with access, there is no doubt that anyone would invest capital of \$100,000 or more and be assured that trips would regularly be cancelled.

Some improvement has been made in recent times but there is no substitute for bitumen seal to the main attractions of the park. This could be achieved at a modest cost, if the will was there to make it the priority it deserves. Tourist operators would then have more confidence in the business opportunity the parks present.

One of the major activities on park has been the opening of the diversion banks in 64 places, to stop flood water being pushed onto land that was watered artificially in the past. The effect of this has been to ensure that thousands of hectares of red gum killed by the prolonged drought do not grow back. The stated objective for this discussed at the last consultative meeting at Yanga was to return this landscape to its "natural state" through a clear felling process.

What exists there at present is an immense natural resource of standing dead timber in a quantity that remains unsurveyed. If the objective is pursued, a valuable opportunity exists for the residents of Balranald who have the skills to remove the resource to engage in a profitable business activity. All that would be required would be a code of conduct, designated areas, agreed rehabilitation of tracks and a win win situation is created. Add to this the thinning contracts which could be available and what could be created would be a sustainable business model for life with royalties going to the park for ongoing improvements.

Other opportunities on park include the 4000 ha cleared paddock in the centre of the park shown clearly here <http://goo.gl/maps/CjCdU> . Since 2005 there has not been any rehabilitative activity on this section of the park. This is a valuable resource which could at least be share farmed for income for the park. The section is beyond the resources of NPWS to manage for environmental outcomes.

Just as NSW NPWS would not contemplate growing a wheat crop, they should not contemplate entering the firewood industry. Private enterprise has the necessary skills and equipment readily available.

In relation to National Parks Generally

Gravel

Inability to get permission to take gravel from a national park has caused this council enormous additional expense in maintaining roads through national parks. This problem is primarily associated with Mungo NP as there is a substantial length of road in the park and council damages roads outside the park to cart gravel into the park for repairs. Common sense is needed here. Parks staff use gravel won from the park to repair their internal roads. A simplified process to excise gravel pits from the park would easily solve this problem.

Dogs in Parks

The current rules in relation to domesticated animals in parks are a one size fits all approach. When the Riverina Red Gum parks were mooted, Council submitted that the conversion of state forests into national and regional parks would be a disincentive to park users who bring their pets on holidays. The restriction already existed in Victoria, so a point of difference was required for NSW

parks or visitation would drop in relation to that demographic. Council notes anecdotally that many tourists travel with their pets.

The problem exists that domestic animals lost on park are a nuisance and potentially breed with wild animals such as dingoes.

Appropriate areas could easily be identified, rules like only micro-chipped and de-sexed animals "under the control of" the owner, resolve the issue easily.

Park Funding

New parks need a business case prepared in advance of purchase spelling out how they will be funded for ongoing maintenance and capital improvement, preparation for public access and publicity. No bank would ever lend a client \$30M without a business plan, yet the public purse seems to operate without such common business principles and practice. This needs to change.

Professional marketing campaigns are not within the budget of the shires where much of the national park estate has been purchased in recent years. For parks acquired on account of international significance, professional State and Federally funded strategic marketing should be part of the funding package. Parks are not solely for scientists; their true value is in giving the public the opportunity to experience their ecological or geo-physical splendour. Without the public there would be no need for parks. NSW NPWS need to adopt this as a first principle. That has not been the experience in South West New South Wales. This attitude is changing under the new leadership of Sally Barnes.

Tourism

At the public hearing in Deniliquin, The Hon. Dr Peter Phelps asked "Is there any particular reason you believe why National Parks should be spending more money on your particular national parks?" The answer in Balranald's case is that the state government of the day attempted to ameliorate the community backlash at the proposed purchase of Yanga with the promise of tourism to replace that lost economic benefit. Since 2005, right through to the declaration of the Red Gum NPs, tourism has been the major point of discussion.

The Hon. Dr Peter Phelps also asked "Do any of you believe that tourism will replace the lost money and jobs from the timber industry?" That the question was asked, indicates that the inquiry members believe that promises were made in relation to tourist numbers and they were, no doubt, a gross exaggeration of what was either possible or that the state government ever intended to try and achieve.

Rates

There has long been an argument by local government that NPs should pay rates. If the state on behalf of the public at large and the environment chooses to remove land from the rate base of a Council, the ratepayers of that shire should not have to make up the shortfall. The responsibility to make up the rates lies with the public at large through either the state or federal sphere.

The argument is never raised that national parks use no council services and on that ground should not pay. In Balranald's case, the amount of damage that tourists do to roads to Mungo National Park is enormous compared to that caused by local traffic. This alone justifies parks paying rates and then the shire would have a revenue stream to repair the roads.

Leasing NP Land

Leases are another area of contention in NP's. At present there are leases of parts of Mungo NP to private citizens. While they may have to pay a lease fee to the NP, lessees of western lands (crown land) pay a lease fee and rates. There is a definite in-equity in this. Leases on NP's should have a valuation applied and a rates account issued. The committee may wish to investigate this further.

The relevant section of the Local Government Act is

S. 555 What land is exempt from all rates?

(1) The following land is exempt from all rates:

- (a) land owned by the Crown, not being land held under a lease for private purposes,
- (b) land within a national park, historic site, nature reserve, state game reserve or karst conservation reserve (within the meaning of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*), whether or not the land is affected by a lease, licence, occupancy or use,

Public Land Generally

Wood collecting from Crown Land

Western NSW has a mixture of land tenures. Western Lands are leased from the crown. Forestry used to manage the permit system for taking firewood from such land. Forestry handed this task to NSW NPWS. While NPWS police taking of firewood, they have made an administrative decision that the permits are too much trouble and no longer issue permits. There are no places in Balranald Shire where people can take firewood for domestic use from crown land. Access to freehold land for the collection of firewood is extremely restricted.

Commercial collectors with access to private land are the only option for people wanting firewood. As Deniliquin pointed out at the public hearing firewood is a primary heat source in our towns as there was never a gas option. With electricity spiralling out of control, this matter needs the application of common sense and needs it now. Without change, the system will result in people breaking the law to get the wood they desperately need.

Lake Benanee

Is a lake about 15 km east of Euston on the Sturt Highway. Council has developed basic visitor facilities such as flushing toilets and shade shelters on the foreshore of the lake on the crown reserve. A boat launching place exists with a natural sand base. With its picturesque location, the lake has become a popular free camping site well off the highway. Council is committed to providing improved facilities in the coming years.

During the drought, NSW Office of Water, NOW, decided to dry the lake in a bid to save water. Not only did this cause the majority of the fish population in the lake to be destroyed, the community had to fight to have it refilled. This only happened with the intervention of the MDBA many months after the agreed trigger point was reached. NOW appeared to have its own agenda.

The issue at stake is the co-ordination between departments to achieve agreed outcomes. Increasing tourism is a stated outcome of Department of Environment & Heritage. There needs to be an agreed

priority on these outcomes, then NOW would be clear on where their priorities fit in the grand plan and the public would have confidence in some of these outcomes as well.

Council considers that this submission should be treated as a public document.

Yours Sincerely

Chris Littlemore
General Manager
30 August 2012